

**SEIZING AMERICA'S PROMISE:  
ONE MAN'S LIFE IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of Delaware in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

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## **ABSTRACT**

At the dawn of the twentieth century the United States of America was a symbol of opportunity and hope to many around the world. Hundreds of thousands of immigrants entered the U.S. seeking for themselves and their children a better life than what they had known. Great changes occurred in the country, in part caused and supported by the huge influx of immigrants. Urban populations swelled, the industrial revolution occurred, settlement of western states expanded, and the country entered World War I.

In order to understand these historical events, it is necessary to understand the experiences, actions, and decisions of the people who lived through them. The stories are varied, but the details are sometimes lost as a single narrative of the country's past unfolds. By examining individual stories, we can achieve a more complete understanding of the past, and that, in turn, can help us better interpret events of today.

This is the story of Victor Francis Lotrich. He was one of the many who entered the U.S. as an Eastern European immigrant and struggled to find his place in the "land of opportunity." He immigrated with his parents when he was just three years old, and though he grew up in America, finding his place in it was difficult. He

participated in the events that helped shape the country, and his life was one of the countless that built the foundation for the present.

This thesis contains his story, some of it in his own words. The story is told in the context of the external events that shaped his life, and it examines the choices he made based on his circumstances. His decisions, in turn, affected the lives of his descendents. His story is one piece in the larger story of our country's past.

## **Chapter 1**

### **A TURNING POINT**

The young man struggled not to lose consciousness as he was carried roughly into the small hospital. He was laid alongside dozens of other young men, all in various stages of injury, some on an irreversible path to death. His eyes stung and his vision blurred. It was hard to make out the faces of the doctors and nurses passing over him. Every breath sent a searing pain through his body, as the blisters covering his throat and lungs worsened.

The stench of blood and death was nauseating, but the sickening, garlic-like odor of mustard gas had deadened his senses to any other smell. It filled his nose, his mouth, his whole body, and it seemed he would never be able to smell anything else ever again.

A young nurse made her way over to him and examined him with a harried look on her face. She pulled a doctor over to see to his wounds. The doctor's eyes washed over the young man as he turned to the nurse and spoke to her in clipped tones.



“Do not spend your time on this one; he is not going to make it. He will be dead by midnight.” The words hung in the air as the doctor moved on to another patient.

The young man’s head swam as the nurse walked away. He fought to keep his bearings and not give in to the pull of darkness tugging at his mind. The pain was almost unbearable, but he struggled to push it away as he teetered on the edge of consciousness. His mind seized on one thought – if he could make it until morning, he would live.

As the medical staff bustled around him, moving bodies in and out, tending to the groaning men lying all around him, he kept his eyes fixed on the window. The darkness outside seemed endless, and many times he felt the inky void would be the last thing he would see. But after what seemed an eternity, a faint bruise appeared against the blackness of the sky. He felt a flicker of hope ignite deep within him. Grayness replaced the black, followed by a blue tinge that slowly swallowed the night. Finally, the sun pushed its rays through the window, and Victor’s breaths continued to come. He had made it through the darkness.

Victor Francis Lotrich was a seventeen-year-old American soldier who, in 1917, found himself wounded on a battlefield in France during World War I. He was fighting for the United States, the country that had become his when he had

immigrated with his family at just three years old. His family had fled a life of poverty and oppression in their homeland, Slovenia. Victor's years leading up to the war had been difficult ones, lived in the shadow of his immigrant status. An unhappy childhood was followed by a troubled youth.

The circumstances that had led him to the forest in Meuse-Argonne, fighting for the United States army, were built on a series of events that had begun before he was even born. His parents' decision to move the family to the United States had set in motion a cascade that had swept him to the very spot where he lay on that day.

His life had been marked by a series of struggles - struggles to belong, to matter, to achieve. A childhood lived as an outsider, the tragic deaths of his brother and mother, a dream to become an American cowboy, and time served in a reformatory prison - these events had led Victor to that moment. His military service played a pivotal role in his relationship with his adoptive country, and his life following the war was changed by it. Tragedy and opportunity unfolded hand-in-hand, and both affected him profoundly.

The time during which Victor came of age was one filled with change in the United States, one of the greatest coming from the waves of European immigrants that entered the country. Victor's family was among the hundreds of thousands who came en mass, seeking the promise of a better way of life. Victor was an active participant

in many of the events that shaped the country in the early part of the twentieth century – the industrial revolution, increasing urban population, westward expansion and World War I.

His story is just one of the myriad that make up the history of the country. There are as many different stories as there are people, and each life that was lived was unique in its own right. It is through the different stories that we, today, can understand and learn from those who came before. The more stories we listen to, the more complete understanding we can gain.

This is Victor's story, some of it in his own words. It is a story of desperation and hope, of trials and perseverance, of sadness and joy. It is the story of a refusal to give up in the never-ending search to find something better.

## **Chapter 2**

### **LEAVING SLOVENIA**

#### **A PEASANT'S CHOICE**

Life must have been hard for Mary and Andrew Lotrich. They were living in the tiny Eastern European country of Slovenia in the late 1800s, a time when, for most Slovenians, making a living meant hard, physical labor, working in fields and vineyards that belonged to someone else.

The tiny farming country belonged to the powerful Hapsburg Empire of Austria, and, as was the case for much of Slovenia's tumultuous history, Slovenian citizens were under the oppressive rule of a leadership centered outside their own country. They supported this ruling empire through heavy taxation, conscripted military service and submission to the political and social laws written by a government that was not their own.

Like many in the country, Mary and Andrew most likely lived in a modest home on a small parcel of land and worked long hours as day laborers, trying to

support a large family. Opportunity to add to their property was virtually non-existent, and their small piece of land would have to be divided among their offspring, leaving the future generation in a state worse than their own.

They lived during a time of social and political unrest, as Slovenians struggled with an ever-worsening economic plight, during which the majority peasant class sunk deeper and deeper into poverty with each passing generation. Slovenians were hungry for political freedom but were helpless to challenge the oppressive rule of the Hapsburg Empire. The prospects for advancement -social or economic- were grim.

Mary and Andrew grew up in a society coping with the consequences of decades of warfare, attacks, and invasions by neighboring countries. Slovenia's location, nestled between Austria and Croatia, with twenty-one miles of coastline along the Adriatic Sea, made it a desired prize for the various empires jockeying for dominance throughout the centuries. Its small size, about that of the state of New Jersey, meant it was helpless to be anything but a pawn in the battles of the larger surrounding nations.

Aside from a brief period of independence in the ninth century, these more powerful neighbors dominated Slovenia until the early 1900s.<sup>1</sup> As power shifted among European dynasties vying for dominance, the tiny country changed hands numerous times, each time facing exploitation at the hands of a larger regime.

At the dawn of the nineteenth century, after decades of rule by Austria, Slovenia fell under the control of France and its leader, Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon divided Slovenia and its neighbor Croatia into six sections, known as the Illyrian Provinces, with the intent of dominating the coastline and denying the Austrians access to the sea. It was under Napoleon's rule that the country enjoyed political reform, albeit brief. Slovenian citizens were awarded legal equality, education was encouraged, and Slovenian became the national language in schools and public offices.

Slovenian literature and journalism flourished, activities that would "leave a permanent effect on the rise of modern Slovenian nationalism."<sup>1</sup> These reforms remained in existence from 1809 to 1813, and, though brief, it was during this time that the country enjoyed a flourishing sense of patriotism and democracy.<sup>2</sup>

After only four years, however, Napoleon was defeated by the Hapsburg Empire, and in 1814, Austria regained control and the reforms were rolled back. The exploitive feudal system, under which Slovenians served as peasant laborers, was reinstated. This lasted until the Revolution of 1848, when all peasants were released from serfdom, only to find themselves in economic conditions worse than before.

Industrialization had bypassed Slovenia, and as a result they remained a mostly agrarian nation throughout the nineteenth century. With each generation, failure to

industrialize meant more and more farmers dividing an unchanging amount of land. Rural areas became overpopulated, and no pathway to a better life was available.<sup>3</sup>

The memories of the Illyrian provinces and the revolution of 1848 had awakened in the Slovenian population feelings that could no longer be suppressed. In the shadow cast by these memories, Andrew and Mary were born and raised. Although once again under the thumb of the Hapsburg Empire, the desire of Slovenians for “democratic reform and greater self-government” remained.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the country, in 1848, set a goal for itself of a “united and autonomous Slovenia,” a goal that would take another seventy years to achieve.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1800s, Andrew and Mary met and married. We don’t know the circumstances that brought them together, but we do know they had each been married before. Mary was in her mid-thirties when she married Andrew, who was older than she, and they each brought to the marriage children from previous unions. Andrew had two sons and a daughter (ranging in age from toddler to teenager), while Mary had two young girls of her own.

It was not long before they had a child together, and when Victor was born, there were eight mouths to feed, an addition that surely put a strain on an already difficult situation. The birth of Victor’s brother three years later must have stretched them to the breaking point.

Mary was a short, heavy, round woman, peering from her only known surviving photograph with an unsmiling expression, grim blue eyes fixed determinedly on the camera. Her mouth is set; the corners turn down slightly. Though flanked on either side by her youngest son and husband, she does not touch them, but holds her hands on her lap, unfolded, resting one on each thigh. Her hands are not graceful, but rather have the look of hard work and calluses.

In the same photo, Andrew appears less stern, his arm around a son's shoulder, his lips parted slightly, though still not quite smiling. Their expressions are not ones of light-heartedness or gaiety, but rather seem to hold in them the absence of frivolity – a solemnity and seriousness born of a life of hard work and difficult challenges.

As the turn of the century neared, Andrew's oldest son, Lorenz, was nearing the age when he would be required to serve in the Hapsburg army. In a few years, it would be his younger brother Franz's turn, followed by Victor and finally the baby of the family, Andreas. Andrew himself had served in the Austrian army and knew that it was an inescapable service demanded of his sons. The boys were required to serve for three years each, and marriage was forbidden until this service was completed.<sup>6</sup>

Their son's conscription was not the only way in which Mary and Andrew supported the imperial state. They were also burdened with heavy taxes, an imposition



of the state that guaranteed they would never be able to climb out of their impoverished situation, no matter how hard they worked.

In addition to the oppression of heavy taxation, Andrew and Mary faced, with their countrymen, a cultural oppression that had become more and more intolerable since the taste of reform experienced earlier in the century. It was demeaning to the Slovenians to have their native language relegated to second-class status, to have no choice in religious persuasion (as any deviance from the Austrian religion was persecuted), and to live with the destruction and instability that defined their country after decades of wars, rebellions, and invasions.<sup>7</sup> Like so many others, they must have desired “an escape from wars and insecurity, from conscription and oppressive regimes, from poverty and landlessness.”<sup>8</sup>

They also worried about the futures of their children. The small bit of land they owned would have to be divided among the four boys, each receiving only a quarter of what his father held. Looking into the future, the outlook grew even more dismal, as a couple of generations of land division would plunge their descendants deeper into poverty.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, a new country was developing, whose size was almost unimaginable and provided opportunity in stark contrast to what Slovenia offered. That new country was the United States of America, and its

newness held a promise of a way of life far beyond the reach of most Slovenians.

While Slovenia was viewed by its inhabitants as “old and set,” and life there was “no longer vital,” America was seen to be “in the process of becoming.”<sup>9</sup>

Word of this new country and the opportunities it afforded seeped into the Slovenian countryside. Effects of earlier reforms lingered, as an increased literacy rate and improved communications allowed information about America to spread.

New railroads and steamships provided better, cheaper opportunities for travel, and the steamship companies themselves had an interest in aiding the spread of information. They circulated letters, propaganda and newspapers from the United States, dispensing stories about the new country across the sea.

Steamship companies, like the French Cunard and Compagnie Generale Transatlantique (CGT) lines and the British White Star line, sought to capitalize on the need for cheap labor in the United States and the discontent of Eastern European citizens, Slovenians included. The companies provided a link between the two, and enthusiastically promoted the economic, political, and social opportunities available in the U.S., eagerly providing a way for Slovenians to reach them.<sup>10</sup>

Steamship agents would facilitate immigration by organizing groups of immigrants, helping them along the “underground emigrant railroad,” assisting in border crossings (sometimes illegal), and helping the immigrants, upon arrival in the

U.S., find their way to a train bound for a U.S. city. Once the new arrival landed in the city, a willing saloon owner (also a steamship employee) would offer assistance in finding employment.<sup>11</sup>

Job opportunities in the United States at that time were plentiful. Advancing technology had bypassed Andrew and Mary's small world, leaving Slovenians in the sleepy cycle of economic depression they had known their whole lives, but in America, "it was the new age of the factory, the steel mill, the coal mine, the railroad," and labor was needed.<sup>12</sup>

Mary and Andrew heard the stories that were sent by their brave countrymen who had left to seek their fortunes in the "golden country...the land of promise." They no doubt listened to the *Amerikanci* that returned to Slovenia, bringing with them gifts and stories, wearing new clothes and a demeanor that "bore all the earmarks of affluence."<sup>13</sup>

These returning men, who were "heroes in their own eyes and the eyes of the village" relayed their experiences working in places with strange names like Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania; Wheeling, West Virginia; Pueblo, Colorado or Butte, Montana. They would speak "expansively, boastfully, romantically of their ability and accomplishments as workers and of the wages they had earned."<sup>14</sup>

When they spoke of their fellow immigrants who, after working and saving for a few years, could move to large, unsettled areas and “buy sections of land each of which was larger than the whole area owned by the peasants” of a town in Slovenia, Mary and Andrew understood the immense size and opportunity of the U.S.<sup>15</sup>

America was a land of possibility and promise, a place where there was the potential to work hard, make money, and rise above one’s station. There was the potential to live like “one of the gentry,” even if you were just an “ordinary workman to begin with.” In America, “even the common people were ‘citizens’, not ‘subjects,’” and even a common man could shake hands with the President.” America was a huge, “explosive,” “untellably exciting” land “wherein things that were unimaginable and impossible” in a small town in Slovenia “happened daily as a matter of course.”<sup>16</sup>

Faced with shrinking land ownership, high taxes, forced military service, religious persecution, cultural oppression and endless wars destabilizing their homeland, Slovenians were eager recipients of news of a different life across the sea. They hungrily listened to stories of a land that offered better living conditions, higher wages, lower taxes and greater personal liberties and freedoms. They embraced the promise of such a land.<sup>17</sup>

The view is expressed by Ivan (John) Molek, a Slovenian who immigrated to the United States in 1900. He describes how, as an eighteen-year-old Slovenian, he

viewed America: “How different opportunities were there...Anyone, by working diligently, anyone, however poor and humble, could forge ahead if he were otherwise industrious and honest.”<sup>18</sup> Fully half of the population of his hometown immigrated to America, and he described many of them as youths “who at home would be condemned to a life of tenancy until death,” but in America would find that “everyone there who was healthy and honest could achieve anything he desired, nearly everything he was capable of.”<sup>19</sup>

But while many of the stories were fanciful and wonderful, filled with the promise of opportunities too much to dream of in Slovenia, other stories surely reached Andrew and Mary too. Stories of friends who had left, never to be heard from again, “sinking, leaving no trace, into the vastness of America.”<sup>20</sup> They surely knew of the men who returned missing arms or legs, or in terrible health. Perhaps they heard the story of the man who came home with a “strange, sinful and unmentionable disease” that he passed on to his wife who birthed a blind child.”<sup>21</sup> If not that one, surely they heard other tales of horror. They must have held a special fear of mines, places that did not exist in their small town, but claimed the lives of many of their fellow countrymen.

The promise of opportunity was overshadowed by the fear instilled by these incidents. And faced with a choice, would they choose the unknown, fraught with

opportunity but also danger, or would they choose what they knew, a life of hard work, with little reward and little to pass on, but familiar and linked to family and friends? They were among millions that struggled with that question, and, at the turn of the century, Mary and Andrew made the wrenching decision to leave Slovenia. They were among the more than 300,000 (fifty-six percent of the population) that emigrated from the country between the years of 1850 and 1910.<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps it was the absence of hope that tipped their final decision in the direction of America. Living under the harsh economic conditions, the political oppression, the instability, and the cultural restrictions may have been tolerable had there been any hope for a better future. But not only were Mary and Andrew faced with insurmountable poverty, with little chance to improve their station in life, they also saw the same grim future for their offspring, with no hope of escape from their circumstances.

In such an absence of hope, desperation must set in, and if an opportunity presents itself, no matter how scary the devil hidden in its unknown folds, it is sure to be viewed as a gift from heaven, one that must be seized, regardless of the risk – a risk that Andrew and Mary must have known held the possibility of misfortune and misery but judged it to be no worse than the hopelessness with which they lived daily.

Though overwhelmed by dire economic circumstances and political oppression, Andrew and Mary loved their country. They loved their families, their friends, and the familiar landscape they had known their whole lives. The decision to leave had to be agonizing and frightening. They made a choice to gamble on this foreign place across the ocean, a place known only to them through fragmented stories passed along by those desperate for a promised land or those too scared to believe it existed, stories that ranged from too-good-to-be-true to too-horrible-to-contemplate. To embark on such a journey required a courage born of desperation, a desperation born of hopelessness.

To rend the family, to make the voyage in groups and live an ocean apart for months to years because they did not have the money to travel together was a burden they assumed because the alternative was unbearable. If what they encountered was terrible, if they failed in their quest for a better life, they would still have a *chance* at prosperity; they would still have hope, and *that* they would pass on to their children.

## **CROSSING**

In the spring of 1902, Mary discovered she was pregnant. Her family's resources were already stretched thin among the existing children - two daughters from

her previous marriage, three children from Andrew's earlier union, plus two-year old Victor. She and Andrew decided the time had come for them to emigrate.

They determined it was necessary to travel at different times, rather than make the trip together. Andrew's oldest son, Lorenz, was eighteen, and his military service was likely upon him. It was decided that Andrew and Lorenz would travel first, find employment and a place to live, and then have the rest of the family join them later.

In December of that year, when Mary was eight months pregnant, Andrew and Lorenz left the only home they had ever known and traveled across the sea to America. Eleven months later, Mary followed them, her eight and ten year old daughters, three-year-old Victor and baby Andreas in tow. The remaining children, fourteen-year-old Franz and eleven-year-old Aloisia, came later, perhaps staying with relatives until money for their passage could be secured. Franz arrived in 1905, Aloisia in 1906.

It was not unusual for families to be separated during the emigration process. Men usually emigrated first, found jobs and housing, then sent for their wives and children. Many traveled to the U.S. with the intent of returning to their homeland after a few years.<sup>23</sup> They entered the U.S. with a plan to work and save enough money to return home with some wealth. While some did return, more ended up staying, making America their permanent home. (In the time period of July 1908 to May 1909,



a comparison of arrivals and departures of Slavic immigrants found a net increase of 64 percent.)<sup>24</sup>

Sometimes this was by choice, sometimes because the Promised Land did not yield the riches expected of it. Slovenian immigrant Louis Adamic explains that, while many immigrants entered the U.S with the hope of earning a large fortune before ultimately returning to their homelands, things often did not work out as planned. Many immigrants found it difficult to save money, and returning to the Old Country “became a hopeless dream.”<sup>25</sup>

Andrew was in the United States only eleven months before Mary and the children joined him. It seems unlikely that the whole family would have made the trip with the intention of staying only a few years. A more likely scenario is that Andrew traveled first in order to take measure of the new world that was completely unknown to any of them. Once he found work and a place to live, word was sent back for the rest of the family to follow.

The funds to purchase the steamship tickets were likely borrowed, as even non-landowners could borrow on personal credit.<sup>26</sup> The steam-powered ships in place by the 1890s had vastly cut the time it took to cross the Atlantic. The earlier sailing vessels had taken three months to make the trip, but by the time Mary and Andrew sailed, the journey took less than two weeks.

Immigrants were viewed as a desirable commodity for the steamship companies, and the largest “competed fiercely” for them. Travelers were seen as “profitable, self-loading cargo,” and the more a ship could carry, the higher the profit.<sup>27</sup>

The majority of immigrants traveled in the cheapest way possible – steerage class, accommodations that were designed to make money for steamship companies, not provide comfort for passengers. Located on the lower decks (the area that previously housed the steering mechanism of sailing vessels), steerage was generally comprised of long, narrow compartments that were divided to separate men, women, and families.

Steerage compartments were crowded, damp, and putrid. No showers or baths were available, and there was a “lack of adequate toilet facilities.” There was “little privacy,” and sanitation, in general, was poor. Due to insufficient ventilation, the air became “rank with the heavy odor of spoiled food, sea-sickness, and unwashed bodies.”<sup>28</sup> Steerage passengers also frequently had to endure a lack of adequate food.

Some of the larger ships could accommodate up to 2000 occupants in steerage alone. Between 1900 and 1910, of the eight million immigrants who traveled to the United States, approximately eighty percent did so in steerage. To these millions,

steerage was the “immigrant’s purgatory” that had to be endured before reaching the promised “paradise of dreams.”<sup>29</sup>

For Mary and Andrew, the crossing may not have been quite so terrible. They were lucky to make the trip on the French ship *La Touraine*, a vessel belonging to the French Compagnie Generale Transatlantique (CGT) line. Unlike most of the Atlantic steamers of the time, ships of the CGT carried little steerage, instead offered third class passage in addition to first and second.<sup>30</sup> Many of the steamships would follow suit, replacing steerage with third class, but not until a few years later.

After Andrew had contacted Mary to let her know she and the children should join him in the United States, Mary packed all of her belongings, carefully choosing what she could carry with her to her new life and what she would leave behind forever. Then, with four small children in tow, she made the trip to La Havre, France, the point of departure for the transatlantic crossing.

*La Touraine* was built in 1891, twelve years before Mary and the children climbed aboard. It was the fifth largest ship of the CGT line and one of the fastest. The trip from Le Havre to New York took a little less than seven days.

Mary and the children were among the 600 passengers traveling in third class. (The third class occupants outnumbered the first and second class combined, accounting for fifty-five percent of all passengers aboard the ship). Third class

accommodations, while still much less desirable than those above it, offered more comfort than their steerage counterparts on other ships. Mary and the children likely shared an enclosed berth with access to a decent toilet and a small degree of privacy.<sup>31</sup>

Improved accommodations, though, did nothing to quell the seasickness-inducing movement of the waves or the pent-up frustration of three small children confined to a small, crowded area. Added to this were the demands of an eight month old, and to forty-four year old Mary, the six-day trip must have felt like a lifetime. How endless the sea must have seemed to her, its vastness previously unimagined, its unfamiliarity matched only by what greeted her on the other side.

For three-year old Victor, the memories of Slovenia would fade, as early childhood memories often do, but the trip across the Atlantic was surely etched into his memory, along with perhaps only one or two blurry images of the place of his birth. While Andrew and Mary no doubt held close to their hearts the memories of their Slovenian culture, Victor was to grow up knowing a life vastly different from his parents.' He would not grow up in a small, tight-knit community in the countryside, where people lived and struggled together, where the majority of citizens were just like him, where comfort was found in family, friends, and familiarity. Instead his childhood would be spent as an outsider in a city that was, by some measures, the fifth

or sixth largest in the world, with a population nearly three times larger than the entire country of his birth.<sup>32</sup> He would grow up in a different world.

### **A NEW LAND**

Victor's entry into this new world in October 1903 was the same as millions of others – through Ellis Island in New York City. Known as both the “Island of Hope” and the “Island of Tears,” it served as the gateway through which nearly 1 million immigrants traveled each year between 1901 and 1911.<sup>33</sup> After opening in 1892, it was destroyed by fire in 1897. After three years of renovations, it reopened in December 1900, the year of Victor's birth.

Upon arrival, the Lotrich family was immediately put on a ferry to Ellis Island during which time they traded the cramped, crowded conditions of the ship for the equally congested conditions of the Island. Their experience likely mirrored that of a French immigrant who described her feelings upon entering the New York harbor in 1920. She caught a glimpse of the Statue of Liberty and was overwhelmed by all that it represented. In her words, “it was so impressive, so majestic, so meaningful. Freedom! Opportunity!” But then she was shepherded off the ship, and she felt like

one caught in a “herd of cattle,” fighting her way through “hordes of people.” Her first experience in the new land was “awful.”<sup>34</sup>

Others have described the conditions of Ellis Island as woefully small for the numbers passing through, suffering from a “want of adequate space to meet the need.” The air in the waiting rooms was “foul and sickening,” full of people with the “reeking stench of steerage compartments” still clinging to them.<sup>35</sup>

It was no doubt frightening for Victor, his siblings and his mother. If they were lucky, they were among the 80 percent that passed through the necessary inspections within a few hours. We know they were not among the unluckiest two percent who were deported back to the countries they had just left, the tragic minority for whom Ellis was the “Island of Tears.”

Deportation occurred if inspecting doctors or nurses suspected tuberculosis, scarlet fever, smallpox, yellow fever or measles. It also occurred if evidence of trachoma (an eye infection), favus (a fungal scalp infection), or lice was seen, or if unsatisfactory answers were given in response to a series of questions designed to weed out those with legal or social problems.

