

# "The Colorado Saloon Legacy of James Purcell"

*by Rob Goodson*

My wife's great grandfather, James Purcell, was the proprietor of four saloons in Mesa County, Colorado, between 1891 and 1909. Three of the saloons were located in Grand Junction and one in Palisade. Over the past couple of years, members of the Purcell family have studied family records, historical archives and consulted with bottle and token collectors in an effort to piece together James Purcell's life and his involvement in the saloon business. The purpose of this article is to share some of the more interesting findings with collectors throughout the country.

In 1875, attracted by the opportunities offered by the mining boom in Colorado, James "Jimmy" Purcell left Iowa and headed to Leadville to pursue his dreams. Within a few years, he moved to Western Colorado to Red Mountain, near Ouray, where he operated a string of pack horses into the early 1880s. He arrived in Grand Junction in 1883, just two years after the town was founded. This made Purcell one of Mesa County's early pioneers and over the next two decades, he would become a popular town figure and proprietor of four saloons.

What got him into the saloon business is unknown. As with many successful saloon-keepers, Jimmy Purcell reportedly didn't drink, but he did have a reputation for being an excellent card player.

## PURCELL'S SALOONS

### Bank Saloon, Grand Junction

Purcell's involvement in Grand Junction saloons started in about 1891, when a Mr. Fredericks and Purcell were proprietors of the Bank Saloon. Almost nothing is known about the Bank, including its location. The only known collectible from the Bank Saloon is a token that reads BANK SALOON / FREDERICKS & PURCELL / PROPS (rev.) GOOD FOR / ONE / DRINK. We can only speculate to how and why Purcell became co-



proprietor of the Bank Saloon, but by 1894, the Fredericks and Purcell partnership was no longer listed in the Colorado Business directories and the fate of the Bank Saloon is unknown.

### The Senate Saloon

By 1894 or 1895, Purcell became co-proprietor of The Senate. The Senate Saloon was located at 413 Main Street in Grand Junction and is probably the most well known of the early Grand Junction saloons. The Senate was by far the longest continuously running saloon in Grand Junction. It was established in 1883 and continued operations until prohibition in 1909. The Senate had a number of proprietors over the years:

1883-1884: George W. Thurston & Monroe Allison.

1884-1885: M. Allison & William B. Leshner.

1886: "Leshner & Co."

1887-1892: William B. Leshner and Joseph Crosby

1892-1894: William B. Leshner and William H.H. James.

1894: William H.H. James, owner, Frank Hughes, Manager.

1895-July, 1898: James Purcell and Frank Hughes.

1898-1909: James Purcell

1909-1935: Saloon was closed but Purcell kept The Senate open as a billiards hall and cigar shop until his death in 1935.

1935-1955: Tom Golden, Purcell's son-in-law, took over the Senate and maintained billiards, snooker, and cigar store, and sold 3.2 beer after prohibition was repealed. Poker was played in the "Bomb Shelter"(basement) starting in 1942.

From all accounts, the Senate Saloon was a popular drinking establishment that also served as a community meeting place from its earliest times. In at least one



Grand Junction election in 1887, the votes were counted at the Senate Saloon late into the night. In the 1890s, a portion of the

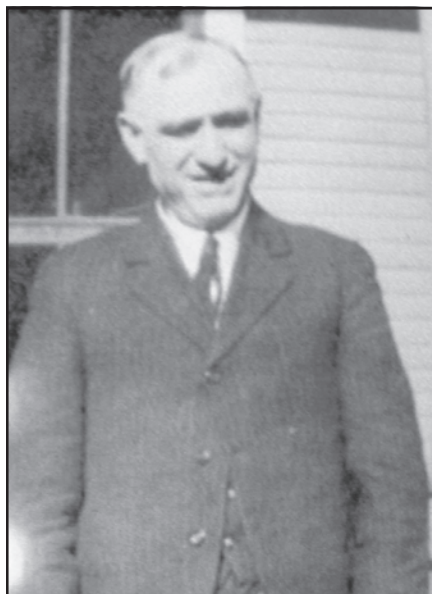


Senate Saloon, circa 1884.

Senate building served as the Senate restaurant, and in 1893 served such fine cuisine as "game, oysters and fish" and claimed that "Vaudeburg of the Senate restaurant is the acknowledged cook of the town."

