Chapter 3

Town and School in a Wilderness

…a land that is paradoxically both extremely threatening and inhospitable on one hand and incomparably rewarding, inspiring and beautiful on the other…

—Allen Nossaman, Many More Mountains, vol. 3, Rails into Silverton, Preface

As the 1870s drew to a close both town and school of Silverton had become firmly established in the economy of the San Juans. Its people liked to think of themselves as citizens of a mining metropolis whose men combined the rough and boisterous lifestyle of a frontier settlement with the amenities their wives provided through literary and religious services and their children’s schooling. Silvertonians’ lives were charged with the energy that drove their aggressive exploitation of the natural environment and were calmed by the efforts to bring culture and religion into their homes and public places. The seasons’ rounds brought in winter the terror of burial by avalanche and death by freezing in the fearful whiteouts of snow and ice. In summer they brought the delights of glorious colors of wild flowers and aspen glens in mountain meadows and on alpine peaks. Silverton’s people, miners and engineers, businessmen and lawyers, desperadoes and prostitutes, freighters and tradesmen, fathers, mothers, and children, experienced year-in and year-out the constancy and the immediacy of terror and beauty of life in the mountains.
Age made little difference. Whether adults or children, Silvertonians knew about the meaning of life and death. Daily they saw or heard of the vicissitudes of human existence in mine and smelter, shop and office, saloon and bordello, log cabin and two-story frame house. In that first decade of settlement, theirs was an experience of life in the raw. With the help of school and church, they were determined to make it liveable for young and old alike.

Access to Silverton remained a problem, in summer less so than in winter. As an outlet toward the northeast Otto Mears had finished by August of 1877 the construction of an extension of the Silverton-Animas Forks road for an additional twenty-five miles to Lake City. Toward the south pack trails led on both sides of Sultan Mountain toward Cascade Creek and Animas City close to what would eventually become Durango. By 1878 a toll road was being constructed through the Animas River Canyon. Not long thereafter it was learned that the Denver and Rio Grande railroad had bought it and planned to survey a route for a Durango-Silverton railroad up the Las Animas Valley.

The preferred route into Silverton, traveled by most of Silverton’s newcomers, remained for years the road that led from Del Norte along the Rio Grande past Timber and Grassy Hill across the Continental Divide over either Cunningham or Stony Pass past Howardville into Baker’s Park. Louisa Weinig, then a school-aged youngster, described the adventure in 1878:

Our trip to Silverton was a wonderful experience. Tho the stage was crowded with passengers mother and I were the only women folks. . . . Our route was by Wagon Wheel Gap, the upper Rio Grande, Stony Pass and Howardville. It took several days as we had to make over-night stops. . . . My brother and I and other passengers walked part of the way as the stage moved slowly owing to the steep and narrow roads. We enjoyed the beautiful scenery, so new and strange to us. Many mountain sides were still covered with snow, but flowers were blooming on the warmer slopes.

Another experience was that of Peter Scott who for a while earned his living as a freighter. He tells us how with sixteen