It was no doubt a disconcerting process, coming at the end of a long and difficult trip. After passing through Ellis Island, the family probably felt no better. Standing in a city that looked like nothing they had ever seen, surrounded by voices

speaking one or more languages they had no hope of understanding, dirty and weary from the long journey, hungry for the food and comfort of home, Mary and the children somehow found their way to a train that would take them to Chicago and Andrew.

It is hard to imagine what went through Mary and Andrew's minds as they departed Slovenia for the long journey to America. What did they expect to find on the other side? They were counting on employment opportunities, but what were their expectations for daily life? Perhaps they imagined a city filled with clean homes, safe streets, good jobs, and equality for all. The reality they would find would be very different from this. Having known only the small agrarian towns of Slovenia, the cities they were about to encounter held in store for them an experience completely unlike any they had known.

They must have been overwhelmed and disoriented, and, like many others, "naturally bewildered or numbed by the impact of the country upon their senses and their minds."<sup>36</sup>

Most of the immigrants from Slavic countries like Slovenia did not come to the U.S. blindly, but had at least one friend or relative in the country. The Eastern and Southeastern European countries known collectively as Slavic included Russia, Poland, Bulgaria, Czechlelovakia, Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, Macedonia,

and Montenegro. In 1908, ninety-five percent of Slovenians arrived in the U.S knowing at least one person from their homeland. This number was approximately ninety percent for all Slavic immigrants combined.<sup>37</sup>

In the face of the confusion the immigrant felt upon arrival, the first concern was “to find people of their own nationality, in whose midst they might orient themselves.”<sup>38</sup> Slavic immigrants usually found jobs within communities where fellow Slavs had settled, “where his cultural group had already carved out its own niche.”<sup>39</sup> This gives us a strong clue as to how it was that the Lotrich family ended up in Chicago.

Like most Eastern European immigrants of that time, the majority of Slovenians settled in areas located near centers of mining or manufacturing. They were “inevitably drawn to already congested and impoverished areas surrounding mines, mills and slaughterhouses.”<sup>40</sup> Few went into the mainstay of their homeland, farming, but instead joined the ranks of the ever-increasing workers supporting the industrial explosion in the country.

Between 1898 and 1908, Illinois was the second most popular destination for Slovenians and Croatians, exceeded only by the mining area of Pennsylvania.<sup>41</sup> (Most statistics of the time period lump Slovenians and Croatians into one group, as they were not differentiated for census records until later in the century.) By 1910,



Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, Minnesota, Washington, and Colorado all had Slovenian populations of 10,000 or greater, with the total number of Slovenes in the country approaching 1.5 million.<sup>42</sup>

The first Slovenians had settled in Joliet, Illinois, an area just southwest of Chicago, in the 1870s, and shortly thereafter, the Joliet colony took on the nickname “Slovenian Rome.”<sup>43</sup> The Slovenian community thrived in Chicago, and more and more Slovenes found their way there.

It wasn’t just Slovenes, though; they were but a small portion of the immigrant population that called the city home. Chicago at that time was a “city of a million strangers,” and in the 1890s, of the more than one million inhabitants of the city, a full one-third were foreign born. Another third were the offspring of foreign- born parents. A 1903 survey of the city found more than forty different languages spoken, fourteen of them spoken by people numbering at least 10,000.<sup>44</sup>

It was into this melting pot that Victor and his family immersed themselves and began their new life. The differences between their old life and their new must have been unimaginable. A fellow Slovene’s letters describe his inability to convey his experiences to his family at home. He felt he could not reveal “all my difficulties nor the details of our circumstances here...it would have been meaningless, for the people

in the Old Country would have been unable to understand and unable to get a clear picture regardless of how detailed one's description was."<sup>45</sup>

At three years old, Victor began his new life in Chicago. The opportunity, freedom, and equality his parents had sought for him would eventually be found, but not at first, and not without great hardship. The difficulties Mary and Andrew faced in Slovenia were traded for a different set of challenges in Chicago. Their life did not become easier in the U.S., and life in Chicago taught Victor hard lessons about equality. The first lesson was quickly absorbed by all of the family members, and that was, that even among immigrants, some were more equal than others.

## **Chapter 3**

### **A NEW WORLD**

#### **THE “NEW” IMMIGRANTS**

From the 1840s through the 1880s, most immigrants to the U.S. were from Northern European countries – Ireland, Germany, England, Scotland, Holland, Sweden, France and the Scandinavia area. Many of these immigrants resembled Americans in physical appearance and spoken language. This made assimilation easier than for those with more obvious differences.

Many of them also shared the Protestant religion that dominated America in the nineteenth century. This changed with the massive numbers of Irish immigrants entering the U.S. as a result of the potato famine of 1846-1850. In large numbers these immigrants took low paying, dirty jobs requiring manual labor. Because of their low station, they were looked down upon, and their Catholic faith also came to be viewed as less desirable than “American” Protestantism.

Beginning in the 1870s, a new wave of immigrants began arriving on American shores, and this group came largely from Eastern Europe. They came from Russia, Poland, Czechlelovakia, and the Balkan Peninsula countries of Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria. The citizens of their new American home viewed these Slavic immigrants with some disdain. They came to be known as the “New” immigrants, and the Northern Europeans who came before them assumed the label of “Old.”

They were, in large part, Catholic, and the anti-Catholic feelings stirred by the Irish invasion extended to the “New” Slavic immigrants. Most of the Slavs were peasants and farmers, less than a generation removed from serfdom, as was the case with Mary and Andrew. Most were from small towns, and they were largely poor and uneducated.

They looked somewhat different than their Northern European counterparts. The “Slavic type” was described in 1910 as “short, thickset, and stocky...not graceful or light in motion.” A broad face, wide-set eyes, defined cheekbones, a broad, snub nose, and a low forehead marked their appearance. They wore an expression “ranging from sullen to serene but seldom animated or genial” and all together, the “whole suggestion [was] of strength, trustworthiness, and a certain solidity.”<sup>1</sup> Between 1870 and 1924, approximately eight million entered the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

The antipathy that had been directed toward the “Old” Northern European immigrants shifted to the “New” Slavic ones. Those from the “Old” wave rose slightly in station, as they were displaced from the lowest rung in society by the newer arrivals who, struggling to survive in a foreign land, filled the ever-increasing, difficult jobs offered by the rapidly industrializing nation.

In addition to appearance and religion, the “New” immigrants differed from the “Old” in education and work experience. Less than three percent of “Old” immigrants were illiterate, compared to 35 percent of “New” immigrants. Fewer of the “New” immigrants came to the U.S. with labor skills, as the majority had experience only in agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

They also came from areas of greater poverty, and this contributed to the idea that the “New” immigrants came to the U.S. for reasons somewhat inferior to those of their predecessors. Their desire for improving their economic condition was deemed morally inferior to the desire for political as well as economic advancement.<sup>4</sup>

It seems unfair branding a group motivated by reasons scarcely different from those of the many who had come before – all struggling in the homelands of their birth to make a decent life for themselves and their families. Economics is tied to politics, and the struggle to survive feels the same, regardless of formal education.

The view of the “New” immigrant became etched in the minds of those already living in the U.S. (both native-born and earlier arrivals), and while positive qualities might have been recognized, they were often treated in a patronizing way. Though Slavic immigrants were described as dignified hard workers filled with “courage, patience, self-sacrifice, thrift, generosity, and obedience,” there was no question that they were, as a group, viewed as inferior - morally, culturally, and intellectually.<sup>5</sup> In 1902, the man who would later become president of the U.S., Woodrow Wilson, referred to Slavic immigrants as “the more sordid and hapless elements of their population.”<sup>6</sup>

While any new immigrant might be called a greenhorn, peasant or “furriner”, the name *Bohunk* or *Hunky* was reserved for those of Slavic origin. The word was a combination of Bohemian and Hungarian, and was used to designate a “stupid or clumsy person” or “any uneducated, unskilled immigrant from central and east Europe.”<sup>7</sup> What was seen as desirable was for a person to become less of a Bohunk and more of an American.

It was during the economic depression of the 1890s, the time period when Slavic immigration was just beginning its crescendo, that American attitudes towards immigration began to shift and become more negative. A new hostility emerged, and

it was specifically directed toward the “New” immigrants of Southern and Eastern Europe.

Against the backdrop of a difficult economy, “hostilities reached a new level” as immigrants were considered “threats to American society.” As the attitudes toward immigration changed, the view of Americanism changed from an ideology of a country of free people enjoying political rights that had been denied in Europe to a “cultural bias later characterized as white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism.” The country founded upon the principle of freedom for all began to define itself in cultural terms.<sup>8</sup>

It was in this environment that Victor grew up. A toddler when he entered the country, America became his homeland, the place that shaped his youth. He could not escape the constant reminders that he and his family were not quite like the “true” Americans who were somehow superior. His childhood was marked by a pervading theme, that he was one of the “others,” a member of the country but somehow beneath those that had come before.

It was during his childhood that Americanization as a movement reached its height of popularity. The “Americanization Crusade” developed at the height of Slavic immigration and continued from the turn of the century through the 1930s. The purpose of the movement was “to bring about the conformity of the immigrant to the American way of life.”<sup>9</sup> The goal was seemingly noble to those working towards it, to

integrate the “sons and daughters of backward races” into society and to “help them to become American,”<sup>10</sup> but it effectively reinforced the notion of inferiority.

The push for Americanization and the growing animosity toward immigrants, however, worked against each other. The xenophobic hostility toward Slavic immigrants that had begun to pervade the American culture was furthered by “speeches, sermons, lectures, scientific and commission reports, journalistic accounts, and organizational goals” all aimed at confirming the racial, cultural, and social inferiority of the Slavic newcomers. As these xenophobic views hardened, assimilation became more difficult.<sup>11</sup>

Even those who professed (and believed) themselves to have the immigrants’ best interests at heart were not immune to the deep-seated view of the immigrant’s inherent inferiority. Consider the comments of author Peter Roberts in his 1912 book, *The New Immigration: A Study in the Industrial and Social Life of Southeastern Europeans in America*. While asserting, “no quality that adds to the dignity of manhood is wanting in the new immigrant,”<sup>12</sup> he also wrote:

I believe in the immigrant. He has in him the making of an American, provided a sympathetic hand guides him and smoothes the path which leads to assimilation...Redemptive forces [are] necessary to raise the



foreigners from inefficiency and ignorance, from anti-social habits and gross superstition...Foreigners in American cities will not throw off the slough of medieval civilization unless the native-born will help them.<sup>13</sup>

The anti-immigration sentiment in the country continued to grow, and what had previously been an attitude of welcome “changed to repulsion,” as immigration restrictions were enacted. The push for Americanization of immigrants grew during World War I and the Red Scare that followed. “In no other time frame was ‘100 percent Americanism’ more in demand,” and “diversity was considered to be unpatriotic.”<sup>14</sup> A culmination of growing animosity was expressed in The Quota Act of 1924, which officially assigned those of Slavic origin to the category of “inferior nations” and races.<sup>15</sup>

It was a difficult time for the son of Slovenian immigrants to grow up. The prejudice encountered by Victor and his family was inescapable in Chicago. The negative view of working class families like theirs, and the social and economic disadvantages that went hand-in-hand with the prejudice, resulted in their family, like so many others, being “forced into the isolation of urban slums.”<sup>16</sup> Tension was always there, and “suspicion and discrimination hampered the possibility for civic unity” in Chicago.<sup>17</sup>

It must have been confusing for those coming to America with the expectation of freedom of cultural expression. Did Mary and Andrew emigrate with the expectation that they would preserve their religion and language, both of which had been suppressed in their country of birth? What they faced upon arrival was great pressure to assimilate and assume the “American” way of life. Social acceptance could be facilitated by “a willingness to downplay ethnicity” and there was pressure to give up cultural habits such as “peculiar religions” and “unusual clothing.”<sup>18</sup> This was encouraged through public education, and Victor surely was indoctrinated to recognize the inferiority of his family’s ancestry.

The pressure came not just from the schools but also from various groups within the community. The anti-immigration, pro-Americanization attitudes prevalent at the turn of the century led the minority Protestant population of Chicago to create churches and societies that promoted their views and to form new groups that “defined American in terms of lineage...These groups equated patriotism with genealogy and cultivated a restricted sense of nationality that excluded not only the immigrants but also their children.”<sup>19</sup>

The choice had been made back in Slovenia, and the Lotrichs had a new home. Regardless of what they had expected when they left their homeland and any disappointment in what they found upon arrival, they had committed to finding a new

life in America, and that is what they did. Chicago was their new home, and the challenges they faced were met with determination to succeed. For Victor, his parents' decision changed his life; it set him on a path with consequences that would affect him through adulthood. And it all started in Chicago.

## **CHICAGO**

Andrew and Mary most likely chose Chicago as their home because they knew one or more fellow Slovenians already living there. The most important requirement of their new home, however, was whether or not Andrew could find work to support the family.

Most immigrants, upon entering the U.S., found themselves working at the worst jobs for the lowest pay. Concentrating in cities providing industrial jobs, they often worked in unsafe, unsanitary conditions, performing physical labor that required strength and endurance. They worked in mines and foundries, agriculture and metal work; a writer in 1910 observed, “no work is too onerous, too exhausting, or too dangerous for them.”<sup>20</sup>

As a major industrial center, Chicago offered jobs in steel making, railroad construction, car building, meatpacking, garment making, merchandising, tool manufacturing, and furniture making.<sup>21</sup> Immigrants often found work different from

what they did in their homeland, and initial employment was often unstable and sporadic.

It was also tenuous, especially given the rapidly changing technology of the day. Machinery changed rapidly, and “the job that one found carried with it no security.”<sup>22</sup> Work was uncertain and unsteady, and there was “nothing solid to rely upon...Jobs were day-to-day, night-to-night, with short or long intervals.”<sup>23</sup>

Andrew eventually found a job working as a blacksmith or steeplejack, one who repairs the outside of tall buildings. He was among the many Eastern European immigrants who, while farm hands by trade, were found to be “more or less accustomed to work in wood and iron,” possessing “mechanical capacity” and easily able to adapt to work in shops and factories in the U.S.<sup>24</sup>

The immigrants who filled these physical jobs were often looked down upon by others who saw themselves above this kind of labor, but it was because of this untiring work force that the U.S. enjoyed the industrial expansion it experienced. The *New York Observer* noted in the early 1900s, “without these foreign-born laborers the growth of the nation would be handicapped.”<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, America transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial nation. This transition was enabled by the huge influx of labor, that is, immigrants. Between 1880 and 1905, the total capital in

manufacturing plants increased fivefold, with a two and a half fold increase in products. The workforce nearly doubled, from 3.7 million workers in 1880 to more than 7 million in 1905.<sup>26</sup>

Immigrants made up the majority of workers in so many of the expanding fields of the time – mining, steel and iron working, railway building, construction, brick and clay working, textiles and refineries, and the clothing industry, among others. The railways laid, the bridges built, the industries that expanded explosively were the result of the hard work of many immigrants struggling to find a better life in the new world. The blood and sweat of their labor fueled economic growth and pushed the country forward.

The view at the time was that such work was necessary, but beneath most “native-born” Americans, and that the immigrants arriving from Eastern Europe were perfect for the job. They were viewed as men who were “strong of body, docile of heart, willing in disposition, to do coarse, dirty, and dangerous work.”

The writer who penned this description discussed the inferiority of these Eastern European immigrants in the context of what was demanded: “We may yearn for a more intelligent and better trained worker from the countries of Europe, but it is questionable whether or not that type of man would have been so well fitted for the work America had to offer.”<sup>27</sup>

The negative views regarding immigrants were not held exclusively by native-born Americans. Even within the immigrant community, prejudices and resentments could be found. Slovenian immigrant, John Molek believed that his fellow immigrants were part of a “two caste system.” The first caste, which, at the turn of the century was three times larger than the other, was made up of the newest arrivals to the U.S., the “greenhorns” who spoke no English and had no special skills. They worked only at “common labor,” jobs that, for the most part, were temporary and paid poorly.

The second caste was made up of the “older immigrants who were by now ‘mangling’ the English language reasonably well...They refused to mingle with the newcomer ‘greenhorns’ and felt ‘something more’.” They were haughty and presumptive, and would sometimes refuse to speak their native tongue with a “greenhorn,” choosing instead to struggle through their broken English.<sup>28</sup>

These older immigrants were striving to find their own place and viewed any new arrivals as competition. Slovenian immigrant Molek explains it this way,

I noticed with a heavy heart the wild competition among immigrants:  
among Slovenes and Croats, and among Slovenes themselves: first of  
all, for any kind of work; then, for better work; and for prestige and

favoritism among the bosses. The majority looked out for themselves; for their own benefit, and all else can go to the Devil!<sup>29</sup>

To native-born Americans, the two-caste system was invisible, as they made no distinction between the two. To them, all immigrants were “green and ripe Hunkies.”<sup>30</sup>

Most of the tensions between groups of immigrants centered around economic worries and the fear that comes from uncertainty and lack of job security. The “Old” immigrants – particularly the Irish and Anglo-Saxons - viewed the “New” Eastern European immigrants with disdain because they were worried about their impact on employers. They worried that the wage scale would change and that unionism could threaten their jobs.<sup>31</sup> Neither of these things came to pass, but tension persisted, and life as a Slavic immigrant was not easy.

## **LIFE IN THE JUNGLE**

In his 1905 work, *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair described the environment of early twentieth century Chicago. The title offers a description of the city, a place where many struggled for survival while living and working in deplorable conditions. For Andrew and Mary, the cramped, dirty, congested city, teeming with immigrants from dozens of countries, was a sharp contrast to the small, homogenous, farming area they had just left. For Victor, the city was the backdrop of his childhood.

The Lotrich family settled in an area heavily populated with immigrants. Tenement housing surrounded the downtown business district of the city, and the cheap rent and proximity to the train station drew many to the area known as Chicago's "Port of Entry." This "Port of Entry," located west of the downtown area, was bordered by Polk, 12<sup>th</sup>, Halstead, and Canal Streets and was home to large numbers of South Eastern Europeans.<sup>32</sup>

The tenements in Chicago, like other cities, were filled with immigrants. These "congested slums" were "wholly occupied by foreigners and their children."<sup>33</sup> While food was found relatively cheaply, housing was another matter, and because of this, immigrants, particularly the newest arrivals, suffered in the worst conditions, both



in their jobs and homes. “They crowded into the worst slums and had the worst jobs.”<sup>34</sup> Tenement housing was described in 1912 as “degrading,” filled with “dirt, crowding, poverty, and wretchedness.”<sup>35</sup>

The Lotrichs lived in an area just south of the “Port of Entry,” first on 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, then on West 18<sup>th</sup>. It is likely they lived among other Slovenian immigrants, as it was common for immigrants of similar nationality to congregate together. It was possible to live in a Slovenian community, shop at Slovene-run stores, even work at jobs under foremen who were Slovenian. In this way, a new immigrant could settle and live in Chicago having little to no contact with the English-speaking world.<sup>36</sup>

It was a vicious cycle. The Slavic immigrant was viewed unfavorably by those already living in America, and he was encouraged to work to become more American. But because of the prejudice against him and the difficulty assimilating into a foreign land, he was driven to live among other immigrants in a small enclave that offered the familiarity of people like him.

For Mary and Andrew, the familiarity provided the support they needed to make their way in an unfamiliar place. The prejudice was tolerable, for they were willing to sacrifice to find a better life for their children. They shared with their fellow immigrants the memories of their homeland and could maintain cultural touchstones through friendship and shared tradition.

For Victor, the prejudice was something he learned as a child, and the memories and practices that brought comfort to his parents were demeaned by the rest of American society. Victor could hardly escape this message. The cultural touchstones that comforted his parents brought embarrassment to him. He was told by society that he was somehow inferior to those who had been born in the land where he grew up.

The streets of his childhood were ones that, in adulthood, he would describe to his own children as a place where “what you learned is something you shouldn’t learn.”<sup>37</sup> The Lotrichs lived in an area 10-20 blocks North of the Union Stock Yards, close to the Levee – the Red Light District. It was fraught with brothels, gambling dens, and saloons.<sup>38</sup> Along with churches, saloons often served as “centers of Bohunk colonies.” They became boardinghouses and offered many services – a place to buy steamship tickets, place money orders, subscribe to newspapers, pay club dues, and, of course, drink.<sup>39</sup>

For the majority of immigrants entering the U.S in the early part of the century, the poverty and living conditions were shocking. “The Slav emigrating in the late nineteenth century was poor but not starving (for bread) but it is safe to conclude from reading his letters that he was shocked at the level of poverty he found here in America,” notes sociologist Josephine Wtulich. “And while he expected to work, and

even to work hard, he found the many deplorable working conditions devastating to his psyche and to his health.”<sup>40</sup>

Whether living in the coal and steel mill areas of Pennsylvania and Ohio or the industrial city of Chicago, immigrants faced difficult conditions. In steel mill cities, the conditions were described as “depressing.” People lived “hectic, uncertain lives” in “shabby houses” where children played on cinder-piles instead of grass and “women had to wash their window curtains almost daily” to keep them clean.<sup>41</sup>

In Chicago, streets were “dirty, dangerous, and inconvenient,” and “a pall of smoke hung over large areas of the city.” Danger came from the streetcar and railroad tracks laid in the streets, resulting in pedestrian accidents, streetcars that jumped the tracks and “a multitude of mutilated people.”<sup>42</sup> It also came from the inadequate sewage system that plagued the city, resulting in the spread of disease and death.

Rampant corruption made the situation worse. Contracts for sewage, trash disposal and the like were awarded not to those who would provide the best service but through connections and bribes. In 1891, 2000 city inhabitants died of cholera, the worst losses suffered in the tenement areas.<sup>43</sup> The overcrowded tenements made the occupants more susceptible to communicable

diseases like cholera and tuberculosis that spread like wildfire under cramped, unsanitary conditions.<sup>44</sup>

Black smoke from nearby slaughterhouses permeated the air, as did the stench from cattle pens and fertilizer plants. Poison and offal (the rejected or waste parts of a butchered animal) were dumped in the open sewer that was known as “bubbly creek.”<sup>45</sup> The “stench of garbage, chemicals and other industrial pollution was virtually everywhere,” and, from the wealthy to the poor, “none enjoyed a clean, safe environment.”<sup>46</sup>

Not all residents were impoverished, as the city housed three classes of people – wealthy capitalists, the middle class, and organized workers.<sup>47</sup> Once obtaining work as a steeplejack or blacksmith, Andrew, as a skilled craftsman, most likely enjoyed a status slightly elevated among the working class.

Despite this, the dirty, smelly, unsafe streets were inescapable, as were the drunkenness, gambling and prostitution that were “rampant.”<sup>48</sup> It is no wonder that Victor, in later life, never shared any memories of his childhood with his own children beyond the lone statement expressing regret that anyone should have to learn what he had.

## **THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE**

The Lotrichs, like 10 million other immigrants that entered the U.S. in the twenty-year period between 1892 and 1912, were Roman Catholic.<sup>49</sup> During this time, the anti-Catholic sentiment that had been stirred by the huge influx of Irish immigrants a generation earlier grew stronger in American society. The “New” immigrants, like the Lotrichs, faced discrimination not only from native-born Protestant Americans, but also from the Catholic churches they found in America.

Most of the “New” immigrants were “not welcomed” by the Catholic churches that had been established by Irish and German immigrants of the 1850s. “They found the existing churches inhospitable to their language and cultures.”<sup>50</sup> Instead of finding solace in religion during the difficult transition to a new country, the immigrants found that “the hardest push for Americanization of the ‘New’ immigrant came from the Roman Catholic church and its American hierarchy.”<sup>51</sup>

Under pressure to Americanize, the Roman Catholic Church had tried to adopt a more “American” approach, which was relatively easy for the English-speaking Irish. Other Catholics entering the U.S. churches “were made to drop their ethnic identity, at least as far as language was concerned.”<sup>52</sup> This was not entirely successful, and, faced

with the burden of non-English speaking members plus the financial strain of so many new congregants, the Roman Catholic church encouraged the establishment of new, ethnic churches. In the 1890s, forty-one Roman Catholic parishes were established in Chicago, and thirty-four of them were “identifiably ethnic.”<sup>53</sup>

Thus, the pattern of ethnic isolation was enforced in another way. The Catholic immigrant, facing discrimination for being less than Protestant, was not even welcomed into his own religion’s church. As the American Roman Catholic church was fighting to gain equality, it viewed the Slavic immigrants with a “xenophobic attitude” and further pushed the Slav into his own isolated community.<sup>54</sup> For Mary, Andrew, Victor and his siblings, the message, again, was clear. They were Catholic, but inferior to the Catholics already living in the city.

Andrew and Mary retained their ties to the Catholic Church (Andrew is buried in Chicago’s Resurrection Cemetery), but Victor and his siblings developed a bitterness towards Catholicism that would persist through adulthood. Victor’s, in particular, was driven by the conduct of a parish priest during a time when his mother was gravely ill. As she lay dying, the family sent for the priest to perform last rites. According to family history, the priest refused to come because the family was too poor. After that, Victor “didn’t have any use for the Catholic church.”<sup>55</sup> Perhaps that

is why, according to one of Mary and Andrew's granddaughters, "all Lotrichs are very anti-Catholic."<sup>56</sup>

### **OLD WORLD VS. NEW**

The trade between life in the old world and the new was a complicated one, felt differently by each generation. For Mary and Andrew, the familiar life of their rural farming community was exchanged for the employment opportunities of a newly industrializing nation. The decreasing opportunity they could see for their offspring in Slovenia was replaced by the hope that the new land would provide a chance at wealth and upward mobility.