Bottle and token enthusiasts are well aware of the popularity and variety of Senate collectibles. Tokens from the



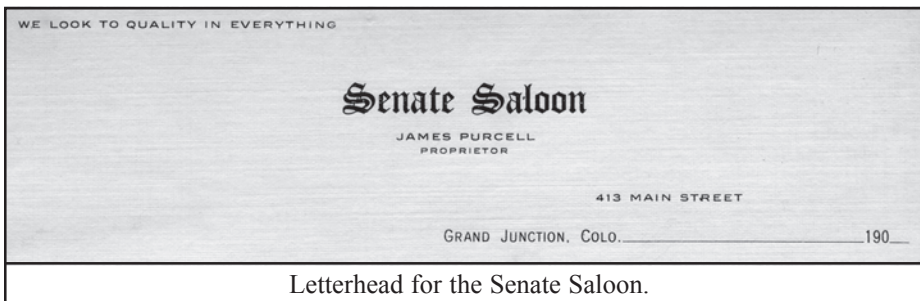


James "Jimmy" Purcell, circa 1933.

Senate span a period of more than 50 years.

As for bottles and jugs, there are numerous embossed flasks, at least two different cylinders, and a half-gallon and gallon jug.

All of the Senate bottles can be attributed to Purcell's involvement there. The earliest and rarest known Senate flask is embossed with the name PURCELL & HUGHES. Only a few of these early flasks are known to exist. Frank Hughes and Jimmy Purcell were partners from about 1895 to Hughes' untimely death in July,



Letterhead for the Senate Saloon.

1898 of a burst appendix. Having had my own appendicitis over the 2003 New Year, I can certainly sympathize with the plight of poor Mr. Hughes (luckily, modern medicine fixed me right up). After Hughes' death, Jimmy Purcell was the sole proprietor of The Senate.

Between about 1900 and 1907, numerous varieties of Senate bottles were manufactured. Purcell put out a pint and half-pint "defender" flask embossed THE SENATE SALOON / GRAND JUNCTION / COLO. The SENATE SALOON flask came in both wiped and ground tops and are the most common Senate flasks.

Purcell also put out a slightly different flask embossed SENATE SALOON / GRAND JUNCTION / COLO ("THE" was omitted). These later flasks also came in half-pint and pint, wiped and ground tops and were produced by the Western Glass Manufacturing Company in Denver. (They have the tell-tale "buckle" on the base.)

These later SENATE SALOON flasks are not particularly rare (compared to most Colorado flasks), but they are highly sought after due to three factors: "Saloon" bottle collectors want them, western whiskey collectors want them, and Colorado collectors want them. Senate Saloon cylinders (quart-sized) are quite rare compared to the flasks and are also highly sought after by collectors. The Senate also produced half-gallon and gallon crock jugs.

In addition to selling whiskey and cigars, Purcell was the General Agent in Grand Junction for Coors Golden Beer and was acquainted with Adolph Coors. In fact, Adolph Coors personally loaned Purcell the money he needed to purchase the 413 Main Street property in 1903. Whether they were friends or simply business acquaintances is unknown.

After several failed attempts by the Anti-Saloon League to ban alcohol in Grand Junction, the April 7, 1909 vote resulted in passage of prohibition by a 60% to 40% margin (1,480 people voted yes and 1,009 voted no). Amazingly, the saloon-keepers were allowed only ten days to clear out their inventory. With all the saloons in town set to close on April 17, 1909, the Daily Sentinel reported that April 17th was "about the busiest day the liquor houses of Grand Junction ever experienced."

Purcell was forced to close both the Senate Saloon and the Annex Bar on that day, and reportedly held his leftover stock in the basement of his house. But unlike many other saloon proprietors, Purcell was lucky to have been able to continue operations of the Senate as a cigar and billiards hall after Prohibition. He continued to be an agent for Coors, and sold Coors malted milk products throughout the teens and 20's until Prohibition was repealed.

Upon Jimmy Purcell's death in 1935, his son-in-law, Tom Golden, took over operations. In 1940, Golden bought a number of new pool tables as captured by



renowned Grand Junction photographer, Frank Dean. In 1942, Golden added a public entrance to the basement, which he renamed "The Bomb Shelter." The Bomb Shelter contained poker tables, which was made legal because the players cashed in their winnings for Senate "Good For" tokens rather than cash. With pool tables, 3.2 beer, cigars and other products on the ground floor and poker in the basement, the Senate continued its successful run of business.

