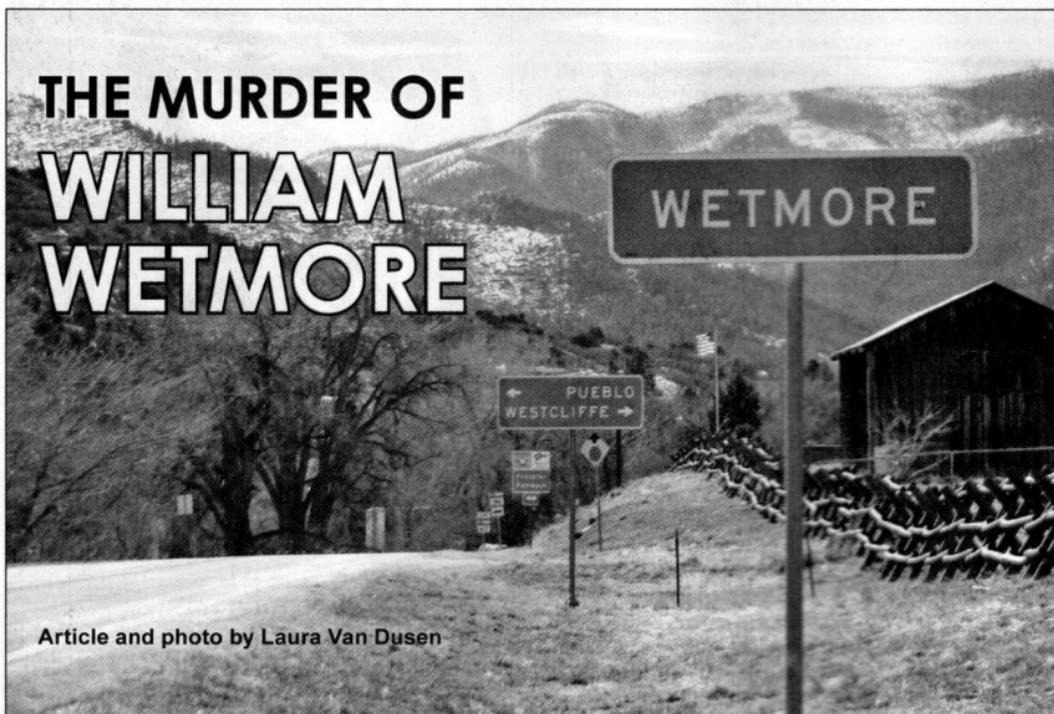


# THE MURDER OF WILLIAM WETMORE



Article and photo by Laura Van Dusen

**W**ILLIAM WETMORE, namesake for the small Colorado town of Wetmore, took a short trip to Denver and returned home in a coffin. He was beaten and robbed at a seedy downtown Denver bar on June 19, 1896, and died from his injuries ten days later.

William was 13 when he first came to Colorado in 1861 with his parents, who were following the gold rush to California Gulch, now part of Leadville. By age 20, he was living and working in Denver. Begin-

ning in 1868, he clerked for the wholesale and retail grocer, Londoner & Brother, owned by Wolfe and Julius Londoner and located at 1624 Arapahoe Street, two blocks from William Malone's saloon where he was later fatally beaten.

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In his 47 years, Wetmore was a busy man. He was deputy marshal in Lake County, carried mail between Fairplay and Pueblo, wrote for the *Pueblo Daily Chieftain*, worked for the IRS, and considered running for Custer County Sheriff in 1881. He was a farmer, real estate developer, and operated his wife's flour mill in Wetmore.

He was born August 1848 in Brooklyn, New York, and his wife Frances Stayton Wetmore was born April, 1857 into a wealthy pioneer family in Independence, Missouri.

Shortly after the couple arrived in the area, circa 1878, Frances bought 160 acres that became the town of Wetmore, situated near the Custer/Fremont county line. It is said that William offered free building lots, as long as the residents collectively agreed to name

***"It is said that William offered free building lots, as long as the residents collectively agreed to name their town Wetmore."***

their town Wetmore. They agreed, and in April 1881, the Wetmore post office was established. The town's previous names—Greenwood Park, Hardscrabble Park and Hammil—were discarded to history.

A civic-minded lady, Frances successfully petitioned Custer County in 1884, to build a highway in the Greenwood District.

The Wetmore family was living in Florence by August, 1894, where their last child, a girl, died at birth. At that time, there were seven other children in the home, ages nine to twenty. In 1896, William was elected Justice of the Peace for Florence, where he



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Opposite page: Wetmore, Colorado, established circa 1881 with a current population of about 500, was named for William and Frances Wetmore.

At right: William Wetmore from the book *History of the Arkansas Valley, Colorado*, O. L. Baskin & Co., published 1881.