This hope for economic advancement came at a cultural price, and forced them to endure less-than-desirable living conditions. While Victor reaped the benefit of their decision, he paid a heavy price in the prejudice he encountered and the conditions in which he grew up.

Immigration has been called "part of the world process of fusion,"<sup>57</sup> but this process can be very slow, and most difficult for those bridging the gap between two worlds. Victor's parents were wholly Slovenian, even after immigrating to America; his children were wholly American, completely unaware of their Slovenian roots until their adulthood. Victor was the one who straddled the divide between the two.

We like to affirm the idea of a melting pot, but this is not a quick or easy process. Instead, what results is an initial collection of diverse communities contained within a larger group. This is what happened in the Chicago of Victor's youth. Each community formed its own schools, churches, and social organizations, and it became difficult to escape the label of identity.<sup>58</sup>

The new world offered vast natural resources, especially land, and the promise of a growing nation. The Lotrichs had come from a country lacking any growth in industry, resulting in an environment that could not support its increasing population. They, with millions of others, fled to an area that could – the United States. They found economic opportunity and freedom from compulsory military service, along with the hope that their children could rise above their station. Their gains were not found without losses, however, many of them felt by Victor and his siblings.

Consider the experience of an immigrant from Carniola who lived in Cleveland before returning to his homeland in Slovenia. No doubt his return was prompted by acute homesickness, but, after just six weeks, he made the agonizing decision to go back to the U.S. Once there he was eventually able to own a house and saloon. Initially, he and his wife struggled to survive shoveling coal and taking in wash, but “gradually they got on.” He made the choice to settle in the U.S. because, had he



stayed in Slovenia, he would have lived his life as “a beggar.”<sup>59</sup> In return, however, cultural traditions were sacrificed.

The trade-offs were numerous. For a chance at economic security and hope for a better way in the new world, the Lotrichs, and millions of others, traded their way of life and social customs. They traded “poor but clean thatched-roof houses with plenty of elbow room” for “crowded, ill-smelling tenements” in a city that was “heavy and ugly...with musty, garlicky odors of crowded poverty.”<sup>60</sup>

They traded their names, symbols of their Eastern European roots, for Americanized versions, in an effort to better fit in. Victor was alone among his siblings in retaining his name. His brother Franz became Frances, Lorenz became Lawrence and Andreas became Andrew; his sister Aloisia became Louisa, and Johann became Joanne. Andrew and Mary, too, had abandoned the names of their earlier life, Andreas and Maria.

Mary, and her many female immigrant counterparts, traded old ovens for new iron stoves. She traded a life alternating indoor chores with outdoor fieldwork for her new cramped, dirty home. She traded a “familiar, sociable village life” for prejudice, and an outsider’s view that she and her family were somehow “alien.”<sup>61</sup> For life in the new world, immigrants traded an existence that, despite its shortcomings, was “harmonious, complete, self-consistent.”<sup>62</sup>

While Mary and Andrew's generation tried to maintain their culture's ways and customs, their children felt the pressure to forsake them. As a result, cultural traditions were devalued. Lost were the traditional costumes with intricate handwork, the color and music that defined Slovenian heritage, and the rich braiding, leatherwork and embroidery that defined their household arts.<sup>63</sup>

City life wrought changes in Slovenian practices. "Newspapers replaced the gossip network of the small town," and the elderly were cared for by mutual benefit societies rather than extended family and community. Cultural practices taken for granted in the homeland (dress, music, literature, performance and language) had to be "institutionalized" through organizations such as singing societies, libraries, and theater groups.<sup>64</sup>

While hard on everyone, it was Victor and his siblings who were torn between the old and new - between his parents' desire to maintain a link to their culture and his new homeland telling him those cultural ties made him inferior. He had to struggle with competing pressures to be Slovenian *and* to assimilate into the new world - all against the backdrop of a dirty, dangerous city that was less than hospitable to immigrant children.

## **CHICAGO'S IMMIGRANT CHILDREN**

Children like Victor were caught in a web of prejudice and low expectations. While American society consistently reinforced the message that he was inferior due to his place of birth, it also bestowed upon him the low expectation that he would amount to little more than a hand in the labor force. Ultimately, he was able to achieve so much more than what society had laid out for him, but not before navigating the difficult world of his childhood.

Slavic children were often made fun of at school for their dress, speech, and different names (thus leading many to change them.) Many denied their heritage. “Sensing hostility, [they] were pressured to repudiate their cultural heritage and many did so very quickly.” Due to “feeling humiliated,” many were affected in “how they came to view themselves and how they were viewed by others.”<sup>65</sup> They lived in the “disagreeable phase” of being “half-Americanized,”<sup>66</sup> bridging the gap between their Slovenian parents and their American offspring.

Children living in the slums of Chicago “had no place to play and were easily led into delinquency.”<sup>67</sup> They lived in poverty and squalor yet could see around them a different way available to those who were lucky enough to have descended from

native-born Americans. They endured derision at school and in the community, but they also saw “windows bursting with riches, mansions empty or occupied by a few favored ones, stores filled with articles that entice the eye and tempt the hand.”<sup>68</sup> Daily, they witnessed a social inequality that surely provoked “a goading sense of social wrongs” that ate at them.<sup>69</sup>

At the same time, they grew up in the shadow of their parents’ desire for them to have a better life. While many parents failed to have their own hopes for increased economic status fulfilled, all surely transmitted the “will to overcome” to their offspring.<sup>70</sup> It was a lot of pressure for a child to endure, this feeling that he needed to become more than what his family was, all the while being told by society that he didn’t quite measure up to the rest.

Victor attended school, but it is doubtful that much thought was given to his future potential. Children of Slav immigrants were often “prepared for jobs in manual skills without regard to their abilities.” Most were “programmed solely for the world of ... blue collar work.”<sup>71</sup>

Some were forced to leave school early in order to work to supplement the family income. Many were on a “vocational track” anyway and went into the trade jobs they had been preparing for. Most “were to be developed into industrial workers.”<sup>72</sup> Though Victor’s primary education was in this environment, he

developed and retained throughout his life a reverence for learning that he would pass along to his own children (all of whom would become teachers).

In 1912, it was found that children of immigrants were three times more likely to be involved in crime than the children of native-born. This difference was not seen in immigrants – they were no more prone to crime than native-born Americans- rather, this “drift into lawlessness” was a characteristic unique to the sons of immigrants. These male immigrant-offspring, on average, left school at a younger age than their native-born counterparts, and they appeared more often in juvenile courts, reformatories and prisons.<sup>73</sup> Victor, sadly, was unable to escape this fate. He was one of the many that served time in a reformatory, though his incarceration occurred after he left Chicago.

This “curse of thousands of sons of foreigners” stemmed from the conditions in which the sons lived and the prejudices they endured. It came from the “dirty homes, ...crowded tenements and vicious companionships...dismal streets, dark alleys, degrading shows, mendacious and anarchistic literature,” as well as the “eye of contempt,” the constant “antipathy,” and the inescapable feeling that no one believed in them.<sup>74</sup> Victor struggled against all of these obstacles.

## **THE END OF CHILDHOOD**

Through all the hardship that he endured on the streets of Chicago, Victor's one bright spot was his mother. They were very close, and their relationship was one of the few things from his childhood he would discuss with his own children. He would tell them often "how good she was to him" and how close he was to her.<sup>75</sup> He would describe how she would "lecture" rather than punish, and she shared with him something he would love his whole life - opera.

In the midst of all the dirt and depravity, Mary and Victor shared this love of music. It was a special bond between them, and Victor held on to this love long after she was gone. He regularly listened to opera as an adult, and he passed his affection for it on to his own sons.

When Victor was just entering his teens, Mary became ill. She likely suffered from tuberculosis, the second leading cause of death at that time, causing greater than ten percent of all deaths in 1913. (It was surpassed only by heart disease.)<sup>76</sup> The cramped conditions of the city put those in urban areas at greatest risk. Victor was undoubtedly terrified at the thought of losing his mother, and, if family legend is true, he was the one sent to bring back the priest to perform last rites. Turned away because of their low station, Victor undoubtedly fought back tears as he returned to her deathbed alone and faced the loss of the person who had been his anchor in the cruel

world of his youth. Another blow was dealt when Victor's brother Francis was unexpectedly killed in an accident.

Though his father tried to keep the family together, without Mary, Victor wanted nothing more to do with the city. Armed with only an eighth-grade education and some money he stole from his dad, Victor went to the train station and purchased a ticket to get as far away as he could. At the tender age of fourteen, he left Chicago and all it represented behind. He struck out on his own to find a new life where he would not be labeled as "different" or inferior, one where he could find the opportunity to rise above what society had told him he must be. He forsook his family and severed all ties in this pursuit. He never looked back and never again claimed the family he left behind. He headed west - to an area of promise and possibility.

## **Chapter 4**

### **CALL OF THE WEST**

#### **LEAVING CHICAGO**

The filth and danger that was commonplace for immigrant families in early twentieth century Chicago had pervaded Victor's childhood like an inescapable odor. Victor had grown up subjected to prejudice, his Slovenian background branding him inferior to those who had the privilege of being born American. The death of his beloved mother marked the end of his childhood, and, after completing a sixth grade education, Victor began to work in a factory, a position he would hold for the next three years. He gained experience working with blueprints, a skill that would surface in later years during his World War I service in the Army corps of Engineers.<sup>1</sup>

The future held little promise for Victor. A life of factory work was what was expected of him. Higher education was not an option, despite his quick intellect, and his path had been set by his status as an Eastern European immigrant. He was struggling to adjust to the losses of his mother and brother, and a grim future of factory work loomed.



In later years, Victor shared so little information with his wife and children, it is hard to know exactly what happened during that time in Chicago, other than that it was very bad, so bad that he “totally denied any relations or anything related to Chicago for the rest of his life.”<sup>2</sup> Victor lived for a short time with cousins or neighbors, but they did not treat him well. By the time he turned fifteen, he had made the decision to leave Chicago and search for a different life elsewhere.

Like many, he was lured by the call of the West. He would answer the call and never return to the place of this youth, nor to the family he left behind. For the rest of his life, he would claim they were all dead. Upon leaving Chicago, he left behind the family and heritage that had branded him as less than a “real” American. His parents brought him to America for a better life, and in attempting to find it, he forsook them and their culture.

In his obituary, there is no mention of his Slovenian heritage. His birthplace is listed as Evanston, Illinois, and his father is described as “the village blacksmith.” (Chicago at that time was a far cry from a “village.”) Only one brother is mentioned and only the fact that he died in Victor’s youth. The obituary indicates that his father, mother and brother all died before he reached the age of fourteen, and that he arrived in Colorado after he was “left alone in this great wide world without parents or relatives,” and that, aside from his sons, “he had no blood relations of his own.”<sup>3</sup>

Victor did tell his children that he “did not want to live in a city and work in a factory.” He told his oldest son that he was orphaned at age eleven and placed in an orphanage, running away at age sixteen.<sup>4</sup> He never wavered from his claim that he had no living relatives.

Perhaps the memories of life in Chicago and the losses of his mother and brother were too painful for him, and it was easier to lock them away forever. Or perhaps he wanted to shield his sons, worried that if his true background were known, they too would suffer the same prejudice he had felt as a child. In any case, neither his wife nor sons learned of their Chicago relatives until long after Victor’s death. During his life, he steadfastly maintained that his only relatives had died in his youth. In 1954, the year before he died, he stated, in front of his middle son, “I am the only Lotrich in the United States.”<sup>5</sup>

Victor scraped together money to purchase a train ticket out of Chicago. He may have used some of the wages from his factory job, but, according to a niece who remained in Chicago, he stole the money from his father. Family legend says that he placed all his money on the train counter and, spurred by a dream of becoming a cowboy, asked for a ticket as far West as he could go. He ended up in Southwestern Colorado. Though his father hired a private detective who eventually tracked him down there, Victor refused to return to Chicago. Colorado became his new home.<sup>6</sup>

## **WESTWARD HO**

In the early 1900s, many young men were drawn to the image of the tough, rugged cowboy and to the expansive Western landscape he inhabited. This highly romanticized image was fostered in the popular media of the time, and many were persuaded to seek their fortunes in the seemingly wild and untamed part of the United States. No doubt Victor felt the same appeal as fellow immigrant Louis Adamic who recorded the desire he and his friends felt as young men to pursue a “stirring life in the far West.” The images on movie screens appealed to a young man’s desire for adventure and freedom, and these images ignited in many a desire to quit their jobs and travel west.<sup>7</sup>

The image of the cowboy represented “rugged individualism,” “unadorned masculinity,” and “ultimate heroism.”<sup>8</sup> This image was perpetuated by books, radio, and movies. It was promoted by Western heroes like Kit Carson and Buffalo Bill, newspaper coverage of the adventures of Billy the Kid, and the “Indian-killing and heroine-rescuing exploits of cowboys,” seen by the throngs that attended Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show (1870-1910).<sup>9</sup>

Zane Grey novels provided romanticized tales of all that was admirable in the cowboy of the West. The first was published in 1910, followed by over fifty more. The novels peaked in popularity between 1917 and 1924. By the 1930s, they had been read by more than half of the U.S. population.<sup>10</sup>

It was during this frenzy of interest in the American cowboy that Victor decided to search for a new identity. He fit the typical description of the type of person who usually became a cowboy – a young man looking for “a change of scenery...a chance for adventure.”<sup>11</sup> How could he resist the pull of the “most central and enduring theme” of the West, that of “the frontier, a vast and stunning landscape where brave cowboys, rugged individualism, and dream fulfillment are the rule”?<sup>12</sup> Dream fulfillment was something he was looking for.

However, the cowboy attraction was not the only link Victor had to Colorado. It is likely he knew of fellow Slovenians living in the southwestern part of the state. The town of Pueblo, Colorado, is known as “a sister city of Maribor, Slovenia.”<sup>13</sup> During the 1880s, a large steel plant, built by the Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CFI) was built in Pueblo.

CFI recruited Slovenian, Slovakian, German and Italian immigrants to provide the workforce for their new plant. The population of Pueblo swelled from 14,000 to 60,000, a greater than four-fold increase due to the plant opening. Many Slovenians

settled in Pueblo, putting down roots and establishing a school and parish that would be named St. Mary's Help of Christians after a sister organization in Brezje, Slovenia.<sup>14</sup>

Pueblo was not the only city that contained a large Slovenian population. Around 1880, Slovenians had settled Canon City, approximately forty miles west of Pueblo. Similar settlements also sprang up in Denver, Aspen, and Leadville. Many Slovenians were attracted to Colorado "by its climate and resemblance to the land of Slovenia."<sup>15</sup>

At the tender age of fifteen, standing at the door of adulthood, though not quite through, Victor struck out on his own. Leaving behind a childhood marred by prejudice and loss, he set out toward a dream built on the very American myth of the Western cowboy. He had a vague notion of a vast place, wide open with opportunity. Fellow Slovenians had gone before him and been successful, and he felt, perhaps, he could too.

Refusing to accept the grim path that lay in front of him in Chicago, Victor chose to seize the opportunity for a new way. Like his parents, he was seeking an escape from a future proscribed by the circumstances of his birth. Unlike his parents, he did not have to cross an ocean in search of a different life; instead he boarded a

train and crossed the country. Andrew and Mary had provided him with a starting point; Victor sought a new direction.

### **LAND OF RANCHES AND FARMS**

With his stolen funds, Victor purchased a train ticket that landed him in Gunnison Colorado, a ranching community in the southwestern part of the state. The Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy rail line offered service along such a route. It used the slogan “everywhere west” because of the extensive tracks running through the Midwest and the mountain states. In 1864, it was the first train line to operate in the Union Stock Yards in Chicago, and in 1882 it opened the first direct rail line from Chicago to Denver. Coal-powered steam locomotives pulled comfortable passenger cars, offering riders the luxury of a separate dining unit.<sup>16</sup>

Victor, of course, had no money to spare for such a treat. He had spent all of his money on his ticket, and he was embarking on this adventure without a job or even knowing where he might sleep when he arrived. He was now alone in the world, without the support of another living soul. Young, scared, and hungry, he tugged at the heart of a fellow traveler, and a kind woman shared her sandwiches with him during the train ride west. This small act of kindness undoubtedly meant a great deal, and the memory stayed with him throughout his life.<sup>17</sup>

What must Victor have thought as the train pulled away from the grit and grime that pervaded his life in Chicago? Could he have imagined the vast change in landscape that he would witness as he approached his destination? As the crowded city fell away and the train passed first through the rolling farmland of Iowa, then along the open plains of southern Nebraska, Victor must have stared in wonder at the vistas opening up before him. As an adult, he had an unshakeable love for the land and the natural world. Surely this trip planted the seeds of this love in a boy who had previously known only crowded city streets.

The train ultimately reached Colorado. The southwestern part of the state, where Victor would finally disembark, was marked by a spectacular landscape unlike anything he had seen before. A diverse mix of red-rock formations, towering mountains, arid canyons and roiling rivers, this was the land where he hoped to be judged not by his circumstance but by his determination and heart.

As an adult, Victor wrote the poem *Castle Evergreen*, and it captures some of his reverence for the beauty of nature.

*Standing in bold outline against the sky,*

*With streams of silver playing*

*Among the boughs,*

*The sentinels, never off guard,  
Tower massive and high.*

*Within the castle, carnivals are ever on;  
The creeks, flowing gently, croon  
Enchanting music of a dance,  
Keeping the frolics in a whirl.  
The wind, sweeping low, carries  
The laughter to distant places.*

*The birds, migrating slow but far,  
Sing its praises long after twilight.  
The light, changing the colors every hour,  
Is accorded the highest laurels,  
For always has it the seat of honor.*

Colorado, a land of dazzling sunshine and brilliant blue skies, presented itself  
in stark contrast to the gray cityscape of Chicago. With plentiful sunshine and



landscapes of breathtaking beauty, the state provided a home in which Victor's love of the natural world would grow.

Colorado was inhabited in the early 1800s by Native American Indians and by the handful of white "plainsmen" or "mountain men" who entered the state looking for beaver and other furs. Throughout the 1800s, traders and trappers and their (usually non-white) wives were the main travelers passing through the state. In 1853 the first permanent settlement in San Luis, Colorado, was established. By 1855, "only a handful remained on the plains or in the mountains," and Colorado was "still a wilderness."<sup>18</sup>

Then, in 1858, something happened that would change the state – gold was discovered. This drew many to the area, but most came up empty in their search for treasure. Censuses results from 1860 and 1861 demonstrate the shifting demographics of the state and those entering it. The majority of respondents in 1860 were white males, traveling through the state, seeking their fortune. Women made up less than five percent of the population, as very few settled the area with eyes on making it a permanent home.<sup>19</sup>

Over the next year, many abandoned their quest for gold, but those staying decided to settle permanently. Wives and families were sent for, and the 1861 census saw a 300 percent increase in white females as they joined their husbands in the young

territory. While the number of women and families increased, the total population declined by approximately twenty-five percent.<sup>20</sup> The fading interest in gold was responsible for the decline in interest, but it was quickly replaced by a new draw, ranching and farming opportunities.

Throughout the 1870s cattle ranches and farms flourished. “The tide of fortune now began to turn,” as towns and mining camps were linked by roads and bridges, and railroad tracks were laid across the state.<sup>21</sup> The young territory flourished, and in 1876, Colorado became the thirty-eighth state to enter the nation.

At the turn of the century, those settling in Colorado embraced the opportunities in agriculture, as the state discovered that “its greatest source of wealth lay not in its mines but its farms.” Immigrants, drawn to the opportunities of the state, generally fared better than their counterparts who settled in industrialized cities.<sup>22</sup> The land did not discriminate, and “hardy men of every descent” established homesteads. By 1910, the population had swelled to nearly 800,000, a five-fold increase over the number who had been there just forty years before.<sup>23</sup>

Victor stepped off the train into this young, developing state. He had left the problems of Chicago behind to find a new set of troubles facing him, primarily, how would he make a living? As Victor would tell in later years, a solution was initially

found in the mainstay of the state – agriculture, but the solution would prove to be short-lived.

At the train station, Victor met a farmer looking for help with his farm. Though he knew nothing about horses or farming, Victor convinced the man that he did, and Farmer Johnston hired Victor for the summer. The next day, Victor was given the job of plowing the field. When Victor attempted to harness the team of horses, he put the harness on upside down and backwards, a story he recounted humorously many times in later years. Despite such difficulties, Farmer Johnston must have taken pity on Victor, for he kept him on through the summer. But when the work ran out, with autumn approaching, he let Victor go.

Again, faced with no home, no employment, and no money, Victor was on his own. Fifteen years old, with no place to go, Victor became desperate. In his own words, recorded by the court that later found him guilty of the crime, “I was hungry and went into a house to get something to eat, and I looked into the sugar bowl and saw some money and took it. Amount of \$15.22 was found on me when arrested. Plead Guilty.”<sup>24</sup> His next home was the Colorado State Reformatory.

## **BENEVOLENT REFORM**

The Colorado State Reformatory opened in 1890. Its establishment was part of a national movement in criminal justice that had begun approximately fifteen years earlier. Victor's incarceration occurred at a time when a new method of prison science was sweeping the country, and the system he encountered was very different from the one that had existed before.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as industry in the United States grew, so did the number and population of cities. Along with this growth, there were increases, or at least perceived increases, in a variety of “city-related” problems: crime, delinquency, poverty, and moral decay.” Not surprisingly, many of these problems were attributed to the “new” immigrants whose presence accompanied the growth in industrialization.<sup>25</sup>

Many crimes were committed by perpetrators just like Victor – young men who were not hardened criminals, had no previous record, but for reasons perhaps related to desperation and survival committed non-violent acts that landed them before a court.

Concern with how to deal with the growing problem of crime prompted an examination of the criminal justice system. The prison science community came to believe that what was needed was a system of reform, rather than just punishment. If

inmates could be molded into productive citizens, not only would they be better off, but society would also reap the benefits.

The idea of a new type of prison system took hold, and in 1867, the *Report on the Reformatories of the United States and Canada* officially declared that institutions should focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment. The authors called for “a new type of institution to separate hardened and novice offenders,” the adult reformatory.<sup>26</sup> It was just such a prison that Victor would enter, with the end goal of his incarceration being his reformation into a productive citizen.

Colorado’s was one of eleven “adult reformatories” that were built in the ensuing years. It was modeled after the Elmira Reformatory in New York, which served as a pilot program and model for those that followed. Elmira opened in 1876 and ushered in a “new era in American penology.” It would “capture the attention of the world and reshape the American criminal justice system.”<sup>27</sup> Along with Colorado, the states of Michigan, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, Illinois, Kansas, Ohio, Indiana, and Wisconsin all boasted adult reformatories by the year 1900.

Victor belonged to a “new criminal class” invented by these institutions: “the dangerous youthful offender.” The institutions aimed to “teach and train the prisoner in such a manner that, on his discharge, he may be able to resist temptation and [be] inclined to lead an upright, worthy life.”<sup>28</sup> Victor entered a facility whose goal it was

to mold him into an upstanding member of society (albeit, one who assumed his expected role in the working class). His time there was intended to not only punish him for the theft, but also to guide him back to the path of good citizenship.

This was a change from the previous role played by prisons. Up until that time, they were institutions of punishment and deterrence. The “adult reformatory” (intended to house offenders between the ages of sixteen and thirty) dovetailed with the idea of reform. The young inmates of these institutions, most often first-time offenders of non-violent crimes, were seen as being ripe for molding into model citizens.

The first way in which the new institutions differed from earlier prisons was in sentencing. Traditional prison sentences were fixed, for a specified amount of time determined by the severity of the crime committed. Inmates entered reformatories with indeterminate sentences.

Victor entered the Colorado Reformatory under a system in which his release depended upon successful rehabilitation. In theory, all of the reformatories used a mark and classification system. They were to provide intensive academic and vocational instruction and to employ humane disciplinary methods.<sup>29</sup> Time would reveal that reality did not live up to the ideal.