In early February of 2003, I went to the old Senate office with my father-in-law and gathered the last remaining files from the Senate's operations. In the file cabinets we found a Senate Saloon half-pint flask (what a surprise) and numerous monthly logs of gross receipts during World War II.

One entry during a down month in 1943 explained that pool profits were down because the 19-year-olds were sent to war.

Shortly after World War II was over, the Senate had a year of particularly good business, thanks, in part, to members of the "52-20" club. As I understand it, World War II veterans were given 52 weeks of pay at \$20 per week once the war ceased - and many Grand Junction members of that club liked to play pool at the Senate.

The original Senate Saloon building still stands and is currently utilized as a fly-fishing shop. The facade was replaced in the 1930s, and the bar fixtures were sold in 1955 to an antique collector outside of Las Vegas, reportedly named Dobey Docke. But many reminders of the Senate remain: some great whiskey bottles and

jugs, numerous tokens, some of the sales ledgers, the front door and the old safe.



#### The Annex Bar, Grand Junction

In about 1904, Jimmy Purcell opened the "Annex" bar at 209-211 Colorado Avenue, Grand Junction. Newspapers advertised lunches twice a day at the Annex. While there are no known whiskey bottles from the Annex, Purcell had a major Coors bottling operation behind the Annex from about 1904-1909. The *Weekly Sentinel* in 1907 advertised "Coor's Celebrated Beer - Bottled and sold in Grand Junction by Jas. Purcell at the Annex." A dozen quarts cost \$1.75 and a dozen pints \$1.25. "Beer delivered to any part of the City between the hours of 3 and 5 p.m. and empty bottles called for."



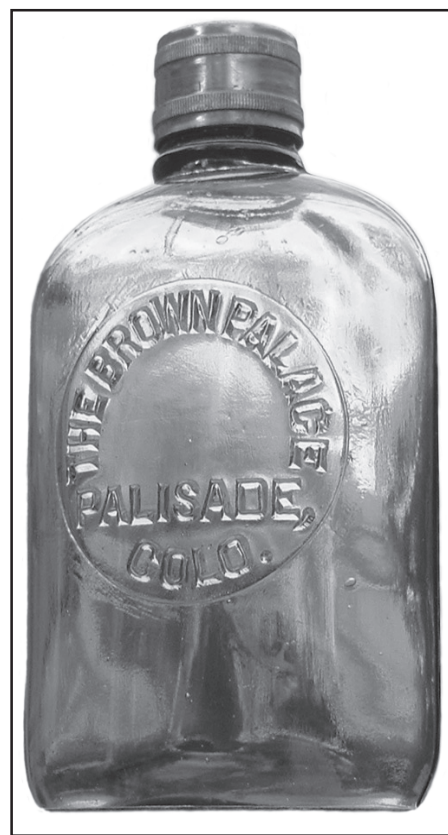
The Brown Palace, circa 1905.

#### Brown Palace Saloon, Palisade

Purcell was also the owner of the Brown Palace saloon in Palisade, Colorado between 1905 and 1908 (prohibition hit Palisade a year earlier than in Grand Junction).

The Brown Palace is said to have been named after the bartender, Robert S. Brown, and not the famous Denver Hotel. The saloon building, which still stands today at the northeast corner of 3rd and Main Street, was completed in October, 1905. Thus, the Brown Palace was only open for three years. The Brown Palace bar fixtures, which were installed in October, 1905, originated from the Senate, while the Senate got entirely new fixtures.

The extremely rare Brown Palace "defender" flask, which comes in both pint and half-pint, was another Purcell flask and is the only known embossed whiskey bottle from Palisade.



Other rare Brown Palace saloon collectibles include two different "Brown Palace" tokens, which were among the Senate tokens found at the Senate after it closed.



The research continues:

In a continuing effort to locate Purcell saloon items, I need the collecting community's assistance. If you have gotten anything from the Senate Saloon, Bank Saloon, Annex, or Brown Palace (Palisade) saloon, please drop me a line. I'm trying to track this information and I'd be happy to share any of my data with anyone who is interested.

Rob Goodson is an attorney living in Grand Junction, Colorado. He continues to research Purcell's saloons and will always consider buying or trading for Purcell saloon memorabilia.

If you have more information about any of Purcell's saloons, please contact Rob by E-mail: [rdgmail@yahoo.com](mailto:rdgmail@yahoo.com) or phone (970) 257-7734.

