



J.B. Walker and his sons by his first wife, Emily Strother Walker. Oldest son, J.B. Walker, Jr., became Morrison's mayor in 1908. He also ran the Mt. Morrison Casino.

# John Brisben Walker, the Man and Mt. Morrison

By Sally L. White

Much has been written about J.B. Walker, "Jefferson County's wonder man," a visionary and entrepreneur who has become a legend of local history in the 74 years since his death.<sup>1</sup> New family records and other documents add a dimension to his life and relationships here that have been little reported, and generate more lines for investigation while also helping us understand his influence on the area in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## Early Years in Colorado

Walker moved to Denver with his first wife, Emily Strother Walker, and young family in 1879-80. At the time of their marriage in 1870, they were said to be the handsomest couple in the valley in Virginia. At 23, he had already attended Georgetown College and the Military Academy at West Point and was a veteran of the Chinese Army.<sup>2</sup> He came to Colorado at the request of the Department of Agriculture, to demonstrate the potential for irrigated agriculture in what seemed to most to be the "arid West." In 1884, he enrolled his two oldest sons in the brand-new

Catholic school in Morrison for its first session.<sup>3</sup>

By the early 1890s, in 1888 by some reports, Walker had returned to New York to manage his latest acquisition, *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. The last of the couple's eight children was born there in 1890. Besides reviving the magazine, Walker assisted the development and promotion of the automobile and the airplane, reportedly offering his acquaintances, the Wright Brothers, room on his estate for their work. As part of his promotion of the automobile, he founded the Automobile Manufacturers Association and, with his son Justin, became the first person

to attempt to scale Pikes Peak by auto, reaching the 11,000 foot level.<sup>4</sup>

Walker sold *Cosmopolitan* to William Randolph Hearst in 1905 for a reported one million dollars.<sup>5</sup> He soon invested his considerable profit in the acquisition of land near Morrison, including a large area of the red sandstone outcrops he hoped to make popular. Enthralled with the spectacular scenery of the foothills and potential for development, he turned his inventive mind to new ventures.

### **“Mt. Morrison: An All-the-Year-Round Resort”**

Walker himself moved to Morrison, returning from the east with a new bride, Ethel Richmond Walker, and their four children. She had been his secretary at *Cosmopolitan*, and continued to be a great supporter of his dreams. They moved into a house on the outskirts of

Morrison, strategically located at the base of his new holdings on Mt. Falcon. The 4,000 acres he bought in the Morrison area included large areas of Mt. Falcon and Red Rocks, but it is unlikely he ever owned, as is often reported, “the entire town of Morrison.”<sup>6</sup> In 1909, he added to his holdings when he purchased the property of Sacred Heart College from his friends, giving it a new name, the Mt. Morrison Casino. Although this transaction officially occurred in 1909, according to records at Regis University archives, the *Jefferson Co. Graphic* announced events at the Mt. Morrison

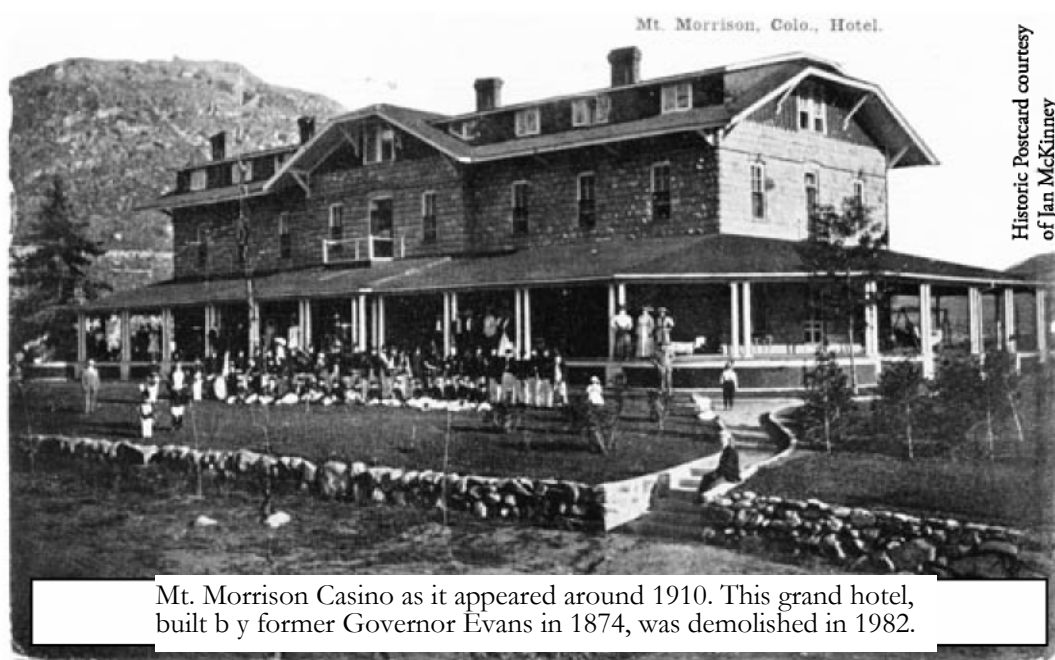
Casino, including the opening of the swimming pool to the public, as early as July 1908.<sup>7</sup>