The new reformatory system involved dividing inmates into three “grades.” Each new inmate was initially placed in the middle grade. He was evaluated monthly for his school performance, work performance, and general deportment. Upon a six-month review, if his performance were deemed good, he was “promoted” to the first grade. If his marks were poor, he was “demoted” to third grade and suffered a loss of privileges. After another six months, a second review was performed, and a good performance could earn a review with the parole board and a possibility of release.<sup>30</sup>

Victor’s reformatory record reveals his “conduct while at reformatory.” For each month he was there, Victor accumulated points that were cumulatively tallied as time progressed. He received five points a day for his entire stay at the facility, and in each month but one, he earned additional “bonus” points, ranging between 50 and 100 for each given month. The only month during which he lost points (25) was December. The reason for the deduction was because of “whistling and singing in [his] cell.” Perhaps a holiday celebration was the reason for his delinquency.<sup>31</sup>

The intent of the “Elmira system,” as it came to be known, was to instill in the inmates a “Protestant work ethic,” to prepare them for industry, to “train and transfer them from economic worthlessness to worthfulness,” to “tame and train” them, to “instill them with Christian character,” and to “let the punishment fit the criminal, rather than the crime.”<sup>32</sup> As Pisciotta contends, there was a desire to exert a form of

social control inherent in this system. It was “aimed at controlling the lower classes...and contributing to the development of an orderly society.”<sup>33</sup>

The inmates found in adult reformatories were primarily drawn from a population that was made up of men very much like Victor - “young, poor, uneducated, unskilled, living on the verge of subsistence.” Most were property offenders, and this was true in the Colorado Reformatory. The 1918 Report of the Colorado Board of Corrections reveals that 68% of the inmates were guilty of crimes of larceny or burglary.<sup>34</sup>

The majority of inmates shared another trait with Victor – that of his immigrant status. Many of the inmates in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century institutions were impoverished immigrants and their children. In Pisciotto’s view, the institutions of that time share much in common with those of today, serving as “storage dumps for capitalism’s unwanted human refuse; a mixture of alienated ‘social junk’ and ‘social dynamite’.”<sup>35</sup>

By the turn of the century, the Elmira Reformatory was “the most important penal institution in the United States.” Despite the praise and acclaim, Elmira did not live up to its promise. It was “a brutal prison” by any standards, “extremely harsh punishments” were inflicted on the inmates, and the institution was “overcrowded, understaffed, grossly mismanaged” and “ineffective.”<sup>36</sup>



The Colorado State Reformatory followed the Elmira model, not just in its philosophy and methodology, but also in the brutal reality that existed within the prison walls. In 1895, a “devastating” investigation by the Colorado State Board of Charities found the deputy warden “guilty of cruel and inhumane treatment of prisoners... and of suffering vile and unnatural practices among the convicts.” The report “left no doubt that the Colorado State Reformatory was one of the most ineffective and inhumane institutions in the country.”<sup>37</sup>

Despite the findings, for the next twenty-five years, the reformatory “maintained an unwavering approach” in supporting the traditional Elmira system, confident that it could “save normal and mentally defective offenders.”<sup>38</sup> In 1916, the year Victor entered the reformatory, then Governor Carlson of Colorado leveled charges against the reformatory’s warden (M.P. Capp), and an institutional review, again, turned up evidence of brutality and harsh treatment of prisoners.

Testimony showed that in May of the previous year, three boys had been beaten with a “heavy whipping strap,” and that “the guards who did the lashing were all strong able-bodied men, five in number, who took turns in wielding the heavy lash.” One boy lost consciousness, and another “was laid up for some time as a result of the said whipping.” It was also found that the prisoners were being fed

contaminated meat.<sup>39</sup> Brutality and harsh treatment prevailed in an institution that was supposed to be providing “benevolent reform.”

Between 1911 and 1915, six known deaths occurred at the reformatory. Three men were shot while trying to escape, one froze to death, one died when he was “killed by a horse barn blowing down on him,” and one died of unknown causes.<sup>40</sup> These deaths add evidence to the picture of a hard, cruel, pitiless institution, one that was meant to turn unruly, misguided young men into well-behaved, productive members of society but attempted to do so without mercy or humanity. By 1922 the facility housed 209 inmates in a facility built for 106.<sup>41</sup>

Victor was just one of thousands housed in the adult reformatories built in the wake of Elmira’s “success.” His incarceration occurred at a time when the criminal justice community was building upon the “benevolent reform” idea propagated so successfully by the Elmira experiment. Between 1900-1920, the prison science community embraced another philosophy, that of eugenics, the idea that a person’s genetic make-up determined his inherent “goodness” or “badness.”

This “medicalization of deviance” supported the economic, political, social and class relations of the day. Prisoners were to be “treated” for their deviant tendencies, and they were to be instilled with “traditional American values” and transformed into “law-abiding, hard-working proletarians.” The eugenic approach “served broader,

societal interests,” echoing “nativist, xenophobic, and racial themes.”<sup>42</sup> Prisoners were to be reformed, but reformed into the working class role to which they were deemed to be suited. As was the case in his childhood, Victor was labeled and relegated to a place at the bottom of society.

This approach proved to be flawed, as the reformatories failed to consistently turn out robotic, “reformed” men content in their role of the common, blue-collar worker. Proponents of the adult reformatory system splintered into various factions, as different approaches were embraced at different institutions. By 1920, “faith in the power of prison science and the rehabilitative ideal was in full retreat.”<sup>43</sup> Eventually, the idea of the adult reformatory was abandoned. Today, most have been converted into either juvenile facilities or adult prisons. (The Colorado Reformatory, renamed the Buena Vista Correctional Complex, today houses adult offenders.)<sup>44</sup>

Though the adult reformatory movement did not survive, there were lasting effects upon the criminal justice system. The goal of transforming “dangerous classes into law-abiding and socially and economically productive working-class citizens” stuck, though the methodology of attempting to do so changed over the years. Indeterminate sentencing and supervised parole also maintain a place in the criminal justice system.<sup>45</sup>

For all the faith placed in the reformation process at the time, Victor's release and subsequent behavior in society had more to do with outside circumstances than institutional programs. A time of great upheaval was upon the country, as World War I was approaching, and Victor, along with thousands of other young men, was about to play a role.

Victor, as an adult, reflected on his experiences in the reformatory. He never revealed to any of his family that he had been an inmate, but for a college English class, he wrote a poem (for which he received a grade of B+) that sheds light on what he thought of his incarceration. The poem conveys his sense of desperation, his dismay at a youthful mistake, and his frustration being labeled "evil."

*A Law's a Law*

*Why have you here a rope thrown o'er*

*The bough of the oak tree?*

*'Sorry, you see, he stole a horse,*

*And is no longer free.'*

*But he is young and full of life,*

*Just off his mother's knee.*

*'Sorry, you see, he stole a horse,*

*For him there is no plea.'*

*Why he can ride, and he can rope.*

*Why can't he pay in work?*

*'Sorry, you see, he stole a horse,*

*In him does evil lurk.'*

*His face is fair, his eyes sky blue;*

*Shorn bud for bloom is lost.*

*'Sorry, you see, he stole a horse,*

*Too late he counts the cost.'*

*His lesson learned, he'll mend his ways,*

*If once more he be free.*

*'Sorry, you see, he stole a horse,*

*He swings from the oak tree.'*

Victor was housed in the Colorado State Reformatory for nine months – from September 1916 until June 1917. He entered the facility seven days after his sixteenth birthday. The prison record demonstrates that, even in his dire circumstances, he refused to acknowledge the life or family he had left behind. He claimed both his parents were dead, and he listed as a relative his brother Francis Lotrich, though he listed Francis’s address as Austria. (He did, however, also list the name of a friend, Frank Chilar, as living in Chicago.) Victor did admit to his immigrant status, declaring an Austrian “nativity” on the form.<sup>46</sup>

Since the Colorado reformatory appeared to follow Elmira’s system, it would stand to reason that at his first sixth-month review, Victor was promoted to the first grade. In a departure from the Elmira system, however, it was just another three months before he was paroled. Why was a parole review conducted earlier than the usual six-month interval? Perhaps a clue is found in the history of a sister institution, the Kansas State Industrial Reformatory.

The Kansas reformatory was founded just five years prior to Colorado’s, and, like Colorado’s, it modeled its procedures after Elmira’s, employing indeterminate sentencing, a mark and classification system, and a parole plan. During 1918, the Kansas reformatory saw a drop of twenty-five percent in its inmate population. This was because of America’s participation in World War I. During that time, “most of

the inmates that wanted to volunteer for the draft were given that option rather than serving their prison term.”<sup>47</sup>

Victor was paroled on June 7, 1917. Whether joining the army was a condition of his parole or the only way he could find to survive outside the reformatory, after his release, he enlisted. By August 16, though underage (he was a month shy of his seventeenth birthday), he joined the Sixth Army Corps of Engineers, Company C. Before the year’s end, he was on a ship traveling back across the Atlantic to fight for America, against the Austrian empire his family had fled. All of the trials he had endured up until that point were about to be overshadowed by the harrowing experience of war.

Chapter 5

**THE GREAT WAR**

*Soldier's Silence*

*You ask me where I've been;  
It makes me look so old,  
That my face is furrowed deep  
With lines like steel, - sharp  
All traces of kindness gone;  
Eyes piercing, - looking-  
Hands moving, never still;  
Caring naught when I eat,-  
When I sleep.*

*But the only answer I can give, ---  
No, there is no answer!  
For if you with me had been,*



*Eaten inside,  
With horrors so terrifying  
That thoughts of them would send  
Your mind awirl with fire,  
Breeding the desire to be going  
God knows where,  
You would not ask me.*

*Victor Francis Lotrich*

### **THE CHOICE TO SERVE**

Victor was sixteen years old and had been an inmate in the Colorado Reformatory for seven months when the United States entered World War I. When the United States, in April, 1917, declared war on Germany, its Regular Army numbered less than 135,000 men.<sup>1</sup> This small force was “scattered in weak detachments,” in small units that were “not suitably equipped and organized for major operations.”<sup>2</sup>

The army was small and not prepared for the battle that lay ahead. After surveying the situation on the ground in France, then Commander-in-Chief of American Expeditionary Forces, Major General John J. Pershing, informed the war department that the army would need to increase its numbers nearly ten-fold to put at least one million soldiers in place within the year.<sup>3</sup> Such a feat would require enormous numbers of enlistees and rapid training to prepare them for their task.

The first draft registration occurred on June 5, 1917. Victor was paroled two days later.<sup>4</sup> He joined the hundreds of thousands answering the call for service (for a myriad of reasons, love of country being only one) and bringing the army's total numbers to 3.8 million by the end of the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

When, in later years, Victor relayed the story of his enlistment, his version did not include his time spent at the reformatory, but rather placed his enlistment immediately following his stint on the farm. As he told the story, after he was let go by Farmer Johnston, "he walked down the railroad track looking for work until some soldiers guarding the bridge at Nepesta [CO] took him into camp and convinced him to join the army."<sup>6</sup>

Whether enlistment was a condition of his parole, or whether his version of events is closer to the truth, at sixteen years old, Victor seemingly had few options available to him that provided more stability than becoming a soldier. Being underage

did not present a problem, as he looked older than he was, and it was easy to lie to get into the army. As another young, seventeen-year-old enlistee recorded in his journal, joining the army despite being underage was a breeze since “the army did not insist on birth certificates.”<sup>7</sup>

The young soldier who penned that remembrance also recorded the reasons why someone his age might consider joining. William Triplet was unhappily finishing his junior year in high school, and the benefits of enlistment appealed to him. “By reporting briskly to the nearest recruiting station I would not only get my diploma but would also receive room, board, clothing, travel, adventure and fifteen dollars a month for the duration of the war.”<sup>8</sup>

For Victor, lacking not only his high school diploma, but also a place to live and money to buy food, the promise of room, board, “travel and adventure” and a diploma to boot must have been an offer too good to turn down, especially if the alternative was more time in the reformatory.

It was not an unusual motive for many who signed up for the Great War. Sergeant Mike Koska described his choice with clear-eyed frankness. Koska, a native Czechoslovakian who emigrated from his homeland at eighteen and joined the United States army at nineteen, explained his decision this way: “What’s the matter with soldiering, in peacetime or wartime? You always have a place to sleep and you’re

always sure of three squares a day and a shirt on your back. That's more than can be said for life outside.”<sup>9</sup> Slovenian immigrant Louis Adamic initially resisted the call to arms but finally joined up when he was out of work and “finally down to [his] last five dollars.” (He ended up staying in the regular army until 1920 and upon his release had nearly three hundred dollars.<sup>10</sup> In his memoir he explained that this was not an unusual route for many down-on-their-luck immigrants. He notes that immigrants were actively recruited, and that citizenship was not a prerequisite for enlistment.<sup>11</sup> During World War I, one-sixth of army recruits were foreign-born.<sup>12</sup>

For some, like Adamic, it was not a patriotic love of country that drove them to fight for their newly adopted homeland. It was somewhat the opposite of that – namely, an inability to find security and stability in a place where they, more often than not, were viewed as second-class citizens. In Adamic's words, “to most of them the army was scarcely more than a convenient meal ticket and a ‘flop’ or an escape from everydayness.”<sup>13</sup>

Young men like Victor, not even out of their teenage years, could not comprehend the horror that awaited them on. For Victor, a life on the streets or in the reformatory was traded for military service, but what he endured on the battlefields of France would impact the rest of his adult life. For an inexperienced youth, the

adventure of service presented itself devoid of the savage tragedy that became the reality many experienced in battle.

According to Victor's middle son, his experiences in the war were "traumatic" and "life-shattering." He was "physically scarred internally and externally from mustard gas burns," but he was also scarred by the memories he carried with him for the rest of his life.<sup>14</sup> At the time, however, there was no way for him to know what awaited him in France. He just knew the army looked better than his other options.

### **THE SIXTH ENGINEERS**

After his release from the reformatory, Victor joined the Sixth Engineers of the United States Army. The Sixth Engineers came into existence in May 1917, formed from a core of transfers from the First Engineers, numbering approximately three hundred men.<sup>15</sup> In a matter of months, the group increased to about 1200 members divided into six companies, designated by the letters A through F. Victor was in Company C.

The time immediately following his induction into the army was a pivotal point in Victor's life. He was in Colorado for a short time before departing for training in Washington D.C., and, as he recounted in his description of his enlistment, he trained

with his fellow Coloradan soldiers in Nepesta. It was during this time that Victor was befriended by a kind rancher and his family, a benevolence that would alter the path of his life.

Along with the other soldiers, Victor attended the local church on Sundays, and it was there he met Adrian “Ed” Gilmore, a fatherly man who invited Victor to Sunday suppers with his family. Ed’s son Harry was about Victor’s age, and they became fast friends.<sup>16</sup> The strong friendship Victor shared with the Gilmores provided him a familial connection that had been missing since he left Chicago. The friendship thrived, and Victor would spend time on the Gilmore ranch recuperating after his return from the war.

Ed Gilmore provided more than just fatherly kindness and generosity. It was through his time spent with the Gilmores that Victor met Ed’s niece, Mildred Thomas, the woman he would eventually marry. Mildred was an extraordinary young woman, with an intellect that matched Victor’s own. The forces that brought them together were a blessing in a life that had had few, and meeting her was one of the most fortunate occurrences in his life. But before embarking on that chapter, Victor had a war awaiting him.

## **PREPARING TO SAIL**

In October 1917, Victor traveled to Washington D.C. with his fellow soldiers to take part in the training that was to prepare them for service in the war in France. The make-up of the regiment was noted to be “remarkably good,” consisting of “students, business men, professional men, and artisans” who made “a splendid impression wherever they went.” There was no mention of a delinquent or criminal in the bunch.<sup>17</sup>

A camp was formed on the northwest outskirts of Washington and came to be known as Camp American University. It was here that Victor and his company arrived for training. The days were busy and filled with challenges due to the large number of recruits arriving and the few officers present for training them. The young soldiers’ days were filled with “close order drill[s], hikes, parades, and engineer drill[s].”<sup>18</sup>

It must have been an odd time for Victor, with so many unknowns and apprehension about the future. He undoubtedly made friends, but perhaps felt out of place, a very young man assuming his role as an adult. The experience provided a backdrop for his short story, *The Last Gamble*, which he would write some time after his return from the war.

The story provides a glimpse of a young man awaiting shipment overseas, along with the rest of his unit. The character in the story is young like Victor and bristles under the fatherly protection of an older character, Bill, while at the same time feeling great affection for him. It is the older character's situation, however, that is the focal point of the story, and the description of the lengths to which he'll go to "play the system" and avoid battlefield service.

The older man, Bill, provides a perfect example of someone who joined the service, not with the intent of serving his country, but with finding a way to better his personal situation. He states in the story, "I didn't join the army because I was patriotic, but to make money." His 'gamble,' which unfolds as the story nears its end, is dangerous, but Bill explains his reasons for taking it. He doesn't want to end up like many men he's known in civilian life, "ragged and homeless, pushed about, just barely existing." The story presents in Bill a character trying to escape two situations – a soldier's life in battle or a civilian's life of poverty.



## *THE LAST GAMBLE*

*Bill and I were alone the afternoon he told me all about his plans. Me, I was cleaning my rifle, and Bill, marked 'no duty' by the Doc the past week, was resting on his bunk, his long, thin hands shuffling the cards in solitaire.*

*I remember the afternoon well. The heat, and the smell of the grease on the rag of my ramrod, and the hard-boiled voice of the corporal drilling the awkward squad – 'column right, column left' – on the company street. The kind of a day you wished you was back on the farm, sitting in the shade of an oak, and chewing grass, not being bothered by somebody telling you what to do next.*

*Bill kind of liked me too, or he'd never told me; me a kid of seventeen and Bill a man of the world. Being in the same squad, and in the same tent, I guess it just felt natural we hitched together and became buddies. And he kinda fathered me too, although I can't say I liked it; me wearing a uniform, and cussing the army like the rest, thinking I'm a man. Why right on the start, after we've been handed out equipment and assigned quarters, he goes to pitying me, making me feel cheap. He sits on his cot, eyeing me work, his elbows on his knees, his head propped on those long hands of his, and says easy like:*

*“What are you doing here, kid? You ought to be home going to school. Somebody ought to have spanked you when you even looked at a recruiting sergeant. Too bad! You’re signed up now, and here you stay until Uncle Sam lets you go.”*

*Cripes! Didn’t he think a fella ever grew up! I didn’t like that; me, who could pitch hay all day with any of the hired men we ever had.*

*No! I didn’t like him on the start.*

*But when a fella sees that something isn’t regulation style and fixes it for you, like putting the right fold in a blanket, and saves you plenty of kitchen duty by giving you little hints of how to get around the non-coms, why you got to like ‘em after a while. And Bill knew lots of tricks, all right. When he was on kitchen police he didn’t peel potatoes and onions with the rest of us. No sir, he’d smooth-talk the mess sergeant and first thing we knew he’s be the cook’s assistant, stirring the hash and cooking himself something fancy.*

*But where Bill was my hero was the way he played cards. There was plenty of games after retreat on the nights following payday, but they thinned out until there’d be only two or three guys with all the money. And Bill always played in them final games. His slim hands would reach out over the khaki blanket and smoothly sweep up his deal. He’d kinda run his hands lovingly over the cards. He wouldn’t flicker an*

*eyebrow as he's push in his money, look kinda steely, and drawl out like a sneer:*

*"Well, she's open boys. Cost yuh a dollar to stay and see her out."*

*And you couldn't tell whether he had 'em or was just bluffing, either.*

*Boy! I'd sit watching, my heart pumping away, plugging for Bill, even if he didn't ever let me play.*

*"You're too green. Save your money, kid. There's a rainy day coming." And he'd kinda pat me on the back.*

*But I had the fever in me I guess. I learned to wait until Bill got started good in a game, and then I'd sneak off to some other tent, where I'd take an empty seat and play poker or black jack; it didn't matter which. Sure I won sometimes, but I'd lose it all before the next pay day. But who cared! The excitement was mine and I guess I got paid, all right. I'd sit there, just like Bill, look my cards over easy like, and stare at the guys, making 'em think; have I got 'em or not. Gee! But it was great stuff! The candles just lighting the bunk and all you could see was faces and them kinda blurred by smoke. When someone clinked the silver in his hand, how it sparkled! No noise or talk, only short speeches, like – "what's yuh got?" – "beats me." – "my pot." And sometimes somebody'd give a funny laugh, and maybe sigh.*

*But it was Bill I was going to tell you about. Well there we was that hot afternoon, me cleaning my rifle and wishing I was home, and Bill over on his bunk dealing out a hand of solitaire with his long slim hands.*

*“Come on over here, kid,” he says, “I want to tell you something.”*

*So I lays my rifle down and goes over and sits on the bunk with him. All the time he talks to me he ruffles the cards.*

*“Maybe you wonder what’s wrong with me. The Doc says there’s something wrong with my heart, and he’s right. I’ve been sick because I’ve wanted to be. Now listen close. I know you’ve been gambling away your wages when you thought I wasn’t looking. That’s why I’m talking to you.*

*Gosh! Did you ever have a sinking feeling? Not that it was any of Bill’s business, but you hate to be found out for a sneak. I just hung my head; what else could a fella do? And I knew I could never make Bill see the fun I got out of playing.*

*“I’ve been a gambler all my life, kid, and I used to think there was nothing like it. But I’m just about through. In civilian life are men, ragged and homeless, pushed about just barely existing. I saw myself drifting from place to place, getting more and more like these men. Perhaps you’ve never seen them, but I have. It was thinking about what I’d do when I was an old man that I hit upon my scheme. I didn’t join the army because I was patriotic, but to make money.”*

*I guess I smiled. The idea of making money on soldiers' pay! But Bill didn't see me. He was staring out of the tent to the parade ground, where the wind was lifting the dirt in little whirls.*

*"There was only one thing I knew. I decided to join the army and gamble each month the thirty dollars pay. If I lost that, I'd quit; but if I won, I'd send the winnings to my home bank. I've stuck to that. Look," he fished from his pocket a bankbook, and showed me the last page with figures. "Not bad, is it: \$20,005, the total of what I've sent. You see, I'm rich. No fear of old life for me now. I'm the only one here, probably, who's done this. You're young yet, kid. Quit this gambling before it gets you. It's been hard for me; you don't know how hard, to get to where I'm sure I can now quit."*

*You can't help liking a guy like that. Bill was smart, all right. The voice of the corporal comes to me bawling some recruit out, and I remembers we're still in the army.*

*"But if we go overseas and you get bumped off, what good will the money do you?" I asked him.*

*"I'm not going. That's why I'm sick. Bum heart. When I figured out my scheme, I also took care that I'd get out of the army. It's my last gamble. Just before*

*going to the Doc I take a little nitro-glycerin, and when they make me hop on one foot, it makes my heart beat plenty.”*

*“Gosh!” Aren’t you afraid it’ll kill you?”*

*“Naw. You see I come back to the tent and lie down. The thing wears off if I stay quiet. I started with a very little: got used to it slowly. But never mind that. I’ve told you all this to show you what a gambler will do, kid, just what – darn it! I guess I can’t tell you any more,” he finished kinda funny-like.*

*I went back to cleaning my rifle, and Bill lays out a game of solitaire. His hands kinda shook, but jimmy! Imagine a guy taking a chance with nitro-glycerin. I guess my hands shook too. I don’t know why. Maybe I didn’t like to think of Bill leaving, we being such good buddies, even if he did father me at times.*

*A week goes by with the same old routine for me – ‘squads right’ and fatigue duty around the regiment. Bill, he goes to medical conferences, and lies around on his bunk, saying nothing. I asked him a couple of times how he’s getting along.*

*“I got the Docs guessing. It won’t be long now,” is all he says.*

*Me, I get more and more homesick. This living by bugle calls grips a guy after a while. And then when I think of Bill going away – Jimmy! You fellas lost a pup when you was young – well, that’s how I felt.*

*Then one day Bill comes back from the medics, and he looks like there's no blood in his face. He hit for the bunk right now.*

*"Took a big dose this morning. I'm going to have to take it easy all day," he says.*

*He dozes about a couple of hours when the 'Cap' comes into the tent. I snaps into attention. He glances around the room, says 'at ease,' and goes over to Bill.*

*"Private Terry, I have some disagreeable news for you. The medical clinic has decided that your heart is in poor shape. They recommend a discharge for you."*

*"Sure hate that, Captain,' lies Bill, looking just like he does when he plays poker. "I hate to leave the outfit when we're just about ready to go overseas."*

*Bill was a smooth talker, all right.*

*"We hate to see you go, Terry, but it's the best thing for you. The papers will be ready tomorrow morning. Drop into my tent about eleven o'clock." And the 'Cap' turns and leaves.*

*"I've won, kid. Tomorrow I go home and take it easy for the rest of my life. And you write to me. Send me say ten dollars every month and I'll bank it for you. When you get out, you'll have a nice sum to start with. Boy! Am I happy! I ought to stay in bed, but I must stroll around the gang and tell them all goodbye. Want to go along, kid?"*

*“No, I got to clean up,” I answered.*

*With that Bill goes out whistling. Me, I’d agone with him, but when I think of all the hand-shaking and good-byes I feel sad, kinda funny about the throat, and I don’t have no pep. And I think of the nerve of Bill, taking a big dose of nitro-glycerin, walking out when he ought to rest.*

*That night they frame up a big game of poker, sort of a farewell party for Bill. Most of the company was there looking on, packed around the bunks, the air so thick with smoke you could hardly stand it. I sat right behind Bill where I could see over his shoulder. It was kinda warm and most everyone had his shirt off. In the middle of the bunk they put a green cloth with candles on the corners; makes the cards easier to see.*

*“Got to win some of our money back, Bill. This is our last chance,” says Brown, and they all echoes:*

*“You bet. This is our night to hold’em.”*

*They plays reckless like at first, but they begin to boost the ante and the game tightens up. You can kinda feel it watching the fellas handling the cards and looking ‘em over good. Bill, he begins to win. Where I sit I can see sometimes he has’em and sometimes he don’t. He sure was lucky, ‘cause they calls him when he does. Was I excited! Jimmey! I sure wanted to get in the game, my hands just itching to hold the cards, but I know Bill’d never let me.*



*Bill, he gets to feeling good and tells the gang: "Come on, sweeten the pot. Let's raise the ante to a buck, and the sky's the limit."*

*So there gets to be real money in the pot. The gang keeps crowding in till there's not even room enough to spit.*

*Bill keeps on winning. Some of the guys go broke, and others take their place. The game stays five-handed.*

*The candles are pretty low when everyone boosts the ante before the draw, and you feel that this is the big hand. I see little drops of sweat come out on Bill.*

*Watching the other fellas I didn't see what he had. Some draw two cards, some one.*

*Bill, he stays pat. He lays his cards under a stack of dollars and drums with his fingers on the cloth. Everybody draws in closer, faces all around, and nobody saying nothing, just looking on. Gee! It was hot and stuffy.*

*Well, they begins betting, all of 'em raising around a couple of times. They began to drop out until only Bill and Brown were left. They keep on boosting one another. Finally Brown pushes in his whole stack. Gosh! There sure was a pile of money out there, must've been several thousand. Bill takes his time counting out the right amount, and I notice that his hand kinda trembles.*

*"I call you."*

*"Four kings," says Browne, and spreads his cards out.*

*“No good. Four aces,” Bill says, and he gets to his feet. He sways and I see he gets white, the sweat pouring down his body. He turns to me and tries to say something, but can’t seem to get it out. All of a sudden he grabs for his heart, lets out a groan and falls across the pile of money. I stare at the four aces exposed – the winning hand of cards under the slim hand of Bill.*

*“God! He’s dead,” somebody yells, and I faint.*

*The Doc, he says heart failure – cause unknown. Me, no, I never tell nobody nothing.*

## ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

By the beginning of December, training was completed and it was time for the troops to begin their journey across the sea. The regiment departed Washington D.C. amid a parade that was “thronged with visitors,” en route to Jersey City, where the following day the soldiers boarded two ships awaiting them. On December 4, the S.S. *George Washington* and the S.S. *Huron* set sail with Victor and his fellow recruits aboard.<sup>19</sup>

Victor’s company was part of the first battalion, which was aboard the S.S. *George Washington*, the third largest transatlantic ship at that time. Quarters were tight, and the men of the sixth engineers later noted that no one would ever forget “how close the quarters seemed” or how the three-tiered iron bunks were “so crowded as hardly to allow any movement whatever through the ship.” The scale of the ship was overwhelming too, as there appeared to be “no end to the number of decks which were so fitted with [the] bunks.”<sup>20</sup>

The voyage to France would take sixteen days, after which time the Sixth Engineers would add their ranks to the approximately 175,000 soldiers in Europe.<sup>21</sup> The transatlantic trip itself, however, was not without tragedy, as rough seas inflicted the first casualty of the expedition. The rough swells encountered on the second day at

sea left many of the men seasick, but it was on the twelfth day that a storm struck, leaving destruction in its path. The raging storm produced huge waves, “large enough to sweep across the deck of even as large a ship as the *George Washington*.” It was “impossible to be on deck,” and the ship “lost almost all her life-boats and some of her deck structure.”<sup>22</sup>

On December 17, two men from Victor’s company were swept overboard. Only one was saved and brought back aboard ship. The men were scared and sick, and the living quarters were almost intolerable due to the seasickness that had gripped so many. The tossing of the ship had also inflicted “many knocks and bruises,”<sup>23</sup> and the sight of land on December 20 must have sent a flood of relief through the ocean-wary troops.