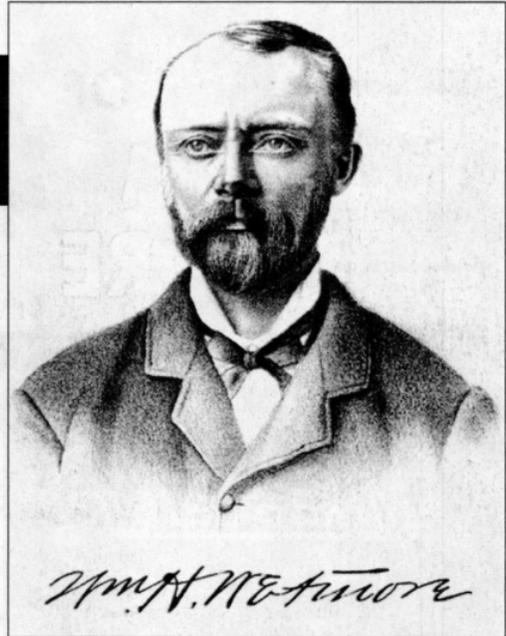
presided in court over claims with awards of less than \$300 (equal to about \$9,300 today).

In mid-June 1896, William and Frances traveled to Denver. They most likely took the train, beginning at a small frame depot in downtown Florence that was predecessor to the large 1918 brick depot that still stands today. From there, the train took them to Denver's Union Station, where streetcars were available to any downtown destination.

There was no record found of why the Wetmores went to Denver. It could have been business; William was involved in several commercial enterprises in Fremont and Custer counties. Or it could have been a pleasure trip to visit William's old stomping grounds.

Frances returned to Florence earlier the day of June 19. Before she left, she gave her husband \$15, equal to about \$465 today, that he put in his pocket.

That Friday evening of June 19, 1896, Wetmore visited the saloon owned by William Malone, who was tending bar. Malone and his "frequenters," as described in the *Rocky Mountain News*, must have noticed Wetmore's wad of cash when he paid the tab. Four men, including Malone, attacked Wetmore, striking him with a club and throwing him out the door. He was robbed and left severely beaten and unresponsive in front of the all-night bar at 1745 Curtis Street. Wetmore was still unresponsive when police arrived. He was taken to the police station first, but when he remained unconscious, he was taken to the Keeley Institute. By that time, he had only 15 cents in his pocket.



**T**HE KEELEY INSTITUTE was an ornate two-story clinic built on the corner of 18th and Curtis Streets, not far from the bar. It was part of a nationwide chain that claimed to cure alcoholism through periodic injections of bichloride of gold and other substances. Medical doctors of the day suspected the concoction contained strychnine, alcohol, apomorphine, willow bark, ammonia and atropine, and possibly gold. A guess is that either the police thought Wetmore was simply drunk, or they figured Keeley was the closest "medical" facility.

Wetmore was unconscious much of the time following the assault; he woke briefly while at Keeley, long enough to describe what had happened. The *News* reported Wetmore's story in the June 29, 1896, edi-



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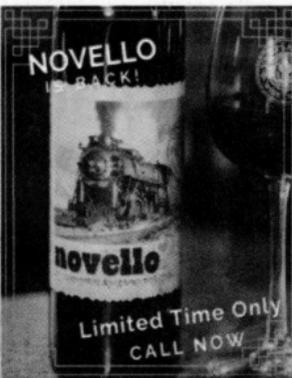
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tion: "He made this statement a week ago last night in the presence of two witnesses, informing them that he was leaving the saloon a few minutes before the assault upon him when one of the frequenters of the place snatched his money. From his story it appears that he was demanding his cash back when he was struck on the side of the head and felled to the sidewalk."

Frances, along with her son-in-law James Crouner (married to the Wetmore's daughter, Margaret), immediately returned to Denver when they heard of the assault. They were with William at the Keeley Institute when he died at 9 p.m. on June 28, 1896. His remains were taken back to Florence and buried at the Union Highland Cemetery there.

The four men were arrested, but records were not found of any court dates or time served. However, when the law didn't provide justice, karma delivered. According to the *News* story, Malone was well known in the city. His bar was "the rendezvous for doubtful characters" and was the scene of several bloody fights. In fact, "some months ago," according to the *News*, Malone was charged with another murder; that charge didn't stick.

By 1904, eight years after Wetmore's murder, Malone had relocated his bar to 1611 Welton. It was there that the murderous bartender was shot by Denver Police Detective Samuel Emrich on February 23, 1904. He died four days later in St. Joseph Hospital. Emrich was frequently in the Denver news for various questionable acts; the most notable was in 1889 when he helped the notorious Soapy Smith stuff the ballot box to get Denver mayor Wolfe Londoner elected. Londoner was forced to resign in 1891 in a scandal that nearly bankrupted the city of Denver.

The shooting of Malone was determined to be felonious. Emrich was convicted in May 1904 of second-degree murder and sentenced to 14-16 years in the Colorado State Penitentiary (now the Territorial Correctional Facility) in Cañon City. He served seven years before being released in 1911.

It seems William Wetmore couldn't catch a break even in death. His engraved headstone at the Union Highland Cemetery has incorrect birth and death dates. It appears the stone shared with his wife was placed on the grave after Frances died in 1928. By then, memories of William's details had apparently faded. ■

Colorado historian Laura Van Dusen was curious how the town of Wetmore got its name. Bit by bit, that research eventually uncovered the hidden history of Wetmore's murder.