Much of the property Walker bought in Jefferson County was purchased in the name of (or turned over to) his newest ventures: the Colorado Resort Co., which purchased the Mt. Morrison Hotel/Casino; and the Colorado Power, Water, Railway, and Resort Co., a company he established for the Red Rocks enterprise. Walker personally owned several undeveloped but platted blocks at the south side of town, part of which is now home to the town’s new (in 1984) post office but most of which

ranges, freedom from smoke; cool nights in summer and bright, warm, sunshiny days in winter.” So enthused a brochure the Colorado Power, Water, Railway, and Resort Company published in 1909.<sup>9</sup> Of the town, this public-relations piece reported that “It will be the aim to build a second Colorado Springs to be within half an hour of Denver’s stores, churches, schools and theaters. A summer or winter home near enough to get to early business in Denver.”

By that time, the “railway to the peak” was nearly complete, and the company’s brochure extols the glories of the trip to the top (see sidebar on next page).

Walker planned to dedicate the Mt. Morrison Incline Rail Road on July 31<sup>st</sup> of that year, extending invitations to 800 prominent Coloradoans, including the governor. The grand opening culminated two years of work on the steep project,



Mt. Morrison Casino as it appeared around 1910. This grand hotel, built by former Governor Evans in 1874, was demolished in 1982.

remains undeveloped. Properties on Mt. Falcon, bought for his new home and his proposed Summer White House, were also listed on the county tax rolls under Colorado Resort Co. ownership by 1910.<sup>8</sup>

From 1906 to 1928, when Red Rocks Park was purchased by the City of Denver, he worked tirelessly to promote the Foothills as a destination for tourists and a haven where weary city dwellers could refresh themselves.

“To the visitor Mount Morrison offers a dry, invigorating atmosphere, the most life-giving on the continent; water direct from the snowy

but such were the wonders of Morrison’s climate that during the period from October 1907 to April 1908, there were “only three days and two hours during which the workmen on the mountain side, constructing the ‘Railway to the Peak,’ were not at work.”

Among the workers Walker had hired for this huge undertaking were representatives of many Morrison families. Manley Sawyer, Tom Matthews, and others assisted the project, and its progress and challenges were tracked weekly in the *Jefferson Co. Graphic* throughout

## The Railway to the Peak

### *From the Jefferson County Graphic*

Manley Sawyer and Tom Matthews are engaged in hauling rails to the Mt. Morrison Incline railroad this week

May 30, 1908

Over 25 men are now employed on the Mt. Morrison Incline railroad and the work is being rapidly pushed toward completion. About 1000 feet of the road grade is complete, ready for the rails and ties, and a few feet of tracks has already been laid. The roadbed for the remainder of the distance is partially graded. One cannot imagine the enormity of such an undertaking without viewing the scene of operations and it is well worth your while to take a walk over the steep incline, which is to become one of Colorado's greatest achievements in railroad engineering.

June 30, 1908

A 125 horse power boiler and an engine of the same capacity are now on the ground, ready to be placed for the Mt. Morrison Incline railroad.

July 11, 1908

The last of the machinery for the Mt. Morrison Incline Railway arrived last week.... Not until the road is completed will people understand the enormity of the undertaking, or the great importance of the new attraction to Morrison.

August 15, 1908

## Magician's wand seen in road built to top of peak

*Walker's promotional brochure, circa 1909*

A speck of white shining on the distant mountain top, a slender, almost imperceptible thread stretching straight up the mountain side—that is the first view you get of the Mount Morrison railway

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the summer of 1908 (see sidebar).