On December 23, the first battalion (comprised of Companies A, B, and C) disembarked from the S.S. *George Washington* and boarded a train that would take them from the coastal town of Brest to the interior of France. The weather was bitterly cold, and many suffered frostbitten feet, ears, and fingers. As they made their way past the small villages, many of the soldiers stared in wonder at the landscape rolling past them. The “thatched roofs in the country, the village wash houses and the town pumps” were “sources of wonder and amusement.”<sup>24</sup> For Victor, it was a glimpse into the kind of life his parents had forsaken in the search of more opportunities for him.

Victor's previous Christmas had been spent in the reformatory, and Christmas of 1917 proved to be almost as bleak, except for the hospitality shown by the French townspeople. As noted by the soldiers, it was "a Christmas never to be forgotten" with "little to eat and no warmth to be had," but many were lucky enough to be taken in and fed by local residents.<sup>25</sup>

The first three weeks of the battalion's time in France was marked by "untold hardships." The baggage of the men got held up, and as a result they had no cookware and no stoves. Rations were very slow-coming and of very limited variety, consisting chiefly of "coffee, bacon or roast beef stew and one piece of bread per meal." The men had to endure snow, rain, or sleet almost every day, and many contracted pneumonia. Four soldiers from Victor's company had to be evacuated due to frozen feet and pneumonia, and the illness claimed the life of one.<sup>26</sup> It was an inauspicious start to a mission that would see the loss of many more lives before it was over.

### **SOMME DEFENSIVE, AMIENS SECTOR**

Victor and his company gathered together in Chaulnes to begin their first assignment of destroying an "immense engineer dump" to prevent it from falling into enemy hands. They were subjected to enemy shelling but finished the job before

beginning a “heart-breaking hike” to Mareuil.<sup>27</sup> Mareuil quickly fell to the enemy, and on March 26 the detachment moved to Demuin, where they spent time digging trenches and organizing their position.

On April 29, 1918, Victor’s Company C, along with A, E, and F, moved via train to the English front, with Victor’s Company ultimately reaching Frechencourt. They were the first American soldiers to arrive in that area of France, and as they passed through they were “greeted with great enthusiasm by the British troops and the French civilians” awaiting their arrival. The soldiers were “in the best of spirits, filled with the thrill of their recent work and encounters with the hun.”<sup>28</sup>

Victor’s company was assigned to the Fourth British Army to “aid in the fortification of the Amiens sector.” The work of the engineers included building bridges, erecting barbed-wire entanglements, digging trenches and dugouts. They built bridges over the Somme River and Somme Canal in order to connect them to the roads leading to the front. Between May 2 and May 18, they constructed 5,638 linear yards of trenches and 746 yards of barbed-wire entanglements.<sup>29</sup>

In addition to the construction work, the soldiers of Company C were assigned to guard the bridges between Villers-Bretonneus and Amiens. The men endured “ongoing shelling” but completed the assignment with just one fatality.<sup>30</sup> The Amiens

Sector assignments completed, Company C joined the rest of the regiment to travel to Montmirail.

During these first months in France, the realities of war must have hit Victor and shaken the normal feelings of immortality held by most seventeen-year-olds. The deaths occurring on both sides, on a daily basis, certainly made him realize life's fragility, and fear undoubtedly crept into his mind. He provides a glimpse in the following vignette:

*In another hour they would try their fortune beyond the barbed wire. They were ready, bayonets fixed, eyes peering through the darkness. Little Smithy with tremors in his voice whispered to Bill:*

*“Buddy, I’m afraid I’m not coming back. I don’t know why I tell you this. You won’t understand. I hate to die. I think of home. From the window of my room there I could see lilacs – wondrous, pungent lilacs. To see them was like hearing immortal music. But why tell you this? And there among those purple blossoms nested a robin. A robin whose breast added a beautiful spot of flaming color. And I sang. Sang from pure joy. There I had tranquil peace.”*

*Bill pulled his helmet lower over his eyes, shook his head sadly, and muttered to himself: "Too bad. Slight case of shell-shock. Another shell and he'll go plumb crazy."*

### **CHATEAU-THIERRY SECTOR**

Company C again found themselves close to the front line of fighting, this time working with the Thirty-Eighth Infantry in the Conde-en-Brie Valley. Their assignment was to begin "construction of a complete defensive system." Being so close to the front, the men found it necessary to spend a great deal of time in the dugout holes that served as their living quarters. "The men were camped in the open and because the enemy might open a barrage at any time, every one dug himself a hole to stretch his tent over, and each time he moved to a new place, he dug a new hole." The soldiers often found it necessary to work under cover of darkness, "as lines of defense were being constructed up to the very banks of the Marne."<sup>31</sup>

On the night of July 14, the German began heavy shelling of the soldiers. The offensive lasted three days, and it would take a staggering toll on the men of Company C. The men in Victor's unit were scattered throughout the region on various assignments, and they had no choice but to join the infantry and fight alongside them.



The “tremendous roaring of the guns seemed to shake the whole earth,” and, due to the constant onslaught of mustard gas, the men were forced to wear their masks for hours.<sup>32</sup>

Despite their attempts to find sheltered positions, many were injured and “great damage was done.” Company C suffered staggering losses with a casualty rate approaching forty percent. Seventeen men were killed, fifty-two wounded and twenty-two gassed. Thirty-six of their thirty-seven horses died as did nine-tenths of their kitchen force.<sup>33</sup>

Fighting alongside the infantry placed young Victor in the position of witnessing the worst of battlefield death – gruesome, bloody injuries and the horrible detachment of those inflicting it. A recurring theme in Victor’s retrospective writings is his disgust with the lack of humanity bred by war. He describes such an incident in another vignette from *Portraits from 1917*.

*The airplane hummed steadily passing in flight. All about it shells burst in a regular pattern. And then it happened, the airplane veered and began spinning, falling to the ground.*

*“We’ve hit ’em,” shouted an excited gunner.*

*The watching soldiers ran toward the wreck. They suddenly stopped as the observer stepped from the ruins and began shooting with his pistol. Several rifle shots rang out together and the observer dropped. The soldiers crowded about the dead man.*

*“Gosh! He must’ve shaved just before he left his port.”*

*“Look at this flower. Bet his gal pinned it on him an hour ago.”*

*“Good thing we got this stubborn-headed fool. He’d raise more devils like himself.”*

*“He had lots of nerve.”*

*About the body confusion prevailed: there was a tearing off of buttons; pockets were turned inside out; someone spit into the dead man’s face, someone else stepped upon it; and all seemed to be speaking at the same time.*

*Private Brown turned away in disgust. He was reminded of a horde of vultures gorging themselves upon a dead antelope.*

## **AISNE-MARNE OFFENSIVE AND VESLE SECTOR**

In late July, Company C, still reeling from their losses in the Champagne-Marne Defensive, began working in an area known as “Cemetery Woods,” between Mezy and Crezancy. Again, under the torrent of “constant shelling,” the group worked to build a bridge across the Marne River. On July 27 the bridge was completed, and the company shifted its attention to the roads surrounding Mezy and Crezancy. After a few days, their task completed, the men moved to 'Herbennerie for rest and training.<sup>34</sup>

On August 2, Victor and his company attached themselves to the Sixth Brigade and accompanied them to the front. They broke a path, cleared roads of fallen trees, filled shell holes and constructed bridges. Suffering the loss of two more men but completing their assigned task, Company C next traveled to Paroy, where they would spend weeks training and receiving replacements for their lost soldiers.

The intensive training was “long and arduous” and involved developing a “system of bridging barbed-wire entanglements” for which the regiment was later commended. There was “grumbling over the amount of work included” but the regiment ultimately “gained a reputation for efficiency and excellence inferior to no other A.E.F. outfit.”<sup>35</sup> The training prepared them for two more offensives in the sprint to the end of the war.

## **ST. MIHIEL AND MEUSE-ARGONNE OFFENSIVES**

*The Argonne (re-titled, To My Buddies)*

*You're afraid! – Muddy ground and skin wet!*

*Easy buddy, smoke a cigarette.*

*Eyes see dim – Hell! The night is young yet.*

**SING, CLOUDS – YOUR BLACK DIRGE OVERHEAD ---**

*A moment's ease to feel the rain cool*

*O'er your fevered brow. – Take it, you fool!*

*Blood runs warm when life drips a red pool.*

**SWAY, TREES! – TO WIND'S CRY, FURY LED ---**

*Bone's chill? – You say you have met death!*

*This moment's glory! – You won't forget,  
When fountain flows – in public place set.*

SWELL, STREAM! – TO WATER'S MOAN ON EARTH'S BED.

*Victor Francis Lotrich*

After completing more training, including some strenuous gas drills which involved the men running up and down on steep hills “trying to catch a bit of breath through the mouth pieces of their gas masks,” the regiment marched to the south of St. Mihiel. The march was long and dreary, “executed in weather which was so rainy and disagreeable as to be beyond description.”<sup>36</sup>

The regiment attached itself to the Fourth Corps, First Army, and proceeded to clear roads that were impassable. The Battle of St. Mihiel was the first large battle where the Americans fought independently against the Germans.

The roads the army needed to pass “had been under constant shell fire for the [previous] four years and had been entirely obliterated.” The engineers were tasked with reconstructing the path and keeping it open for an army of 100,000 men. The

engineers spent many hours “working in the rain and sleeping in water-filled shell-holes,” and many of them came down with influenza and pneumonia.<sup>37</sup>

Then, the regiment was tasked with positioning themselves to support the American offensive in Meuse-Argonne. It was the largest American offensive against German forces and involved a million American soldiers. Twenty-six thousand American lives were lost – “the most costly engagement in American history from the Revolution to the present day.”<sup>38</sup>

Under heavy shelling, the Sixth Engineers moved up to Bois-de-Fays in a position of support along the front lines, “wiring various positions captured by the infantry.” It was a gruesome task, as the men, “stagging through the tenacious mud of the Bois de Foret” embarked on a “hopeless quest” to secure the woods with no artillery assistance, facing areas “crammed with the enemy infantry and machine gunners.”<sup>39</sup>

Some of the men got pinned down in muddy foxholes for “seemingly endless” periods of time when it was “impossible to move” and risk alerting the enemy of their location. The rest of the regiment was subjected to “a continuous bombardment of high explosive and gas shells.” Victor’s company continued their job wiring along the banks of the Meuse.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps it was during this battle that Victor was dealt one of the most heart-breaking blows of his young life. In later years, he told his children the story of how he lost two close friends. His written vignette captures not only the grief but also the excruciating guilt inflicted upon those who survive but witness first-hand the destruction around them.

*From Portraits of 1917*

*John, Jack, and Luke were called the trio of Company C. When one was seen the other two were never far away. They were like links in a chain, well forged. When one lagged, tired, the others shouldered part of his load, relieving him. All their possessions together was the common property of all.*

*In the Argonne Forest they dug a hole just large enough to be of comfort to all three. The top they covered with several layers of sheet iron. In this dugout they felt secure. The shrapnel from the bursting shells about fell with a ring upon the roof. They laughed at the whine of the fragments as they passed overhead.*

*For several days the heavy shelling went on, and the trio ran out of water. About five hundred yards away from them was an old*

*well. They could see the windlass from a crack between the iron roof and the earth.*

*“Let’s draw straws to see who goes after the water,” suggested Jack.*

*“Agreed,” responded John and Luke.*

*Luke drew the short straw. He fastened the canteens together and crawled out. He dodged and crept from shell-hole to shell-hole until he reached the well. He drew up a bucket full of the water. It reeked with the fumes of chlorine and mustard gases. He let it fall back into the well with reluctance.*

*When he came back he was astonished to find the dugout gone. A shell had hit it direct leaving no trace of the iron roof, nor any signs of John or Jack. He looked at the blank hole with amazement, and then suddenly burst out laughing wildly.*

*“Shut up, you fool,” somebody called out, “do you want us all blown up?”*

*This recalled him. His laughter turned to tears, and he mumbled: “John, Jack, forgive me for cheating. But I didn’t know, I didn’t know.”*



Finally, the conflict at Meuse-Argonne was won, a victory for the United States and her allies that brought a halt to the war. It was welcome news for the Sixth Engineers which had experienced heavy casualties and were “exhausted from the continual strain and sick from the constant exposure to rain and to the gas-poisoned air.”<sup>41</sup>

The gas-poisoned air had taken its toll on Victor who also sustained other serious injuries. He found himself taken to a military hospital where he was pronounced too badly injured to survive. Somehow, though, he did survive, and he was eventually placed on a ship back to the United States. The war was over, and he was going home. However tenuous his relationship had been with his adopted country, the United States was truly his home.

He left France with scars. His lungs forever bore the effects of the searing, poisonous mustard gas. Furthermore, a trauma was etched into his memories from which it would prove difficult to fully escape. Like any who endure such horror, Victor faced the challenge of putting the scarring memories behind him and finding a way to move past the horror he had endured. He was returning to America to start a new life, and the country that awaited him this time viewed him much differently than it had when he arrived with his parents just sixteen years earlier.

After the war was won, many felt a respect and admiration for the soldiers who had brought them victory. They were celebrated as heroes and the country was grateful for the service they had provided. In 1920, a book written by and for the Sixth Engineers, contained this dedication: “Words can never adequately express the praise and honor due those who volunteered, who labored and fought as only true Americans can...”<sup>42</sup> For Victor, it must have been the first time in his life he was considered a “true American.”

The prejudices Victor had endured as a boy faded into the past as they were replaced by gratitude for his service to the country. He locked his immigrant past away, and the war proved to be a turning point in Victor’s American journey. Upon his return, he was able to put his difficult past behind and begin the hard work of building a new life.

The memories of his childhood and his wartime experience shaped him into the adult he became, but he hid the memories deep within himself. They were always with him, but he did not share them with the family he went on to build. The memories were painful, and after leaving them behind, he did not want to revisit the pain. Instead, he focused on moving forward.

*Every Day*

*Upon the highways of life's course*

*Uncalled for, DEATH lurks in the corners*

*Grinning ----- grasping every chance.*

*You with your recklessness*

*I in my careless ways.*

*Come, let us deceive this mocking evil*

*Enough of his work we have seen*

*To banish our wanton methods.*

*Let us grasp each other's hand*

*And step across the road together.*

*Victor Francis Lotrich*

## **Chapter 6**

### **A NEW LIFE**

#### **RECUPERATION**

Victor, now nineteen, returned to the United States in January 1920. He carried with him shrapnel-filled wounds and memories of the atrocities of war. Though he had made it back alive, he was acutely aware of the many who were not so lucky. As a member of the Sixth Engineer corps, he was the only survivor among the 180 that started. His injuries precluded an immediate re-entry into society, and he was on the “recuperating list” for years.<sup>1</sup>

After receiving his discharge papers, Victor returned to Colorado, where he had put down fragile roots that would grow and strengthen in the coming years. He contacted the Gilmore family, and Ed Gilmore took him in and provided a place for him to convalesce and regain his strength. Victor had severed all ties with his blood relatives in Chicago, but in Colorado, Victor found he was part of a family again, and in Ed Gilmore’s obituary, Victor was listed as a foster son.<sup>2</sup>

The kindness of the Gilmores was significant in Victor's life, as was the kindness of an older woman named Alta Cannon. Cannon was a grandmotherly woman who had taken an interest in Victor and written to him during the war. She faithfully remained a part of Victor's life for the remainder of his years. Even after his death, she stayed in correspondence with his widow and children, always maintaining her interest in the Lotrich family.

It is unclear whether "Grandma Alta," as she was known, developed a connection with Victor prior to or during the war. Alta was a "spinster lady" with no children of her own who wanted to have a soldier to write to, knit socks for, and generally support.<sup>3</sup> It may be, however, that the relationship actually started earlier, when Victor was in the reformatory. Perhaps her correspondence was part of the reform program. It seems likely, particularly in light of two sly references she made in letters written in later years.

In 1961, in two letters she sent to Victor's wife Mildred, Alta praised the family they had raised, complimenting the children on their goodness, education and service, ending with the lines, "not a 'delinquent' among them" and "no 'juvenile delinquents in *your* family!!"<sup>4</sup> She seems to be referencing Victor's earlier incarceration, but she never revealed his secret. At one point in later years, when Victor was suffering from depression, she returned a pack of letters that he had written

to her, perhaps in an effort to help him work through difficult memories that were haunting him. He promptly burned the letters, unwilling to remember or share his past with himself or his family.

Through some force of luck, in the next year, Victor learned of a program for recuperating soldiers in nearby Colorado Springs. The Broadmoor Art Academy, successor to the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, had been founded in 1919 by a group of wealthy citizens. It “attracted a veritable roster of who’s who in American art,” and in 1921, it opened its doors to World War I veterans.<sup>5</sup>

From 1921 to 1923, in addition to its fine arts program, the Broadmoor was under government contract “to furnish vocational training for ex-servicemen of World War I.” Victor was one of a handful of ex-soldiers who attended the school in order to learn “how to make a livelihood at graphic design and commercial art.”<sup>6</sup>

The art training was a perfect fit for Victor. His natural artistic ability flourished, and he developed skills he would carry with him through the rest of his life, both professionally and personally. He used his drawing ability in later years in an archeological position, drawing and cataloging archeological finds. He designed and drew patterns that his wife stitched into a quilt for their first son, and he experimented with oils, producing paintings that reside with his children and grandchildren to this day.

Southwestern Colorado, however, offered few jobs in commercial art, and Victor still dreamed of working as a cowboy or rancher. He bought his own horse, saddle, chaps, and spurs, and found another opportunity open to veterans of the war. In 1919, the faculty of Colorado State Agricultural College (presently Colorado State University) opened all classes to disabled veterans.

The 1924 yearbook of the college, the *Silver Spruce*, contains a dedication explaining the school's gratitude to the veterans and its reasoning for offering them an opportunity at education: "America sent her bravest, her strongest into a foreign land to fight for country, right, and God...It is with these men that a grateful nation is most concerned...A thankful government is putting forth every effort to restore to its heroes the powers which they so gladly gave that Democracy might not perish from the earth...Let us not forget our debt to the Disabled Veteran."<sup>7</sup>

Victor was a recipient of lavish praise and reverence - quite a switch from the days of his youth in Chicago and his stint in the reformatory. He enrolled in 1922, and for four years took classes in forestry. While there, he used his artistic ability, joining the editorial staff of the yearbook and contributed artwork, drawing the frontispieces for four sections of the book.<sup>8</sup>

Victor then tried to put his forestry training to work in the mountains of Colorado but "became too ill to continue." He tried work on farms and ranches

around Nepesta but “was not physically able to continue that type of work.” The respiratory damage inflicted during the war left his body unfit for the demanding conditions of outdoor work – heat, humidity, bugs, dust – all these things challenged his already compromised respiratory system.<sup>9</sup> It was time to find another career.

### **LEARNING TO TEACH**

Returning to Colorado had allowed Victor to reconnect with his “adoptive” family, the Gilmores. Among them was Ed Gilmore’s nephew, Art Thomas (who would eventually become Victor’s brother-in-law). Both Art and Art’s mother Ellen tried to steer Victor toward a different career, one that would not be precluded by Victor’s physical limitations. Art was teacher at a small school in Fowler, Colorado and felt teaching would be a good fit for Victor. There was an opening for a teacher at a small school in Timpas, Colorado, and Art and Ellen helped Victor get the job. Victor started in his new position in 1925 and stayed through 1927.<sup>10</sup>

Art’s sister Mildred was also a teacher at a small one-room school just east of Fowler. Mildred and Art’s mother Ellen fiercely believed in the value of education, and she had insisted that all five of her children (her two boys and especially her three girls) attend college. Following her graduation from Fowler High School in 1925,



Mildred had attended Western State College. In 1927, she got a teaching position at Unity School, and it was at this time she and Victor fell in love.

Blue-eyed Mildred was pretty with a calm, steady personality. She possessed a sharp intellect and many talents, but she was easy-going in her approach to life. She was secure in her intelligence, despite the prejudices that existed against women at that time. When she was in high school, she took physics and scored the highest marks in the class. Enraged, her male teacher refused to give her an A, citing the fact that it was impossible for a girl to receive the highest grade. She calmly accepted the B and moved on to another subject. Throughout her life, she was able to accept whatever challenges life handed her and calmly move forward, doing whatever needed to be done. This was a quality that would serve her well during her marriage to Victor.

It is no wonder Victor fell in love with her. He had found an equal in terms of intellect, and he was no doubt attracted to her steady presence. She came from a loving family dedicated to education and would be a perfect mate with whom to build a strong family foundation. With her, Victor would be able to build a stable family of his own and find a security that had eluded him most of his young life. On May 20, 1928 when he was twenty-eight and she twenty-one, Victor and Mildred were married in Mildred's parents' home.

Between 1928 and 1932, Victor served in two other small schools in southern Colorado. He taught at Rye for two years before serving as the grade school principal in Mancos, requiring the couple to move almost three hundred miles west of Mildred's home town. Mildred and Victor settled into their life as newlyweds, discovering and exploring shared interests and hobbies, among them hunting arrowheads and bird watching.

They became part of their community, and in addition to teaching, Victor took on the first of many coaching responsibilities he would assume over the course of his career. They were active in church, and though he was ill for much of December 1931, Victor recovered to play Santa Claus in the Sunday school Christmas program. Victor joined the American Legion, and they built a life for themselves, enjoying each other and their place in the community. For Victor, he finally had found a place where he belonged, as a valued, contributing, respected member of society.

Victor experienced some effects of ill health during the first few years of marriage, and had had his appendix removed three months prior to the wedding. In 1931, Mildred noted four episodes in which Victor was ill, the most prolonged in December, during which time he was too sick to teach, so Mildred taught his classes for him. In Spring 1932, she again temporarily took over his duties when he was too

ill to teach.<sup>11</sup> No doubt the respiratory damage left him susceptible to colds and viruses that were normally shaken off but in his case could cause great difficulty.

