

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 324: JACKSON FAMILY

PIONEER DURANGO BUSINESSMAN & CIVIC LEADER

Harry Jackson, son of German immigrants Adolphus and Antonia Jackson, was born in Camden, NJ, on February 23, 1859. He had grand ideas, too big for Camden to handle, and knew at a young age there was no future for him there. He headed west taking “only the clothes on my back,” going first to Frederick, Maryland, where he became an apprentice blacksmith at Peter Seeger’s Blacksmith Shop. Working twelve hours a day on a salary of \$50 per year he somehow managed to save \$100 in three years.

In 1881 he continued his journey west, lured to the “sunny San Juans” by the booming railroad industry. Thinking he better have some protection in the wild west, he bought a small .22 caliber pistol for \$1.50. But, when he arrived in Durango and saw that everyone had a significantly larger firearm, he threw his pistol in the river and got a job with the railroad. A strong, stocky man with “forearms as hard as the iron he forged on his anvil,” Jackson’s blacksmithing and horseshoeing skills were in high demand as he moved from one wild, bustling camp to another where the crews were laying tracks from Alamosa to the new town of Durango. As the railroad tracks advanced, so did the camps which were little more than tent cities with saloons, dancing

girls, and bars, and “lots of shootings,” he recalled. Later that year he set up one of the first businesses in Durango, a blacksmith shop near where the Strater Hotel is today. He called it “*The Novelty Carriage Works and Horse Shoeing Shop.*” His newspaper ads at the time proudly announced “*Repairing of all kinds neatly and promptly done.*”



Harry Jackson

Two years later he married Louisa (Lulu) Becker, stealing her (in the words of her father) “like a *teef* in the night.” In 1884 he bought a lot at 742 Main Avenue and built a new hardware store, the imposing brick-façaded *Jackson Hardware & Implement Company*. There were other blacksmith shops in the area but Jackson believed their prices were too high. Confident that his prices and goods were better, he began selling picks, shovels, cable, chain and dynamite. As Durango grew and the need for iron work and wood work increased, Jackson had twenty one men working for him. The store flourished and Jackson added farm implements to his stock and opened a paint shop. He and Louisa lived above

the store and once his quick thinking saved his family’s life when a fire broke out. He rushed upstairs and threw his baby daughter and Louisa out of the upstairs window so that she they landed on the awning facing Main Avenue and slid down it right into the surprised arms of Mr. John F. Bell who was passing by at the time. Then he threw their dog out - and he was saved as well!

Jackson developed a reputation for building tough, long-lasting wagons designed specifically for use in the mining and timber industries and for the rough roads in the county. Each wagon he made was hand-crafted with quality materials and meticulous workmanship. What materials he could not find, he made himself. Later, his wagons were made with steel axles of his own design, capable of carrying tremendous loads over hazardous roads. It was said that his wagons set the standard of excellence for the time.

In 1903 Jackson bought the first car in Durango, a 50 horsepower Model XIV Winton. "What a beauty it was – red with solid brass trim," he said. Great numbers turned out to see him drive by in this red marvel. In 1919 he sold the hardware store and opened an automobile dealership, selling Winton automobiles and trucks. His life was inextricably entwined with the growth of Durango. During his lifetime in Durango he established several thriving businesses that served generations of Durangoans. As historian Duane Smith once observed, Harry Jackson and the skilled blacksmiths and mechanics who worked for him "provided the muscle that built this community." Some of his other accomplishments include the following: he served several terms on the Durango City Council, was on the Board of the State Bank Depository, was elected Exalted Ruler and lifetime member of BPOE Lodge #507, was a member of Durango Lodge #46 of the AF&AM, and an officer of the Red Man Lodge. He was elected President of the Durango Board of Trade, was a School District Director, City Alderman, a member and Director of the Farmer's Institute, Grand Chancellor of the Knights of Pythias and on the board of the newly created Durango Library. In addition, Jackson was on the Colorado-New Mexico State Fair Committee and actually won a \$5 prize at the fair for the best butter in 1909. He was one of the brave volunteer firefighters battling the "Great Fire" of 1889 that threatened to destroy downtown Durango. He was elected Director of the Colorado State Automobile Association and was a member of the Durango Motor Club. In newspaper ads that appeared during the time when he owned Jackson Hardware, other merchants would reference the location of their stores in proximity to his store, i.e.

"We are across the street from Jackson Hardware."

In 1917 Jackson was elected Mayor of Durango and true to his character he got to work immediately, petitioning Congress for funds to build a post office and court house. He pointed out to the politicians in Washington that "Durango is a prosperous city. It is growing and I believe it will greatly increase in the immediate future." He always believed in Durango. He served as mayor until he resigned in November 1919, but remained active in his business and in the civic life of Durango until around 1938.

Harry Jackson died on November 4, 1944, somehow fittingly at the wheel of his car as he prepared to take his customary drive around Durango. During the hours of his funeral all businesses in Durango were closed in his honor. A true pioneer in spirit, he was always willing and ready to change with the times and to develop and grow alongside his town. *According to the Durango Herald "His death closed one of the most colorful chapters in the history of the San Juan Basin."*



Jackson Hardware and Implement Company, photographed 1907 (below) and again in 1928

Courtesy "Glass Plates & Wagon Ruts" by H. Jackson Clark