Walker also hired Morrison residents to work on his other projects, from building the dance pavilion in the Park, to hauling materials to the top of Mt. Falcon for his new home there, to stabling and caring for his horses. Single-handedly, he must have provided a boon to the entire local economy.

George "Pete" Morrison, grandson of the town's founder, reported to Georgina Brown that he and his brothers were hired to work on Walker's new "castle" home on Mt. Falcon. According to Pete's unpublished

memoirs, this would have been about 1909-10; the boys also worked on remodeling the Sacred Heart College back into a hotel about the same time.<sup>11</sup>

That many of his enterprises were doomed was not entirely Walker's fault. And some succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. His efforts to promote the foothills led to the establishment of the Denver Mountain Park system; ultimately the vision of foothills parks he pioneered guided the acquisitions of Jefferson County Open Space as well. Less successful, thankfully, were several schemes in 1912, when he suggested to the Denver City Council that they support just a few of his ideas, in exchange for which he would (a) carve one of the red rocks into a full-scale replica of the Sphinx; (b) recreate a Mesa-Verde cliff dwelling in another outcrop; and (c) build life-size models, in cement, of the giant prehistoric reptiles found in Morrison.<sup>12</sup>

Walker brought visitors from

across the country to Morrison, showed them the spectacles of Red Rocks and the Denver Mountain Parks, and tirelessly promoted the glories of the foothills of Jefferson County. His efforts won success in 1912, when he persuaded the Denver City Council to develop a system of mountain parks to take advantage of the refreshing scenery and environment of the area near Morrison and Evergreen. For this, he is rightly known as the "Father of the Mountain Parks."

We sense Walker's public relations touch also in a proposal to change the name of the town's post office in 1908. Although it seems Morrison itself never adopted the change, the post office did become known officially as "Mt. Morrison," and this is the name Walker used in his promotions. As reported by the Jefferson Co. Graphic on July 4, 1908:

*"The name of the Morrison post office has been changed to Mt. Morrison in conformity with a petition*

*requesting the change. The new name looks somewhat better in print and it is suggestive of mountains, cool shady nooks, and at the same time the old name has been retained as part of the new."*

Walker's oldest son, John Brisben Walker, Jr., became Morrison's third mayor in 1909; his father surely encouraged his interest in shaping the town's future. His tenure in office seemed relatively quiet—he presided over discussions of "fixing the water way along Mill Street" as well as the decision to purchase a "cerfew bell," and



Walker hosted Sunday concerts on the platform atop Creation Rock.

four dozen buckets for the use of the volunteer fire department. J.B. Jr. was more of an absentee mayor than may have been expected, although he was presiding, but not voting, the night the trustees approved the extension of his saloon license for the bar he managed at the Mt. Morrison Casino.<sup>13</sup>

### Dreams Suffer A Final Defeat

Walker's friendship with John Ross is documented by the personal recollections of Mary Ross Quaintance, Ross's daughter, also reported by Georgina Brown.

The two men were big players on the small field that was Morrison in 1910, and both no doubt benefited from their long and productive association. Walker's personal fortunes were always fickle, however, and the beginning of World War I in the summer of 1914 seemed to foreshadow yet another decline. The popularity of the automobile also spelled trouble for his great attraction, the

funicular on Mt. Morrison, and the threat of war affected his hopes for a boom in foothills recreation. In 1916, J.B. Walker lost his beloved wife Ethel; just two years later his "castle" home on Mt. Falcon was burned to the ground.

John Ross, with his company, the Bear Creek Development Corporation, was there to pick up some of the pieces when Walker's empire began to crumble after 1918. By 1925, Bear Creek Development Corp. had acquired more than 1,500 acres of the Red Rocks Park and Mt. Morrison area formerly held by the Colorado

Power, Water, Railway and Resort Co. and another 180 acres owned by the Colorado Resort Co. in the great heyday from 1910 to 1914.

In 1925, Walker still owned almost 700 acres central to the Park. By 1927 this property was purchased by the Park of the Red Rocks Corporation, also a John Ross enterprise. Thus it was that corporation that ended up selling the park lands to Denver through a condemnation proceeding that was finalized in August 1928.

As for Mt. Falcon, the lands belonging to the Colorado Resort Co.,

including the once-grand Mt. Morrison Casino, all went to Frank Kirchoff in foreclosures or tax sales starting in about 1925.

(Kirchoff was, according to one report, president of the American National Bank in Denver.) During the 1930s, the former Casino was well-known as the Hillcrest Inn; as such it continued to host many dignitaries and celebrities.