Nonetheless, the illnesses were relatively minor, and it was a very happy time for Victor and Mildred. They lived in an area rich with Native American artifacts, and in their free time loved to go hunting for such things. They also shared a love of the natural world and all creatures in it and spent a lot of time observing wildlife. Mildred's diary from 1931 is filled with references to their outdoor activities: digging for Indian ruins, sugaring for moths, and hunting for caterpillars.<sup>12</sup>

In 1931 and 1932, Mildred noted in her diary sightings of baby owls, an oriole, a robin, bluebirds, a mother grouse with six babies, muskrats, sage chicks, pheasants, a meadowlark, swarms of painted lady butterflies, as well as caterpillars of the cecropia, viceroy, poplar sphinx and io moths. She also chronicled her and Victor's participation in basketball games, Sunday school, fishing, stamp collecting, and, most importantly, digging for fossils and artifacts.<sup>13</sup>

During the May and June 1931, Mildred made twenty-six entries describing her and Victor's efforts at finding Native American relics. The entries included descriptions like: "hunted Indian relics on Hall's Hill," "dug in afternoon on Paquin Hill," "...found a piece of a water pitcher," "looked for arrows. Victor found a couple of nice ones," and "found Indian grave."<sup>14</sup>

On May 24, Mildred's entry reads, "visited ruins at Yellow Jacket," and all entries for the next two weeks are devoted to this site. Mildred and Victor, along with her brother Art, would undertake an excavation of the site, and the results would change the course of Victor's career.

### **EXCAVATION AT YELLOW JACKET**

Yellow Jacket Pueblo is located in Montezuma, Colorado, on the western side of the state, less than thirty miles from the Utah border. It is the site of the largest ancestral Pueblo Indian village in the Mesa Verde region. According to the Crow Canyon Archeological Center, which now oversees Yellow Jacket, "the site covers 100 acres and contains a minimum of 195 kivas [ceremonial chambers] (including a probable great kiva), 19 towers, a possible Chaco-era great house, and as many as 1,200 surface rooms. Its occupation spanned about 220 years, from the mid-A.D. 1000s through the late A.D. 1200s."<sup>15</sup>

According to the findings in the 1997 Crow Canyon Archeological Center Excavation Report, Yellow Jacket was first described in print in 1859, and it was mapped several times in the following years, but no excavation of the site had been undertaken prior to Victor and Mildred's activity in 1931.<sup>16</sup>

Victor describes the heady time in a piece he entitled *We Excavate a Ruin*.

*My wife and I have excavated a ruin. Nordenskiöld [explorer of Mesa Verde] may be partially responsible for this, for he reviewed before us a colorful past, filling our minds with a glamorous history of the Southwest. Ancient it was – dating back to the Norman Conquest on another continent. Cliff-dwellings, with their associate terms – mesas, canyons, kivas – were sparks of the imagination, kindling a desire, a longing to dig, to see, to know.*

*With eager curiosity, we read papers, pamphlets, books, reports, everything that had a bearing on the Moki civilization. We visited museums, and pensively studied the remains of these little-known people.*

*“Some day we shall be located in the country of the Pueblo culture, and then I will dig,” I remarked to my wife.*

*“And when you do, I will, too,” characteristically she replied.*

*We were very happy the day I received a contract to teach in the country we had dreamed of so long. Our opportunity had arrived. So Mildred and I have excavated a ruin.*

*We entered the amphitheater of southwestern Colorado -bordered on the north and east by the granite peaks of the San Juan Mountains and the Continental Divide; on the south and west by a labyrinth of deep canyons passing through unbroken desert*

*to the Colorado River – with a feeling of awe, our first strong reaction. A blazing sun scorched the countryside, the sparse grass among the sagebrush was burned and withered, a dusky brown. A strange stillness, a brooding watchful atmosphere hung in the heavens, dipped down, hovered over the elevated mesas. This feeling of the imminence of brooding life was intensified by the Sleeping Ute Mountain, a half mile west of Mesa Verde, lying, a lone mass of soaring rock, surrounded by desert sands. Like a giant, and Atlas, his knees support the sky; his enormous arms are folded across his chest; his headdress of blue-green pinon and juniper trails off into the distance.*

*Our first efforts were confined to a ruin a short distance from Mancos, accessible in leisure moments. The Ruin had been mutilated by pothunters for the past half century, and would have been unrecognizable, but for the broken potshards and chips of flint strewn all about. We searched for arrows and found several perfect specimens, beautiful points in moss-agate and cloudy obsidian. We explored every gully, and looked beneath the stems of the sagebrush.*

*“Look! What’s this!” exclaimed Mildred, pointing to a protruding bone.*

*“Looks like a knee-cap,” I answered excitedly, “I believe you’ve found a skeleton.”*

*“Perhaps there will be pottery with him,” Mildred rejoined in tones expressing both hope and a fear of disappointment.*

*With nerves keyed to a high pitch we began a careful scraping and removal of dirt. The bones were slowly exposed. We were neither conscious of passing time, nor heedful of surroundings. Yet as we worked the pungent odor of bruised sagebrush vividly impressed itself upon our senses. At last the skeleton lay uncovered in the thousand-year old tomb. In the crooks of the arms were several bowls and a pitcher, but broken.*

*“Be careful how you dig. We’ll save the pieces and put them together. The museums do.”*

*There were many ecstatic hours spent in sorting and matching the potshards. The pleasure received in completing an intricate design, not discernible in the fragments, never abated.*

*Silently contemplating the bare remains, we thought of the past. How closely akin were the cultures of diverse ancients in the event of death! The Egyptians piling treasures in and about the sarcophagus; the urn burials of the Romans placed with coins; the Mokis providing food and water to tide the dead into the unknown – the last tie between life and death, the last ritual conducted for the individual, the final gesture in the presence of unfathomable mystery.*

*The sun was sinking; the sky was alight with violets and reds; the low sagebrush cast patterns in long shadows as we picked the last pieces from the soil and reverently replaced the cover of the centuries-old grave. Meditatively, in the darkening twilight, we walked homeward, our pulses beating with the quickened emotion of our find, our resolve strengthened to delve deeper into the culture and customs of these prehistoric people.*

*“Let us find an unmolested ruin and dig it completely and scientifically,” Mildred proposed with enthusiasm.*

*Many were the trips we took over the mesas and through the rocky canyons. The ruins were everywhere. The difficulty of choosing a site was the lack of water. After a great deal of searching we found a ruin built by a spring – water reminiscent of mountain snows. To drink deep was a relish, a twang of satisfaction, in that dry and parched countryside. We received permission to dig, and during our vacation we located a camp. The Sleeping Ute Mountain loomed to the south – quiescent and inscrutable – an American Sphinx.*

*Our camp was simple. Mildred improvised a stove from the rocks of the ruin, which gave satisfactory service as our appetites increased with work. Each evening before dusk we spread our bed on the ground, except when it rained, and we were forced to the shelter of our car. The car also served as a storage place for our food.*



*The first few shovels of dirt thrown from the ruin revealed the circular wall of a kiva. The sun beat down furiously. We perspired freely as we moved the fallen masonry – sandstone hewn into the semblance of brick. The deeper we dug, the harder the work became. Our backs ached from heaving debris over the steeper sides, but we dug on. We found the rock chipped to make a smooth surfaced wall, and we marveled at the neatness of the labor accomplished with crude implements, rough stone hammers. How they must have worked! Carrying stone and water upon their backs, they trudged up and down the steep canyon. They were a people supposed to be inherently lazy; but the work shown in the ruin did not bear out this thought, as our muscles ached with the simplified task of only removing the debris.*

*No sounds broke the stillness about us, except an occasional whirl of an insect flying low, and infrequent chattering cry of a magpie, and an intermediate “queer, queer, queer” call of a canyon wren.*

*We followed the wall down to the floor. Here we found pottery in place, but smashed by the fallen wall from above. We sacked and labeled each piece as we painstakingly uncovered the small chamber. The bowls, jugs, pots, and jars had been carefully placed as though the occupants had departed but had intended to return. Where had they gone, and why? The excavated kiva, nine feet in diameter, revealed an accumulation of ashes marking the fireplace, a few cubbyholes, and a shaft for*

*ventilation. The cool air rushing in the shaft was used to force the smoke to rise and pass out of the opening in the top. It was a dreary swelling place, but a monument to primitive struggle, a struggle for clanship, a housing of likeminded religious and social groups. The dirt was packed about the pieces of pottery by centuries of rain and snow, but to us it had a freshness of creation, although broken, and we dug eagerly on.*

*In the evening and during the night the stillness was increased threefold. The ruin lay there, a tomb in the moonlight. No sound now where once the cries of children must have arisen and re-echoed down the canyon walls, or perhaps a song chanted by a medicine man, recounting an epic of daring deeds and conquest. And audible always must have been the muttering of an incessant prayer for rain, rising in times of extreme drought to frenzy. From our bed we watched the stars move in their orbit, but about us there was no perceptible sound or motion, only a feeling of death and isolation.*

*“Surely this indescribable melancholy was not here when the Mokis built their dwellings,” Mildred remarked.*

*“Perhaps they were unconscious of it,” I replied. “Yet their ruins are at one with the landscape and the atmosphere. It’s possible they were a melancholy people.”*

*“Not necessarily. I’m sure the people living here now are not.”*

*“That would be an argument that the brooding atmosphere was always here.”*

*“I suppose so,” Mildred agreed after a slight pause. “Yes, it probably was.*

*When we watched the football game last fall in Cortez, how trivial seemed the cheering and emotion displayed, in comparison with the silent and somber sadness of thee Sleeping Ute, lying in view of the field.”*

*“And the people didn’t notice it, or at least they displayed no knowledge of it.”*

*“No.”*

*“The Mokis being born here would know no other place, and being closely allied with the soil, they built their structures with the accessible sandstone. That at any rate would account for the perfect harmony of the ruins with the landscape.”*

*“Yet the melancholy atmosphere must have affected them. At any rate I wouldn’t like to spend a lifetime here, beautiful as the country is,” Mildred concluded.*

*Numberless cries of swallows, greeting the rising sun, awoke us every morning. We never tired of watching them skim along the descending rays of the sun, coming lower and lower, until they reached the earth, then disappearing down the canyon, leaving to us the silence of the day.*

*Our hands became calloused, our bodies a dark tan, our appetites increased; we lost contact with the outer world – a loss that seemed to matter little – as we became more and more absorbed with our work. In order to preserve the ruin from*

*further crumbling we filled a kiva or room with the diggings of the next. The only signs of molestation visible was the fresh dirt on top and an increasing pile of sacked pottery, a heterogeneous collection of bone implements, and a handkerchief wrapped around small beads and rare pendants.*

*Neither Mildred nor I will ever forget the pleasure we experienced the morning we found the square mug. As we were troweling along the wall of a room, the mug rolled down, whole. Shouting we ran to a bucket of water and washed it clean.*

*“A square mug! How unusual a shape! There must have been an original soul in this community,” exclaimed Mildred, joyously.*

*“It’s perfect, too. Not a scratch on it. We’re certainly lucky. And look at the decoration,” I added. “This repays us for a great deal of the hard work we have done. I don’t recall square pieces in any ancient pottery. (We have since learned that the mug is almost unique, only one or two others being known.)*

*“Let us call this ruin “Square Mug House,” Mildred proposed. And so Mildred christened it by throwing upon the dune the water with which we had washed the mug.*

*The design painted on the mug was a variation of the conventionalized triangular terrace motif. Masters of this theme, they applied it symmetrically in geometric figures, but never repeated a design. Mildred and I like to think of their*

*drawings as the Moki's poetry, the written language or expression of some creative genius carried on through successive generations, the guiding hand of each new designer apparent in a new departure with a different interpretation – their contribution to the world.*

*At times we sauntered through the silvery sagebrush. Lovers of bright colors, the Mokis must have experienced the same breath-taking delight that cactus in full bloom gave to us. Gay reds and yellows met the eye in unexpected crevices – like fires they glowed, beacons for nectar-loving insects.*

*One day we had a visitor, a dry farmer of the region, dressed in denim, unkempt and unshaven.*

*“Finding anything? Lots of these ruins about here, but we don't never touch'em. Oh, if we find a grave we dig it, yuh get whole pottery there.”*

*“Do you live close here?” I asked.*

*“'Bout a mile down the canyon. I usta farm that place yuh see over there – the place with the red barn – but the soil's no good any more. I couldn't raise anything, so I moved. And I'm going to have to move again. That's what's the matter with the country here; the soil plays out.”*

*“You don't like this country then?”*

*“Naw, I wish I could get out. This usta be a fine country for cattle. I’ve seen grass as high as your knees and thick, but sheep sure ruined that; don’t even have enough grass for themselves any more,” and he spat disgustedly into the distance. “If I do raise good crops it takes it all to reach a market – no railroads, and it’s a long ways to a large city for a car. Naw, we’re kinda shut in here. You take in the winter, sure don’t like it, the snow piles in till we can only go to town on horseback fur our mail. Naw, I can’t say as I like the country.”*

*As we watched him disappear grumbling into the distance, we wondered if the Mokis had not been confronted with practically the same problems – soil losing its fertility, a depletion of grasslands by drought, and a scarcity of game animals, the deer and rabbits. Perhaps this was an answer to why and where they moved, the resources of an area consumed causing them to seek a more productive country. And wasn’t the same pattern being enacted before our eyes! A constant shifting!*

*In our explorations we had noticed ruins of various ages built one on top of another, showing successive occupancy. Superimposed on these were the remains of a modern swelling; glass intermingled with pot-shards of Mokis; pieces of iron junk beside sandstone brick; the concrete foundation bare; planks of decayed wood strewn about the buried mounds. Like the sand blowing over the ruins, constantly shifting, the dwellings of man show no permanency in this region.*

*The day of departure came, and with it the packing and loading of the artifacts, bowls, mugs, pots, stone and bone implements, beads, pendants of various shapes and sizes, and the diagrams of the site. We had excavated a ruin. It lay bare and vacant, a house stripped. As we left, we looked once more at the Sleeping Ute. He lies there serenely, endlessly asleep, unmindful of passing time, fitting epitome of the country. He is indifferent to cultures established about him, through a reluctant yield of the soil. We departed with the feeling that many ruins would accumulate, and that the Ute would stand there indifferent – but unconquerable.*

It was an exciting time for Victor. He and Mildred were exploring Yellow Jacket, and he had made the decision to return to college. In 1932 he enrolled in Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado to pursue a degree in English. Though he had taken years of classes, first at the Broadmoor Art Academy, then at Colorado State Agricultural College, he had not been a fully matriculated student at either, therefore had not technically graduated. His enrollment at Western State led to a meeting that would open up new possibilities for him.

Either prior to or after his enrollment, Victor met C.T. Hurst, a prominent archeologist and professor at the college. Hurst was also interested in Yellow Jacket and collaborated with Victor in writing up the findings of the excavation there.

Victor and Mildred spent the summer of 1932 digging and looking for artifacts, as Mildred's diary is again filled with numerous entries about their time digging at Yellow Jacket, Paquin Hill, and Mancos Canyon.<sup>17</sup>

In 1932, Victor and Hurst published their findings in *El Palacio*, a journal of "art, history and culture of the southwest," published by the Museum of New Mexico, in an article entitled "An Unusual Mug from Yellow Jacket Canyon." They followed it up in 1933 with "The 'Square Mug House' of the Mesa Verde Culture" in *The Journal of the Colorado Wyoming Academy of Science*.<sup>18</sup> The title of the second article came from the name Mildred had bestowed upon the Yellow Jacket site.



Another article about Victor followed in the *Science News Letter* entitled “Unusual Features in Ruins at Yellow Jacket Canyon.” The article contains a description of the twelve kivas and eleven dwelling rooms that were found, noting that one of the kivas had hexagonal walls, a finding of great importance as, at that time, no other hexagonal kiva had ever been found.<sup>19</sup>

The article explains the origin of the name “Square Mug Room” after the relic that was one of only a handful of square pieces ever discovered. Other pieces found included thirty bowls, other pottery, human remains, a cradleboard, and a skeleton with a string of fifty-two turquoise beads on its wrist.<sup>20</sup>

It was during this time, studying English at Western State and writing up the findings of the Yellow Jacket excavation, that Victor found and pursued a new passion - writing.

### **WRITING AT WESTERN STATE COLLEGE**

While at Western State, Victor completed short stories and poetry for class assignments and discovered a talent for writing. This was the boy who had left Chicago with a sixth-grade education but somewhere along the way had developed a love of words. Many of the things he wrote reflected his experiences during the war, and he started submitting his writings for publication.

In her diary, Mildred noted that Victor “sent [a] feature to the *Denver Post*,” (10/7/32), “mailed story to *Argosy*” (2/13/33), “mailed play to *American Mercury*: (2/21/33), and “Victor sent story to *Our Army*” (2/28/33). Victor continued his collaboration with Hurst, submitting an article to *Art and Archeology* in 1933 that was not accepted but sent back with a request that it be re-written.<sup>21</sup>

Victor also participated in writing contests. Mildred noted in her diary that he won first prize for a poem submitted to the *Sky-Line Scribes* (5/25/33) and received an award for “Truth” (5/19/33). He also participated in the “One-Act Play Festival” held at Western State, a competition established early in the twentieth century by Lois Borland, the school’s first English professor. In 1933 Victor submitted the play *Soldier’s Laugh*, and won first prize of \$50. The play remains today one of the approximately 170 in the Lois Borland collection at Western State.<sup>22</sup>

*Soldier’s Laugh* deals with the absurdity of war. Fourteen years had passed since Victor had fought in France, and it was during this time in his life that he explored his feelings about the war through his writing. There is a poignant recognition of despair captured in the description of the character of the German prisoner. There is an emphasis on humor and laughter that reveals Victor’s thoughts on the dehumanizing aspect of war. A loss of humanity is intertwined with loss of life.

## SOLDIER'S LAUGH, ONE ACT PLAY

### Cast of Characters

*Captain of the U.S. Army*

*Lieutenant of the U.S. Army*

*Top Sergeant of the U.S. Army*

*Private – Captain's orderly*

*Robert – interpreter of U.S. Army*

*Private of German Army*

*Scene: A dugout of the front line trenches – a small rectangular room with a low passageway in the center leading out, over which hangs an army shelterhalf. On either side of the passage are tiers of double bunks built of rough poles. The bedding is in ruffled condition. Around the bunks are several army packs strewn carelessly. The walls are drab, soil color.*

*Several rifles are leaning about the walls. In the middle of the room is a low box upon which is a lighted candle. Another box rests against the side of a wall in front of a bunk. The light blurs and subdues all the room into a unified whole by casting everything in huge shadows.*

*A canteen hangs on one of the bunk poles; it contains water.*

*Immediately preceding the drawing of the curtain is heard the sound of machine-gun fire – this sound continues intermittently, with varying degree of intensity, throughout the play. It is further augmented by an occasional whine and bursting of a shell.*

*The drawn curtain reveals the Captain pacing the floor in serious contemplation. Upon a bunk sits the Lieutenant studying a map in his lap. Their uniforms are neat but show soil. In the opposite bunk lies the sergeant asleep with his clothes on, and a blanket thrown over him. His coat is thrown on an upper bunk, partly hanging down. His belt with pistol hangs on a bunk's pole.*

*Capt. - (with determination) This raid must be a success. I want you to concentrate on capturing and bringing back a prisoner alive.*

*Liet. - We'll do our level best, sir.*

*Capt. - We need a prisoner to reveal to us the weakness in the enemy's line. I'm sure, (with emphasis) in fact I'm positive that they have removed most of their troops to other sectors.*

*Liet. - The quietness of the last few days would make one believe so.  
(continues to study map intently)*

- Capt. - (eagerly) Lieutenant, I have received permission to attack at once if there is no doubt of the Germans being asleep. That's why you must succeed!*
- Liet. - (tracing a course on the map) We will, sir. My plan is to cut the barb wire across this point and enter their lines, making a quick dash. Sort of surprise them, and we'll be back before they know what it's all about.*
- Capt. - Fine. Carry it through. Do you realize what it would mean to us to break through, capturing men, guns, supplies, and demoralizing the enemy at this time?*
- Liet. - Oh! Yes! Hasten the end of the war, and the journey home (lays map on bunk and rises)*
- Capt. - More than that – honor and promotion, and with promotion assignment in the rear away from this madness – the piteous cries of the wounded. (bitterly) There is no humor here.*
- Lieut. - A medal or two, and another bar on my shoulder wouldn't be bad to arrive home with. And to get away from this madness! (winces)*
- Capt. - Bring a prisoner back, and we'll go a long way.*

*Lieut. - We will. (looks at his wrist watch) Ten minutes to twelve. Time to go, sir. (salutes)*

*Capt. - (ignores salute and takes his hand – both are in strong light of candle, the faces reveal firm determination) Good luck. (Lieutenant leaves)*

*Captain picks up map – pulls box to candle – sits down and studies map. After a brief interval the orderly enters. He is an awkward country lad, his uniform ill-fitting. His shoes and leggings are covered with mud. He presents a picture of discomfort.*

*Ord. - (in a tired tone) Sir, Sergeant Brown has been hit by a piece of shrapnel. He passed right out.*

*Capt. - God! Sergeant Brown, one of my best men, and just when I'll need him. Who's in command of the second platoon now?*

*Ord. - No one, sir.*

*Capt. - I must go and put Corporal Smith in charge. (folds map and puts it in pocket) God this hell --- dead men, wounded men, delayed supplies! Orderly, there's no humor in being a Captain.*

*Ord. - (disgusted) Well, sir, I don't see nothing funny about any of this.*

*Capt. - No, I guess not. There's no humor in war. However, if everything goes well tonight, the situation will change. Straighten out the beds. (leaves)*

*Ord. - (begins to tidy upper bunk and sings with vigor)*

*O! Mademoiselle from Armentieres,*

*Parley voo;*

*O! Mademoiselle from Armentieres,*

*Parley voo;*

*O! Mademoiselle from Armentieres*

*She hasn't been kissed in the last four years*

*Hinky dinky, parley voo.*

*O! The marine from ---*

*Serg. - (raising his head – sleepily) Hey! You damn nit-wit, cut that out!*

*Can't you see I'm trying to get some sleep!*

*Ord. - Oh! Hello, Sarg. Didn't know you was here. Beg your pardon.*

*Serg. - (sits up – yawns – rubs eyes – says sarcastically) Didn't know I'd be here. Where did you think I'd be? Two days and nights I run my fool legs off hunting food for you blockheads, and when I get a chance to sleep, you think it's funny to come around and wake me up.*

*Ord. - (mockingly) Funny! Funny! (recalls captain's statement) Say – what's the big idea. First the captain makes a crack about (imitates captain) "no humor in being a captain," and here you're bellyaching and trying to be funny. Drive a guy nuts, as if anything could be funny around here. Be yourself, Sarg, be yourself.*

*Serg. - (angrily) You'll think it's funny when you find yourself out on listening post one of these days, Captain's orderly or not.*

*Ord. - Aw! What's the use of getting sore? Here, have a cigarette. (walks over and hands package to sergeant)*

*Serg. - This all you got?*

*Ord. - Yah, but go ahead and take one.*

*Serg. - No. Here. I'll roll one. (does so)*

*Ord. - (lights a cigarette) Say, speaking of something funny – (laughs) when Carson went west – ha! ha! – that was funny!*

*Serg. - (smiling) How was that?*

*Ord. - (illustrating) As we was charging across the open space between the two woods, a chunk of shrapnel, big as your fist, come along and took half of Carson's face off. He fell on one knee, the rifle caught his weight, and there he was balanced. Corporal Aiken was on the side*



where the face was good. He run over, taps Carson on the shoulder and tells him, "Come on, Carson, no place to pose here." Carson fell on over then and Aiken run like hell, cussing a blue streak. (laughs)

Serg. - (laughing) I'll have to kid old Aiken about that, ha! ha!

Ord. - Be ready to fight when you do. He's a little touchy about it.

Serg. - (still laughing) That makes it funnier than ever.

Ord. - (begins to shake blankets) Say, what did the captain mean when he said something about the situation will change?

Serg. - Did he say that? It's too early for the company to be relieved. I don't know what he meant. (jumps from bed at a sudden thought) Has the raiding party gone?

Ord. - The suicide gang, yep; They're gone, about ten minutes ago.

Serg. - Damn, I wanted to see Jones before they went.

Ord. - Cheer up; maybe he'll come back.

Serg. - Jesus, I hope so. He owes me five hundred francs.

Ord. - (whistles) Five hundred francs! (reminiscently) A guy could show mademoiselle a good time with that next time we go back. How come he owes you that? Poker game?

Serg. - Naw, a cootie race.

*Ord. - What, you beat Jones' cootie? Why he was cleaning big money with it.*

*Serg. - (as a matter of fact) I was lucky. His cootie was way in the lead; but when it got to the middle of the newspaper, it stopped to lay eggs, and mine walked across an easy winner.*

*Ord. - Gosh, you sure were lucky. Goes to prove a guy is bound to lose sometime. (begins to tidy captain's bed) The cap must be a restless sleeper. Look at this bed.*

*Serg. - Where is the captain?*

*Ord.- Old Brown's number was on a shell. The cap's gone to put Smith in his place.*

*Serg. - Brown gone. Another widow! The company is sure getting busted up. Jesus, who'll be next? (puts on coat and pistol. Captain returns, kicking mud from shoes)*

*Capt. - Damn mud. (notices sergeant) Have a good nap, sergeant?*

*Serg. - It helped a little, sir.*

*Capt. - Good. We have some work to do. Get every man out and prepared to go over the top.*

*Serg. - Yes, sir. (leaves)*

*Capt. - Here, Orderly, clean this pistol.*

Ord. - *(takes pistol and speaks awkwardly) Would it be asking too much, sir, to have you take this letter and see that it's sent to my mother in case I go west?*

Capt. - *(embarrassed) Why-why no. What makes you think you're going west?*

Ord. - *I don't know, sir. My buddies have got theirs, one by one. We're going over again. It's mighty easy to stop a bullet.*

Capt. - *(kindly) Don't worry. This war won't last forever. Somebody's going home. It may be you.*

Ord. - *Home! I wish it was tomorrow! Do ya know what I'd do? Some of the guys say they're gonna eat first thing, and others are gonna sleep; but me, I'm just gonna sit down somewheres and laugh, laugh, and laugh.*

Capt. - *Sit down and laugh! Yes, I'd like to do that too, but we won't do it here. (the sound of machine-guns increases, shells burst with more frequency) God! What's broke loose! (stands listening, quizzically. Orderly looks out)*

Ord. - *(turning his head back) Must be the raiding party, sir. (Looks back out – the noise of battle is intense, then gradually subsides. The captain paces anxiously. He decides to go out, and just as he is about to the passageway, the orderly backs in) It is the raiding party, sir. Here*

*comes the lieutenant. (The lieutenant enters with muddy and torn uniform, breathing hard.)*

*Lieut. - (in a gasping manner) We – have – a – prisoner - , sir, - party – separated. – Prisoner – with – other – group. – God, - but – I’m – dry. (goes staggeringly to canteen and drinks deep)*

*Capt. - (excited) Orderly, go out and spread the alarm to be on lookout for the rest of the party, and have the prisoner brought here immediately. And Robert, the interpreter, also.*

*Ord. - (lays pistol on bed and departs) Yes, sir.*

*Capt. - Fine work, Lieutenant. Didn’t expect you back so soon. We have plenty of time to plan an attack before zero hour.*

*Lieut. - (hangs canteen back on pole and staggers to box upon which he sits) The prisoner, sir.*

*Capt. - He is to be brought here, immediately. (notices the dejected, slumped figure on the box)*

*Lieut. - (coughs) Just a little scratch, sit, nothing much.*

*Capt. - Let me see it.*

*Lieut. - (waves the captain away) It’s nothing – really – just a scratch – that’s all.*

*Capt. - A little scratch? We'll have to tend to it. Can't have tetanus creep in.*

*But rest now, and we'll look at it later. Tell me about the raid. (sits on bunk)*

*Lieut. - We got off fine, sir. (has a spell of coughing) Let me have the canteen, I'm so damn dry.*

*Capt. - (giving him the canteen) I don't like that cough. Sure you're not hurt?*

*Lieut. - (drinks) Naw, I'm not hurt. Just a scratch. I must have eaten a peck of dirt, and some of it lodged in my throat. (coughs)*

*Capt. - I guess we got so much dirt to eat, but it's damn disagreeable. You got off fin you said. (sits on bunk)*

*Lieut. - Yes, we got a good start. We hit straight for – where's the map?*

*Capt. - (pulls the map from his pocket) Here.*

*(The lieutenant drags the box with an effort to the bunk – coughs – sits down and takes map)*

*Lieut. - (tracing on map) We hit straight for this point, cutting the barb wire for a width of a hundred yards, a good sized hole for the company to pour through.*

*Capt. - (enthusiastically) Fine! Great! We'll make good use of it.*

*Lieut. - Everything was smooth sailing this far – no shells our way, everything quiet, couldn't have been better. We crept on slowly, and almost passed into their lines here, when Jones whispered to me that he thought something was on our left. So we worked our way in that direction. ( has another spell of coughing) Damn (gets canteen after effort, drinks; when through, he passes his hand over his forehead) Oh yes! We worked over to the left here very cautious. Then, unmistakably, we heard movement between us and our own line. Deploying the squad we started back. We ran into a lookout, who mistook us for his own comrades. Before he realized anything, we captured him, quickly and noiselessly.*

*Capt. - (irritated) What did you separate for then?*

*Lieut. - I was coming to that, sir. We disarmed the prisoner and started back, feeling pretty good. Ha! (a forced ironic laugh which causes him to have another coughing spell) NO, we hadn't gone very far when some damn ignoramus from the line here sent up a flare.*

*Capt. - (amazed) From the line here?*

*Lieut. - Yes! From the line here.*

*Capt. - We'll find the bastard and court-martial him. (perplexed) Why, how in the devil could it have happened? Why everyone knew you were out there.*

*Lieut. - Court-martial nothing. When you find him, let me at him. God! What I'll do to him. (the strong emotion leads to another coughing spell)*  
*Ha! The light caught us moving, and then hell broke loose. Jesus!*  
*How it broke! We dropped down. I then decided to split the squad to insure delivery of the prisoner. Jones and Gillmore took the prisoner while the rest of us went in the opposite direction shooting – purposely drawing the enemy's fire. And we got it. (softly) The prisoner cost us dearly, if he didn't get away. Rendall and I are all that got back.*

*Capt. - Don't feel badly about that, Lieutenant. The objective was reached. Jones probably was cautious and went in a round-about way. We'll get the prisoner directly – get the information needed, and then we'll pay back our losses.*

*Lieut. - the way they opened up on us makes me wonder if there is any weakness in their line.*

*Capt. - A few machine-guns placed around can make plenty of noise. Spot their location, and they're made harmless.*

*Lieut. - I hope you've figured right, sir. Guess I'll lay down, get a little rest before we go over the top. Kind of tired. (gropes weakly in an effort to climb to upper bunk)*

*Capt. - Lay in my bed. I won't be using it. (sits on box, studies map)*

*Lieut. - Thanks. (loosens Sam Brown belt and coat at collar) Lots happened in last few hours. (shudders) So damn much blood spilt.*

*Capt. - (stares at candle) So damn much blood spilt.*  
*(Lieutenant lies down – reaches out and picks up a pack for a head prop)*

*Lieut. - Ah-h-h! This feels good. Didn't know I was so tired.*

*Capt. - (still staring at candle) So damn much blood spilt.*  
*(suddenly arousing from stare, he rises and begins to pace the floor)*  
*Lieutenant, our plans must come out right. They must. (stops pacing and listens) Listen to those goddamn guns. Are they never still?*

*Liet. - Ha! those guns still! Yes, when you blow them up. And we're going to blow them up, eh, Captain?*

*Capt. – Yes, we'll blow them up. We'll break through, gain honor and promotion. To get away from this hell. God! All I hear is those damn guns calling (emphatically) blood! MORE BLOOD!*



*Lieut. - Funny how it all depends upon the prisoner though.*

*Capt. - We've got to depend on him.*

*Lieut. - Let's attack and break through regardless.*

*Capt. - No, we can't do that. We can't shed blood needlessly.*

*Lieut. - But if we break through – is that needless?*

*Capt. - It wouldn't be, if we were sure. To run up against a stone wall and be thrown for a loss; leave a hole here, no; we don't dare do that.*  
*(emphatically) God! That would be murder.*

*Lieut. - Then it really all depends on the prisoner. (ironically) I could laugh, if it weren't so gruesome. You're right, Captain, there is no humor in war. Pawns in a chess game, that's all we are, and it's very little time that's lost between moves. (coughs) Checkmated by a lousy prisoner. (coughs) God! I must be burning up, my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, I'm dry – can't fill up. (endeavors to reach canteen which captain hands to him)*

*Lieut. - (takes a sip and throws canteen across room) Insipid stuff!*

*Capt. - (puts hand on lieutenant's forehead) Here, let me see that scratch; you've got a little fever.*

*Lieut. - Aw, go on away, Cap. There's nothing wrong with me. (frantically)*  
*Can't you see I want to rest. (the orderly is heard off doorway) Ah!*  
*The orderly, sir. (both look expectantly at passageway)*  
*(The orderly enters followed by the prisoner. He is dressed in a ragged*  
*blue uniform from which all buttons and ornaments are removed. He is*  
*fearful. Behind the prisoner is the interpreter, dressed much like the*  
*orderly)*

*Ord. - (salutes) The prisoner and the interpreter, sir.*

*Capt. - (returns salute) Robert, we haven't much time, so question him fast.*  
*What is his regiment?*

*Pris. - (addresses captain pleadingly) Bitte, ich mochte mein Bild wieder*  
*haben.*

*Capt. - What did he say?*

*Robert - He wants a picture back.*

*Capt. - A picture back! Never mind the picture. What's his regiment?*

*Robert - Welches ist ihr Regiment?*

*Priso. - Bitten Sie den Herrn Hauptmann mir mein Bild Wieder zu geben. Ich*  
*mochte mein Bild wieder haben.*

*Robert - He begs for a picture, sir. He says he'd like it back.*

*Capt. - Damn the picture. His regiment, get his regiment.*

*Robert - Welches ist ihr Regiment? Der Herr Hauptmann will es wissen.*

*Pris. - (to the captain) Herr Hauptmann, ich mochte mein Bild wieder haben.*  
*Es ist alles was mir übrig bleibt.*

*Robert - He asks for his picture again. He says it's all he's got left.*

*Capt. - Picture, what picture?*

*Robert - Ven Welchem Bilde redder Sie?*

*Pris. - (eagerly) Dem Bilde meiner Frau und meiner Kinder.*

*Robert - A picture of his wife and children, sir.*

*Capt. - A picture of his wife and children! Hell, I haven't his picture. What is his regiment?*

*Robert - (pathetically) Bitte, mein Bild. Ich verliere gern alles andere, Geld, Briefe, Pfeife, Tabak, die Uniform Knöpfe; aber bitte sagen Sie dem Hauptmann mir mein Bild meiner Frau und meiner Kinder zu geben.*

*Robert - He still raves about his picture, sir. He said he doesn't mind losing everything else, his money, his letters, his pipe, the buttons from his clothes; but he would like the picture of his wife and children back.*

*Capt. - (irritated) Tell him we haven't his picture. We're not interested in his picture. We're losing time.*

*Robert - Ihr Bild geht uns nichts an. Nennen Sie Ihr Regiment.*

*Pris. - Dies ist ja Krieg, aber Sie werden mir gewiss nicht mein Bild verweigern.*

*Lieut. - (sits up in bunk) Anybody got any water? I'm burning up.*

*Ord. - (giving his canteen) Here, sir.*

*Robert - The prisoner said he knew that this was war, but he figures we're not so cruel as not to give him his picture back.*

*Pris. - (spontaneoulsly) Das Bild ist alles was ich habe. Bitte gaben Sie es mir wieder. Ich habe jetzt nichts mehr – keine Heimat, keine Freunde, die Meisten Freunde sind tot. Wann werde ich meine Familie wieder sehen? Bitte geben Sie mir mein Bild. Das ist keine grosse Bitte. Ich bin zu nichts mehr nutz, und es ist alles was ich habe.*

*Robert - He further says sir, that the picture is all he has left. He'd like it back. He says he now has no country, no friends, that most of his friends he did have are dead. He wonders when he'll see his wife and children again. He says that it's such a little thing to ask for, and that the picture can do no one else any good.*

*Lieut. - We'll have to send out and get that picture, or we'll get nothing out of that dumbbell.*

*Capt. - You're probably right, lieutenant. Orderly, where did you find the prisoner?*

*Ord. - The first platoon had him, sir. He was already stripped for souvenirs.*

*Capt. - You go down there and get this man's picture.*

*Ord. - Yes, sir.*

*Capt. - And the letters he had, also; they may be important.*

*Ord. - Yes, sir. (leaves)*

*Robert - Der Herr Hauptmann hat nach Ihrem Bild geschickt.*

*Pris. - (gratefully) Danke vielmals.*

*Capt. - Now, Robert, tell him I've sent for his picture and get his regiment.*

*Robert - I have already done so, and he gave thanks. Welcher ist ihr Regiment?*

*Pris. - Mein Regiment ist aufgelöst, und ich weiss nicht zu welchem ich jetzt gehöre.*

*Robert - His regiment was disbanded. He doesn't know what outfit he is with now.*

*Capt. - Tell him none of that. He's got to come across.*

*Lieut. - Yes, tell him we might help his memory – with a bayonet. We're losing too much time.*

*Robert - Sie müssen die Wahrheit sagen.*

Pris. - *Nun, es ist die Wahrheit. Ich weiss es nicht. Ich bin erst heute als Ersatz zu dieser kompanie gekommen.*

Robert - *He says he came today as a replacement, but doesn't know what company.*

Lieut. - *Well, that means we don't know who we're up against.*

Capt. - *(distracted) That's bad. Ask him how many men there are in their front line.*

Robert - *Wie viel Mann sind im vorderen Schutzengraben?*

Pris. - *Ich weiss nicht. Ich kam im Dunkeln an, und wurde gleich auf Wache geschickt. Ich habe nur den Unteroffizier und die Ablosung gesehen.*

Robert - *He doesn't know. He just came at dark and was put on guard in no man's land without seeing anyone but a corporal and the man he relieved.*

Capt. - *Now we don't know anymore than we did yesterday.*

Lieut. - *And the attack is off. But is he telling us the truth? (tries to rise but falls back into bunk coughing)*

Capt. - *That I don't know. What do you think, Robert?*

Robert - *I believe he told the truth, as far as I can tell.*

Capt. - *He looks as if he hasn't been in the lines, and he's freshly shaven.*

*(orderly returns)*

*Ord. - Sir, the picture and the letters were burned.*

*Pris. - Mein Bild, hat er mein Bild?*

*Robert - He wishes to know about the picture, sir.*

*Capt. - His picture, hell, tell him the truth.*

*Robert - Wir können ihnen das Bild nicht geben; es ist verbannt.*

*Pris. - (hears Robert as if unbelieving) Mein Bild? Nen! Nicht verbrannt!*

*(he wrings his hands) Nicht verbrannt! (tears begin to fall) Das Bild war alles was ich hatte.*

*Robert - Sir, he is taking it rather hard.*

*Capt. - It can't be any harder on him than our disappointment is to us.*

*Pris. - (breaks into sobs which he tries to control) Mein Bild. (he looks heavenward and cries) Oh Gott! Was habe ich getan um das zu verdienen?*

*Robert - He calls on God, sir. He wishes to know what he has done to deserve all this.*

*Capt. - For Christ's sake, how do I know. Take him out of here. Orderly, take him back to headquarters. Get him out of here. (orderly takes sobbing prisoner out) That's all, Robert, you may go.*

*Lieut. - (who has begun to laugh,, a free laugh and clear) If – if – that – don't – beat – all.*

*Capt. - What in the hell are you laughin' about?*

*Lieut. - (talks with difficulty between his laugh) I – can't – help – it – sir.*  
*(sergeant enters)*

*Serg. - (salutes) Sir, the company is formed and ready to go over.*

*Capt. - The company is ready. (in a dazed manner) Never mind the order, sergeant. Disband the company, all except the guard on duty. We're not going over.*

*Serg. - (joyously) Yes, sir. (leaves)*

*Capt. - Lieutenant, cut out that laughing. There's nothing funny about this.*

*Lieut. - I – just – can't – help – it.*

*Capt. - (very bitter) All our hopes gone, and you can laugh?*

*Lieut. - Not about – that – sir.*

*Capt. - We'll get no honor or promotion out of this. Cut out that laughing.*

*Lieut. - (calming down a little) Sir, it's not about honor. I know all the plans are gone haywire. But didn't you see the humor here, sir? (rises after an effort from the bunk)*

*Capt. - Humor here, hell. What are you laughing about?*



*Lieut. - Why, the prisoner, sir.*

*Capt. - (puzzled) The prisoner?*

*Lieut. - Yes, the prisoner.*

*Capt. - And you see something funny – to laugh about the prisoner, eh!*

*Lieut. - (laughs again strong and clear) Why – yes – sir – didn't you see – the – big – cheese – break – down – and – bawl – over – a – picture – a – measly – picture?*

*Capt. - (bewildered) Why, Lieutenant!*

*Lieut. - Bawling – over – a – picture – like – a – little – kid – and – yet – you – yourself – Captain – said – there – was – no – humor – in war! (as he laughs he is suddenly taken with a cough and he gropes wildly about. A cough is broken in the middle as he falls over dead)*

*Capt. - (runs over and unbuttons the lieutenant's coat) Take it easy. Take it easy. – What's this? A hole in your lungs. Why you said you had only a scratch. (discovers he is dead) Dead, my God, dead! (backs away) Died laughing. (perplexed ) I said there was no humor in war. Why, why yes, of course I said there was no humor in war. (backs away towards doorway) My God! Died laughing. No humor in war.*

*Orderly. (screams) Orderly. (flees through doorway and his voice is heard frantically off stage) ORDERLY.*

*The machine guns give a final mocking burst and die gradually as the curtain is drawn across a darkening stage.*

Victor graduated from Western State College on August 19, 1933, and the day before graduation, he received a job offer to teach junior high and high school in Hartman, Colorado. Mildred and Victor traveled over four hundred miles across the state, this time settling within twenty miles of the Kansas state line.

The happy times continued for Victor and Mildred in Hartman. They were once again close to Mildred's family and were able to spend time with them. They spent Christmas 1933 with Mildred's uncle, Ed Gilmore, and her cousin Harry visited frequently, usually spending New Year's with the couple.

The day after Christmas 1933, Mildred went to see the doctor, possibly to confirm some exciting news she already suspected. The couple was about to embark on a new adventure – they were expecting their first child. On July 10, 1934, Victor Arthur Lotrich was born. Victor excitedly made Mildred's journal entries for her for the ten days she was hospitalized following the birth, and he drew birth announcements by hand to mark the momentous occasion in their lives.<sup>23</sup>

Victor had big hopes and dreams for his son. Mildred often said in later years that Victor loved his family very intensely. She said his children and family life were so important to him because he never had that when he was young.<sup>24</sup> Victor seemed

intent that his son was going to have every opportunity that he himself had missed growing up and exposed him from an early age to books, music, and the natural world.

During this time, while he was teaching at Hartman, Victor continued to collaborate with Hurst, writing up the Yellow Jacket findings, and in 1935 the first of a series of five articles was published. “The Gunnison Collection I-V,” appeared in *Southwestern Lore* over the span of the next two years.

Victor experienced some normal bouts of illness during the family’s time at Hartman, mostly colds, but in early 1937, he came down with rheumatic fever, a condition caused by Group A streptococcus (the same bacteria that causes strep throat). Rheumatic fever causes painful swelling and inflammation of joints, often accompanied by a high fever. The disease is more common in children than adults, but, once again, Victor’s compromised health may have been a factor in his susceptibility to disease.

His symptoms began in December (Mildred again filled in, teaching his classes), and worsened in January. The doctor visited the house on January 12, and Mildred telegraphed her mother to come help with the baby. When Victor worsened with an apparent fever, Mildred had to buy a thermometer to monitor it. Victor grew weaker and weaker before fainting on January 20. Mildred prepared to transport him to Fitzsimmons hospital in Denver the next day. The day dawned bitterly cold,  $-18^{\circ}$

F, and Victor's temperature rose dangerously to 104° F. Mildred finally got him to the hospital about 8:30pm.

Three weeks later, Victor had all of his teeth pulled at Fitzsimmons, a treatment, at that time, utilized to treat systemic infection. He then spent another month in the hospital recuperating. On March 13, he returned home. Mildred noted in her diary that his recovery at home was slow, but he perked up on June 17 when he got a set of false teeth and promptly ate a green apple.<sup>25</sup>

Mildred and Victor were still enjoying their pastime of bird and animal watching. During May and June, Mildred noted going for a drive "to hear birds," citing orioles and flycatchers. She also documented that they "looked for caterpillars," "looked for beetles," and "found orange and yellow moth[s]."<sup>26</sup>

Victor was also pursuing his interest in archeology. The articles he published with Hurst had gained him attention from the archeology community, and in July, he interviewed in Denver for a position with the State Museum. In September, he was awarded the job of curator in the Department of Archeology and Ethnology. Victor was about to embark on a new career, one that his son would later describe as "the high point of dad's life." He and Mildred packed up, and on September 26 she recorded in her diary, "lovely day – moved to Denver."<sup>27</sup>

## **A MOVE TO THE CITY**

Victor would remain in his position at the State Museum for just under five years. It was a wonderful time for the family. They bought a house at the end of 1937, and the following spring, their second son, Francis Andrew Lotrich, was born. Victor had buried his past and denied the existence of any living relatives, but he acknowledged their memory, if only to himself, by giving his second son the names of his brother and father.

Professionally, Victor produced prolifically. He shifted his writing focus to archeology papers and published a collection of articles dealing with Indian pendants, cradleboards, and arrowhead points. “Comparison of a Blade with Two Folsom Fragments” and “Pendants from the San Francisco River, New Mexico” both appeared in *Colorado Magazine* in 1938. “Points of Antiquity from Twelve States” followed, and Victor was referenced in Charles Scoggins’ “Folsom and Nepesta Points” in *American Antiquity*.

In 1941, Victor published the article “Indian Terms for the Cradle and the Cradleboard,” an article held today by the anthropology department of the Smithsonian library. He was also mentioned, in 1941, in a short piece in *Science News Letter*, entitled “Great Migratory Flight of Butterflies Seen.” The piece describes how Victor,

“state archeologist of Colorado and skilled entomologist,” drove from Denver to Colorado Springs to catch and identify swarms of migrating Painted Lady butterflies.<sup>28</sup>

Victor and Mildred’s love of the outdoor world persisted, and they continued to enjoy sighting various birds and insects. Having a little disposable income also allowed the adoption of a new hobby about which Victor became passionate - stamp collecting. Mildred often cared for the baby Frank, while Victor took their older son, Victor Jr., fishing, trading stamps, collecting butterflies, and to other various activities. Frank, as an adult, would describe that time in his parents’ life as one of excitement. They were going to restaurants in Denver and meeting influential writers and scientists. They had enough money to begin to pursue his father’s passionate interests: woodworking (purchasing equipment that would be abandoned years later), collecting tiger beetles, collecting fossils in Florissant, and buying books, for themselves and for young Victor.<sup>29</sup>

The idyllic time was not to last, however, and as 1942 began, something in Victor’s world was going awry. In April of that year, he abruptly resigned from the State Museum. As adults, his sons would engage in lengthy discussions, trying to figure out what changed in their father at that point, because from that time on, his life became a struggle, one in which he would change jobs frequently and grapple with bouts of depression. The family moved ten times over the next thirteen years,

sometimes living apart, with Mildred in one house, Victor and one of the children in another, working elsewhere, coming home only on weekends.

It is hard to know what triggered the change in Victor. Mildred told her sons that Victor left Denver because of a dispute he had with prominent scholars in the archeology field about the classification of arrowheads. The nomenclature of the time dictated that all points were classified in one of two categories – Folsom or Uma points. Victor, based on his observations of points he had found, introduced the classification of “Nepesta points,” naming the arrowheads after the area in which he found them.

According to Mildred, going against the established ideas of the time created lots of problems for Victor. Archeologist Charles Scoggins lent support to Victor’s ideas, citing them in his paper “Folsom and Nepesta Points,” but this did not mitigate the backlash over the idea of changing the nomenclature.<sup>30</sup>

Victor’s personality, especially in later years, would prove to be inflexible, and he would demonstrate repeatedly an unwillingness to compromise on any issue about which he felt passionately. He would often do just the opposite. Leaving the job at the State Museum was only the first in a line of resignations to follow, some on the heels of a public stand Victor took to make a point.



According to Victor's son Frank, leaving the State Museum was much like Victor's leaving Chicago – there was a finality to it, and Victor never looked back. After leaving, Victor “never attempted to get another job in the field of archeology or ever wrote another treatise dealing with archeology” ever again. According to Frank, “There may have been a diplomatic way out, but my father probably refused to compromise his principles or beliefs in the rightness of his position.”<sup>31</sup> Throughout Victor's life he continued to look for artifacts and Indian campsites, but he never re-entered the field professionally.

## **DECLINE**

A professional struggle may not have been the only thing going on in Victor's life. On December 8, 1941, the United States entered World War II, and this may have triggered a reaction in Victor that he neither recognized nor was prepared for. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) had not been thought of at that time, but Victor may have been suffering from the after-effects of his war experience.