In 1943, Kirchoff turned it over to the Poor Sisters of

St. Francis, who operated it as St. Elizabeth's Retreat until 1952. Last known as Pine Haven, the building began a long decline in the 1960s and 1970s until it was lost to demolition in 1982. Mt. Falcon itself, and the "castle ruins" of Walker's grand home, were sold to Jefferson County Open Space in 1973 (1490 acres in all).

Rancher Alice Rooney Derby, a property owner adjacent to Red Rocks Park, is said to have turned down the opportunity to purchase lands in Red Rocks—despite the fire sale prices—on the practical grounds that "cows can't

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as you sit upon the broad veranda of the Mount Morrison hotel and look upon the lavish splashes of color with which nature has painted the scenery of one of the most beautiful realistic art settings in the world.

That is the first impression—but the wonders of the mountain pictures, unfurling with the changes and splendor of a moving panorama as you make that wonderful ascent up—up into the air, clinging involuntarily with that moving car to the mountain side, make you gasp at the daring that has placed this wonderful incline railway with its powerful and intricate machinery in the very midst of rugged and primeval nature, lording over the massive shape of Titan caves and upheavals, glinting in the red distorted sandstone in the Park of the titans below.

The new road just opened by John Brisben Walker up Mount Morrison, bringing the work of two years to a successful finish, has given to Colorado one of the wonders of the modern world and has laid in the lap of Denver or perhaps we might say, has tied to her apron strings a veritable jewel casket of exquisite scenic effects which the busy Denverite has been accustomed to travel miles and miles to distant mountain resorts to duplicate only in part.

Ten miles from Denver—an hour's ride—lies a wealth of scenery with the most commanding point of observation—the top of Mount Morrison, giving the full sweep unimpeded, unmarred on all sides.

A veritable top-of-the-world, and the feeling comes to you that some giant force of mythologic times, when the Titans whose caves in the stupendous sandstone formations gleam red below, battled with the forces of the world, must have constructed that wonderful bit of almost magic railroad...

The walk through the Park of the Titans, past those stupendous formations where the very Titans themselves might be concealed in labyrinthine caves, is the most perfect foreground for the railroad that every person blessed with even the faintest glimmer of imagination could wish.



120 stairs carved into Creation Rock led to the platform on top.

eat rocks.” She did, in 1931, turn over a few acres to Denver to provide an access road to the new parklands.

According to A.J. Tripp-Addison, Superintendent of Denver Mountain Parks, the Red Rocks Park acquisition was a “convoluted process.” In fact, it took visits to the courts to straighten out and finally complete the transfer of park lands to the City and County of Denver between 1928 and 1937. The final transaction, receipt of a land patent from the federal government for the top of Mt. Morrison

(land the City had previously purchased from the Colorado Power, Water, Railway, and Resort Co.), completed the process in 1937. In the end, the City had acquired 640 acres of Red Rocks Park for \$50,000 (plus \$4,000 for water rights), as well as 130 acres of public access for fishing and picnicking along Bear Creek all the way from Morrison to Idledale.<sup>14</sup>

Looking out at Red Rocks Park, as Morrison residents do daily, it’s hard to imagine all this wheeling and dealing,

but very easy to appreciate the foresight of John Brisben Walker, who saw a need for land to be preserved for the future and who arranged to meet that need in a spectacular way. Without his vision, and the dedication of Denver Mountain Parks and Jefferson County Open Space in carrying it out, Jefferson County would be without many of its most valued natural treasures.

*For more on Walker’s exploits in Colorado and elsewhere see Historically Jeffco 1997.*

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#### Sources:

<sup>1</sup>In **Jefferson County, Colorado: the Colorful Past of a Great Community** (1962), Sarah Robbins gives Walker this accolade. Walker was a colorful and prominent character, who has frequently been the subject of articles and stories and whose exploits in the Denver area have been thoroughly reported in local histories. Most of this background material is available elsewhere and will not be repeated here. In the 1970s, the schoolchildren at Red Rocks Elementary wrote a play based on his later years in Morrison, after the death of his second wife, and his “Summer White House” was the subject of a reading to the Monday Literary Club by Eileen Ewing Archibold on April 19, 1954, just to name two of the more obscure reports. Despite all this attention, there are still mysteries to be solved and discrepancies in Walker’s past yet to be reconciled.