He had drawn extensively on his wartime memories for his writing projects at Western State College, but as the years went on, he grew more and more reluctant to talk about what had happened. His sons, in retrospect, believe he suffered from survivor's guilt, and Frank recalled an incident when a woman pestered Victor to tell

her about the war “to the point where he told her the story of a best friend being shot in the guts and holding his bleeding intestines in his hand and asking [Victor], ‘What am I supposed to do with these?’ right before he died.”<sup>32</sup> Victor got to the point where he simply would not talk about the war. It was “like a door that was closed and [the family] were not to approach it.”<sup>33</sup>

According to a long-term study conducted by Zahava Solomon and Mario Mikulincer regarding the incidence of PTSD, it would not have been unusual for Victor to have started experiencing symptoms at that point in his life. He was forty-one and going through a tumultuous time at work. The study found that “the chronic nature of PTSD renders trauma victims vulnerable for life and mid-life is a particularly high-risk period for either delayed onset or reactivated PTSD.”<sup>34</sup>

Another long term study of PTSD in Korean War veterans conducted by Jillan F. Ikin found that certain conditions during service predispose an individual to chronic problems. Victor fit the profile of one at highest risk: “Combat severity and duration, war-related injury, inexperience, lack of seniority and youthfulness all contribute to long-term psychological morbidity.”<sup>35</sup>

It’s impossible to know what really triggered Victor’s resignation from the State Museum, but it is coincidental that it followed right on the heels of the United States’ entry into the war. Another theory considered by Victor’s sons was that the

war stirred in him a feeling of responsibility to give back to the community that had been so good to him, to contribute in a way he felt he wasn't doing at the State Museum.

Whatever the combination of factors, Victor and his family packed up and left Denver, moving back to Nepesta, Colorado, when, once again, Ed Gilmore provided Victor with needed support, opening his home to Victor, Mildred and their two small boys. The family stayed with the Gilmores for the summer of 1942 before moving back to their old town of Hartman in the fall.

Victor took a job as Hartman's superintendent of schools, while he and Mildred tried to re-establish their life in their old community. They settled in, but times were different. The strain of leaving Denver hung in the air, and young Victor and Frank, then eight and four, required food, clothes, and attention. The following year, Victor and Mildred's third son, Alfred Thomas arrived. Victor played a central role in the town as superintendent of the schools and was elected to the board of trustees in April 1944.

Victor was working hard to maintain the stable family life he and Mildred had created, but two events occurred that changed his world again. On June 6, 1944, the allied troops invaded Normandy. Victor listened to D-Day coverage on the radio, and ten-year old Victor and six-year old Frank walked in to see their father with tears

streaming down his cheeks. It was the first time they had ever seen their father cry. He was saying to himself, “those poor, young men...no blankets, nothing to eat...in the mud, in the rain...it isn’t right.”<sup>36</sup>

Frank, as an adult, would look back on how D-Day affected his father. “Somehow he was able to suppress [his war memories] and looking back, he did extremely well – until the Normandy invasion which brought many of the horrors back.”<sup>37</sup>

Not quite two years later, in the spring of 1946, the town of Hartman planned a service in honor of the veterans who had fought in World War II. The high school had a brand new gym, and Victor went to the school board with the recommendation that the gym be used for the celebration. The school board, worried about the floor of the new gym (basketball was of enormous importance in the small town), denied the request.

Victor was “incensed,” and he went to a town meeting to express his fury. With the school board present, he made a “blistering, impassioned” speech about priorities, “electrifying” the listening crowd. The school board refused to change their minds, and Victor was fired within days. He did not finish out the school year.<sup>38</sup>

Victor found himself without a job and a family to support. It was difficult for him to do physically demanding jobs, but he still tried. He “took whatever work he

could find,” first at the mill before he “got cross-wise” with them, then working for the electric companies in the nearby towns of Springfield and LaJunta. He was “trying to make whatever kind of living he could for his family.”<sup>39</sup> The family raised hens, in hopes of starting a chicken farm, and Victor entertained the idea of starting a honey farm. He was searching for a way to support his family, and another change was imminent.

## **DEPRESSION**

Struggling to keep his family afloat, Victor needed a new plan. In the spring of 1946, he decided to move his family to Handley, Missouri to try his hand at farming. The family got a herd of cows, which they milked by hand, and Victor built traps to catch rabbits for fur.

Despite his best intentions, Victor could not make a go of it. The land was poor, and he was physically limited in how much he could do. The income was just not sufficient to support the family. He needed to find another job, and he looked, once more, to education.

In the spring of 1947, he enrolled at the University of Missouri, taking graduate classes in order to qualify for a job as a school administrator. He finished the classes

and that fall assumed the position of superintendent of schools for the town of Windyville, moving his family approximately ninety miles west.

Something happened, though, and Victor resigned just a few months later. It has remained a mystery to the family, but whatever it was, it again caused Victor to turn his back, and he and the family moved back to Handley. Victor slid into a deep depression. According to his middle son Frank (who was ten at the time), Victor “did nothing. He lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. Sometimes he refused to eat. Very seldom would he get up to come to the table. He did read the magazines, the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *Reader’s Digest*. He did not want to be disturbed, and he was very unpleasant to be around. No one could do anything right, and he grumbled and growled about everything.”<sup>40</sup>

This went on for months, and the burden of the farm fell on Mildred and young Victor, then fourteen. They did everything, from milking the cows to cutting down trees for firewood, but the position was untenable, and eventually the family moved back to Colorado. They went to Colorado Springs and stayed with Mildred’s sister Stella. It was the summer of 1948. They had been in Missouri for just over two years.

Perhaps it was a combination of factors that pushed Victor into the depression – World War II sparking memories of his own service, the problems at the State Museum, losing the job at Hartman, and his failure to succeed at farming in Missouri.

His life had been a long series of struggles, and with each previous adversity, he had found the strength to persevere. His life was different now, though. He had a wife and three sons, to whom he felt an enormous responsibility to provide the life he had been denied. He was in poor health, never fully recovering the strength he had had before his injuries at age nineteen. And perhaps the cumulative effect of his troubles began to weigh too heavily.

The early years of his marriage to Mildred had been an oasis of happiness in a life that had been filled with difficult challenges. He had achieved education, respect, and a successful position in the field of archeology. He had found a wonderful woman he loved dearly and had three healthy children. But the loss of his job, his physical limitations, and the nagging effects of the trauma of war- psychological as well as physical- had pushed him to a breaking point.

Over the course of the summer, he was able to work through the depression, and in the fall he found a teaching job. Things improved, but they “never hit the high point again.” As his son Frank explained it, looking back, “I don’t know that he really did come out of it.”<sup>41</sup>

## **SEARCHING FOR PEACE**

The fall of 1948 brought another move for the Lotrich family. They moved out of Mildred's sister's place, and relocated in Ellicott, Colorado, approximately twenty-five miles east of Colorado Springs. Victor got the job of principal of the high school there, while Mildred got a teaching position. They settled into the teacherage, but after just a few months, Victor got into a disagreement with the school board about discipline and resigned.<sup>42</sup>

Victor wanted Mildred to resign too. He wanted them to pick up and leave, once again. This time, long-suffering Mildred put her foot down. She refused to quit. She told Victor that she had three boys to think about. She told him the boys had to be provided for, and that was what she was going to do. She told him he was free to go if he desired, but she was keeping her job. Victor stayed but didn't find employment until the following school year. It was at this point that Frank remembers his mother "became the provider and mainstay of the family."<sup>43</sup>

It was a difficult time for the family. Young Victor, just entering high school, went back to Colorado Springs to live with Mildred's sister. Frank spent a lot of time with his father, who was struggling through another bout of depression. Frank recalls, "I missed a lot of school that spring going with dad to collect bullets and brass and moths and beetles."<sup>44</sup>



Victor also sought solace in the music that he had loved since childhood. Every Sunday he listened to the Metropolitan Opera, and the kids knew “when operas were on, you didn’t make a sound in the house.” Frank remembers, “Daddy worked hard to get himself through this tough spot...eventually going back to teaching and being somewhat happy in the last years of his life.”<sup>45</sup>

In the summer of 1949, the family moved to a farm owned by a family named Downes. Mildred continued teaching at the high school in Ellicott, and Victor found a teaching job in the town of Campo, located at the southern end of the state, some 250 miles away. He lived in Campo during the week, making the long drive to come home on weekends. During the summer he ran the dairy farm for the Downes.

Late in 1950, Victor returned to Hartman, taking a teaching position at the high school. Young Victor lived with him there, while Mildred and the two younger boys stayed at the Downe’s farm while she continued to teach at Ellicott.

The next year, a teaching job opened in Holly, just ten miles from Hartman, and Mildred took it. The family lived there for a year, but in 1952, Victor left his position in Hartman and took a job in Springfield, which was approximately 75 miles to the southwest. This time Frank lived with Victor in Springfield, commuting home on weekends to see Mildred and Alfred, who had moved to Holly. (Young Victor had

graduated from Hartman High School and was away at college). Finally, in summer 1954, Victor got a teaching job at Holly, and the family was finally together again.

On December 23, 1955, Victor was feeling ill and went to lie down. Mildred had often made mustard packs to place on his chest to help with the breathing problems that had plagued him throughout his adult life. She got one ready and carried it up to his room. When she got there, she discovered he was not breathing and called an ambulance. Victor had had a heart attack. Though the paramedics tried to revive him, he died en route to the hospital, at 12:45 am, December 24. He was 55 years old.<sup>46</sup>

## **Chapter 7**

### **VICTOR'S LEGACY**

Victor's parents, Maria and Andrew, left Slovenia in order to find a better life for themselves and their children. What they found was a nation that, sometimes grudgingly, provided the opportunity for a better life, but also a new set of hardships and discrimination. While Maria and Andrew clung to their Slovenian heritage, even after making a life for themselves in the United States, Victor was caught between two cultures. He did not feel the tie to Slovenia that his parents did, yet, for almost half of his life, he was not accepted as a true American.

Victor was able to find the path to becoming "American" and that is the legacy he gave to his children. He was the bridge between his parents' immigrant status and his children's American identity. In finding the path, he cut himself off from his past, burying the memories deep within himself, never acknowledging their existence.

Upon entering adulthood, he was able to make the transition, but not without great sacrifice. His service in World War I was pivotal, bringing with it equal measures of tragedy and opportunity. Victor's military service was horrific and left

him scarred, physically and emotionally, but it afforded him respect that had previously been unattainable. It also opened the doors for an education that Victor realized was essential to bettering his position in society.

Before entering the military, Victor's prospects were grim. He was serving time in a reformatory and faced a life on the streets upon release. As it did for countless others, and as it continues to do today, the military provided a pathway for a young man struggling to survive. Victor served heroically, but it is a disservice to ignore the fact that because he was young, poor, and without prospects, the military seemed his only option, and he found himself fighting valiantly for the country that had done little to ease his struggle.

Upon his discharge from service, Victor was aided by his "adoptive" family, the Gilmores. They provided him the support he needed to recuperate and face the challenge of building a life. Victor had left his immigrant past in Chicago, and his wartime service cemented his place in society as a true and equal American. His service also afforded him the opportunity to pursue a higher education, first at the Broadmoor Art Academy, then at Colorado State Agricultural College.

Though his physical injuries kept him from the cowboy and ranching life he had dreamed of, Victor soon found another calling - teaching. He married, and he and his wife built a family. Together they pursued shared passions – archeology, books,

music, stamps, and, always, the natural world of plants and animals. His archeology interest led to professional respect and a good job. His family grew, and he experienced great success.

Things grew rocky, though, and Victor's past, though hidden, intruded. His wartime memories, his refusal to compromise, his acute sense of justice, honed by early years of discrimination, somehow combined to bring about difficulty and depression.

Through it all, he clung to his family and his love for them. His true legacy was the gift he gave to them and to their descendents. Victor built a life in America and carved out a respected position in society. He recognized and stressed the importance of education, devoting a large portion of his adult life to teaching. He had an intellectual curiosity and a passion that led him to experience his world fully, whether it was through books or opera or collecting arrowheads.

Though difficulties came frequently in his later years, what was never affected was Victor's love for his family. There were bad times, but even during some of the worst, moments of happiness were intertwined. Victor's middle son Frank acknowledges the difficulties he and his brothers faced during their dad's depressions, but he remembers the good times too. He describes them this way:

At the Downe's place, going to the big hill and collecting bullets, collecting bottle caps, collecting matchbooks, watching baseball, and helping with the cows. Listening to opera on Saturdays and listening to music on lps and there were the *Rover Boys* and other books from the used book store...In Hartman, going to sporting events...Mother always keeping statistics. Going with my mother and father to hear [young] Victor sing. Going arrowhead hunting, collecting butterflies... In Springfield, father and I batched during the week and went home to Holly on the weekends. There was listening to music and soaking and sorting stamps...In Holly, as one family again, seeing dad happy, going to movies with him, collecting stamps, doing the German Plate errors, etc. And the fish, I dare not forget the fish.<sup>1</sup>

Maria and Andrew sacrificed to bring their children to this country, and Victor faced great challenges in building a life. It is his descendents who are the true

beneficiaries. Victor built for his children a home where they were loved, and they, in turn, each did the same for their families. They grew up in a middle-class household, where education and opportunity were stressed, and they provided love, education, and opportunity for their children. Each of Victor's three sons graduated from college, as did every one of his nine grandchildren. They all now enjoy lives as comfortable Americans, secure in their place in society.

In May 2008 syndicated columnist Kathleen Parker wrote a piece in which she explored the idea of being a "full-blooded American." She discussed a "patriotic divide" in the country that is, in her opinion, marked by "blood equity, heritage and commitment to hard-won American values. And roots." (Or, conversely the lack thereof.) She acknowledged America's immigrant past but viewed the issue through a narrow lens. She argued that there is "a different sense of America among those who trace their bloodlines back through generations of sacrifice," and laments that the descendants of such bloodlines whose "forefathers fought and died for an America that has worked pretty well for more than 200 years" worry that their "heritage is being swept under the carpet."<sup>2</sup>

It seems the argument has come full circle yet again. In Victor's time, he was less than a true American but now his descendants are in danger of having his admirable heritage swept aside. He felt obliged to hide it in life but is revered long

after his death. Victor's sympathies would likely lie more with the "new" immigrants of today than with those worried about a loss of "full-blooded" Americanism.

In August 2009, Victor's granddaughter carried into a quilt documentation event the blue and white baby quilt Mildred had stitched for their first baby. The quilt contained pictures, lovingly designed and drawn by Victor. All of the documenters left their respective tables to gather around the small quilt. They lauded its uniqueness, its originality and its beauty. They commented on the pictures – the chess board, the scarab beetles, the outlines of the continents, the butterflies, the math symbols – all of the things Victor and Mildred wanted to surround their child with. The quilt was deemed "special" by those who examined it, and it has been documented by the Alliance for the American Quilt as a unique piece of Americana.

It is an irony that should not be lost. This piece of American history was designed by a man who spent much of his life fighting to obtain his place as an American. It is easy to forget the struggle or to minimize its importance, but it is a dishonor to Victor and all those like him to let it fade away. The American past is a heterogeneous collection of the life accounts of its members. It is only through the collective stories of all Americans, each unique and special in its own right, that we can get the true picture of what it means to be an American.



Victor's life was filled with hardship, but it was filled with times of great happiness too. His life with Mildred brought him joy, as did the children they had together. The young boy who left Chicago with a sixth-grade education, scared and alone, became a veteran, a teacher, an archeologist, a writer, a painter, a loving and beloved husband and father. He valued education and pursued his interests passionately. He gave his children love and wanted for them great opportunity. These are the legacies he left his children, and they are still felt by his grandchildren and great-grandchildren. His story built the foundation for all of their lives today.

*Two Ideals*

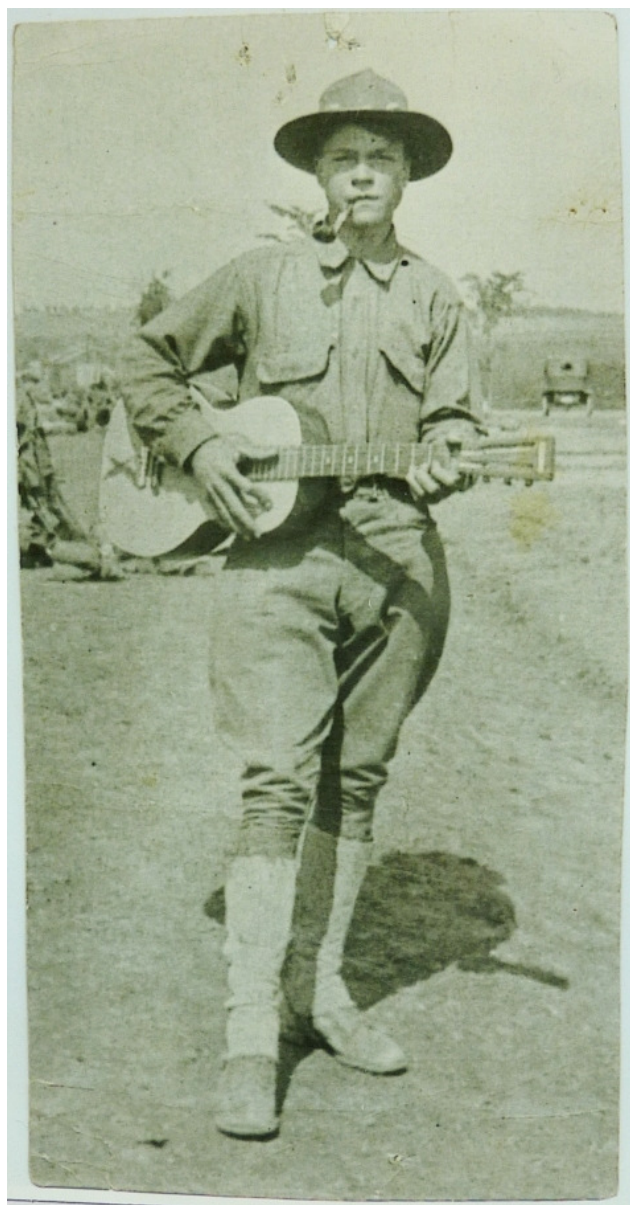
*If I were an artist,  
The pictures that I would paint  
Would to every one bring gladness.  
Leaving sadness a word unknown.  
But if I could express myself in song,  
To evil spirits I would sing  
A lullaby in tones so soft and low,  
That they in endless sleep  
Would be lost.*

*Victor Francis Lotrich*

**APPENDIX A**  
**PHOTOGRAPHS**



The Lotrich Family c.1907. Pictured left to right: Andreas, Mary, Andrew, and Victor



Victor F. Lotrich, 1917, Sixth Engineers, United States Army



Victor F. Lotrich, 1920





Victor F. Lotrich, Broadmoor Art Academy, 1921

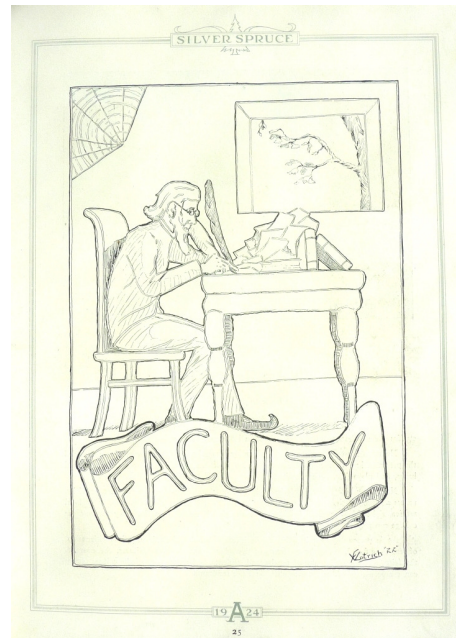
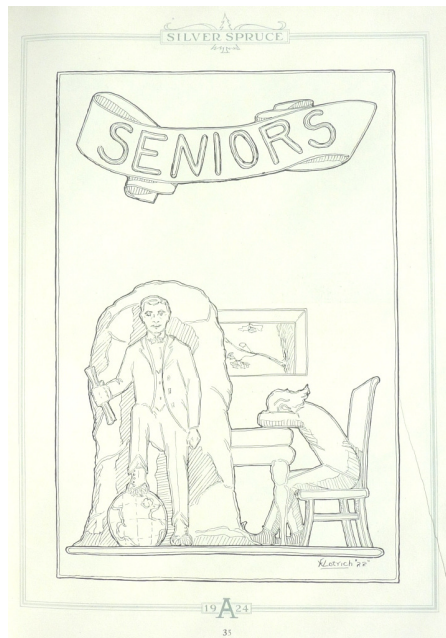
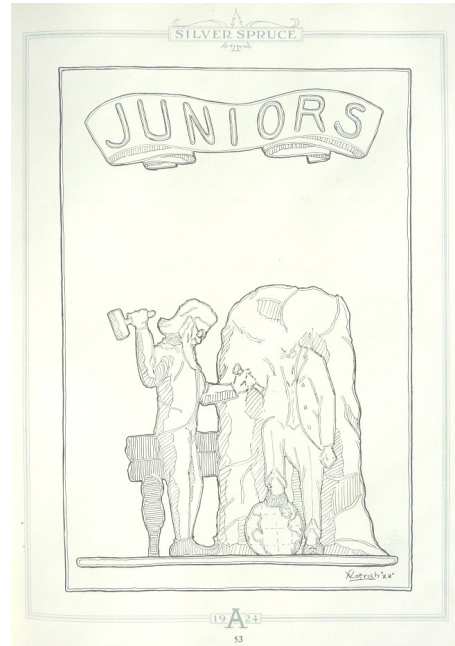
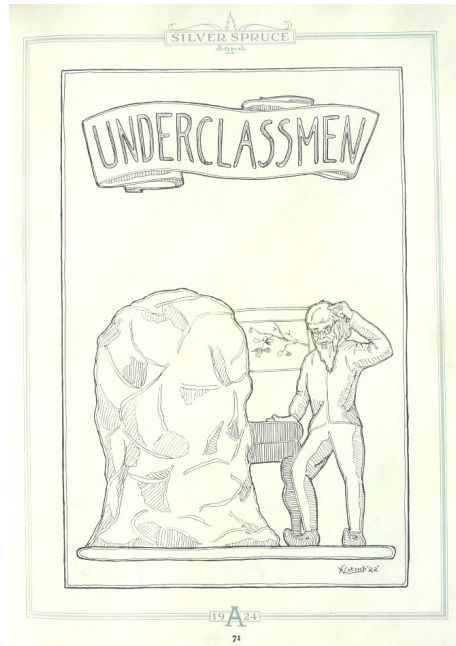


Mildred Thomas and Victor F. Lotrich, wedding photograph, 1928



## **APPENDIX B**

### **ARTWORK**



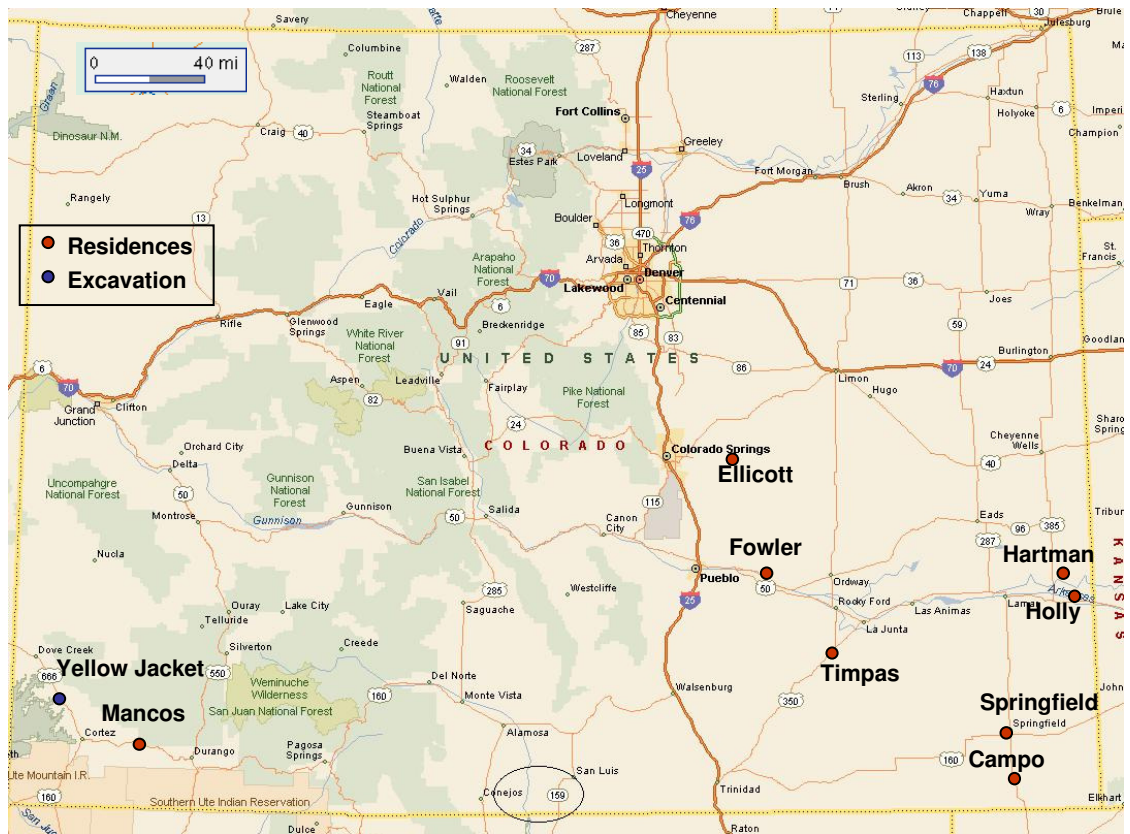
Drawings by Victor F. Lotrich, included in the *Silver Spruce*, yearbook of the State Agricultural College, Colorado, 1924



Oil Painting by Victor F. Lotrich, c. 1930

**APPENDIX C**  
**MAP OF COLORADO**





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