<sup>2</sup>Genealogical records and other information on the Walker family were generously provided by Margaret E. (Peggy) Walker, granddaughter of Gerald Walker, the youngest son of John Brisben Walker and Emily Strother Walker. Peggy also, in 1985, compiled a 12-page unpublished history entitled “John Brisben Walker.” A few dates are still in question, however. Peggy’s account thoroughly details Walker’s involvement with automobile manufacturing and promotion.

<sup>3</sup>**Regis: on the Crest of the West** is a thorough history of the school in all of its locations during its first hundred years. Written by Harold L. Stansell, S.J., it includes an extensive chapter on the years 1884-1888 when the school was known as Sacred Heart College and was housed in the original Evergreen Hotel in Morrison. Regis Educational Corporation, 1977, p. 238

<sup>4</sup>Walker Manuscript

<sup>5</sup>Other sources report \$1.5 million. Most accounts are from newspapers of the time or in reviews since his death. In her summary of his

life, Margaret Walker does not give a figure for the sale. It seems likely, largely because of the close timing, that this money went directly into his land investments in the Morrison area.

<sup>6</sup>This quote from **The Shining Mountains** by Georgina Brown (1976, p. 211) is frequently repeated by other authors. Brown’s account is based partly on interviews with people who remembered Walker, including George D. “Pete” Morrison and Mary Ross Quaintance, and thus has an interesting personal flavor. According to Sarah Robbins, “He had acquired many acres of real estate in Jefferson County, in addition to the whole town of Morrison (listed at the time as 4,000 acres).” (p. 81) In fact the “whole town” is today still less than 1,000 acres in size, and Walker primarily purchased undeveloped park land or platted lots for speculation. The main exception was the Mt. Morrison Casino building and property.

<sup>7</sup>As reported by Stansell (**Regis: On the Crest of the West**), this transaction took place in 1909 but final payment was completed in 1915. The property (Block 15) is listed in the 1910 tax rolls under the ownership of the Colorado Resort Co.

<sup>8</sup>Jefferson Co. tax rolls were examined for the years 1905, 1906, 1910 and 1925-1930, as well as the Denver Mountain Parks regional map of 1914, which also shows ownership. In the records for 1925 through 1930, much of the property is listed under “J.B. Walker, trustee” and is annotated with the reference number of the various tax sales; the two resort companies appear to have been dissolved by that time. (Correspondence with one of his creditors indicates that Walker was in Texas 1924 to 1927, working on his new road grading promotions.) Many of the properties were evidently sold (or foreclosed) during the final years of Walker’s life, when his fortune was again exhausted. He died in New York in 1931.

<sup>9</sup>The brochure, **The Mount Morrison Railway to the Peak and The Park of the Red Rocks**,

features descriptions of the “High Line Scenic Drive to the Summit of Mount Falcon,” the “Famous Park of the Red Rocks,” the “Baths and Hotel at Mount Morrison,” and, of course, the funicular railway. It also has attached to it various particulars of the finances and “earning powers” of the Colorado Power, Water, Railway, and Resort Co. “The railway has a capacity for 4,000 passengers a day at \$1.00 each. The operating expenses are smaller in proportion to capacity than those of any other railway in the world.” These inducements seem to have been designed to attract stockholders and other investors.

<sup>10</sup>This date is given in excerpts from newspaper stories compiled about the railroad developments in the Front Range, page 354 of an undocumented copy in Museum files. The excerpt reads “It is the intention of J.B. Walker, Sr., to dedicate the opening of the Mount Morrison Incline R.R. to-day, with honors befitting the occasion.” Perhaps the event was delayed, as Brown (**Shining Mountains**, p. 212) states that the railway was “officially blessed and launched on its maiden voyage” on Saturday, August 7, 1909.

<sup>11</sup>Pete Morrison and his brothers, grandsons of the town’s founder, started their film careers with stunt roles in Red Rocks about 1908, but continued to do railroad, mining, and ranch jobs around the area for several years. From about 1916 to 1930, Pete was based in Hollywood, where he directed and starred in 204 films, most produced by his own studio, Lariat Productions. (file documents and film lists)

<sup>12</sup>Walker’s schemes for the park reported by the Denver Post December 8, 1912.

<sup>13</sup>Morrison town records, minutes of Board of Trustees meetings from April 1909 to April 1911.

<sup>14</sup>Personal communication and records on file at Denver Mountain Parks headquarters in Morrison; A.J. Tripp-Addison, Superintendent