

ROOM 230: THE STRATER FAMILY

ANTHONY "ANTON" STRATER, 1830-1894. BORN IN WESTPHALIA, PRUSSIA, DIED IN DURANGO.
WIFE MARY (HONACK) STRATER, 1832-1895.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN



Anton Strater 1828—1894

Anton Strater emigrated to the United States through Boston in 1842. It was in

Boston that he met his future wife, Mary Honack. In 1856 they were married and had a son, Frank. Shortly after, the family moved to Cleveland, OH, and they were blessed with two more sons. All three sons were destined to be entrepreneurs.

Anton enjoyed a successful career as a coppersmith. He made everything from jewelry to awnings and stills. He started a new company, the Strater Plumbing Co., a natural fit for his medium of

copper. His oldest son, Frank, took after him and worked with him to build oil and gas tanks. The middle son, Fred, worked with John D. Rockefeller on the creation of the "cracking" process, in which crude oil is heated to temperatures high enough to distill it into gasoline. This is a process still used today.

The youngest son, Henry, started out as a pharmacist, though his future path was to become a hotel proprietor, as well as a pharmacist and retailer.

The three young brothers travelled to Durango by train and horseback in 1880 to bid on the plumbing contract for the new town in its infancy. They were indeed awarded this contract, and their Durango adventure

began. Within months of their arrival they established the Strater Brothers Paints and Oils Store, the very first brick building on Main Avenue. Fred was also involved in banking. There were many opportunities, and the brothers were good at seizing them. Henry began dreaming of building the largest and finest hotel in the West.

There was a huge demand as people were arriving daily because of the silver rush.

Henry convinced his father back in Cleveland to invest the family fortune in a hotel called "The Strater House." He obtained a bank loan as well. A crew of 20 men worked night and day until the grand opening on August 31st, 1888. It was truly a modern first class hotel for the time.

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- *Hotels in the 1800s served as signs of prosperity and as a symbol of a community's "class" and its arrival on the urban scene.*
- *By February, 1881, Durango was only 6 months old, and there were already 6 hotels built.*
- *The Strater House was completed at a cost of \$70,000, an extravagant figure for the time.*
- *In 1887, a farm laborer was earning \$1.38/day; a painter \$2.93/day; a bricklayer \$2.94; a carpenter \$2.24 and a plumber \$3.52/day.*
- *The 376,000 hotel bricks cost \$1,692, more than 3 years of the average annual wage at that time.*
- *The hotel started with 50 rooms, each boasting wood burning stoves and comfortable furnishings. Some of the finer rooms even had pianos!*
- *The Strater served the community as a refuge from the elements. During the winter months, many townspeople would close their homes and move their families down to the hotel.*

THE COLUMBIAN HOTEL

Recognizing his lack of experience in the hotel business, Henry hired a competent manager, Mr. Hugh L. Rice, to run the Strater House. The town was booming, and the hotel was a focal point for social gatherings. It would seem that a perfect arrangement had been set up with the construc-

tion of the hotel by Henry and the management by Mr. Rice. However, a gross misunderstanding occurred between them when the lease to Mr. Rice lacked the "exclusion" for the pharmacy Henry wished to run from the hotel. Mr. Rice offered to lease back space for the pharmacy, but at

an exorbitant rate. This infuriated Henry, so he built a second hotel, the Columbian, right next door to compete with the Strater. He converted his paint store into the new hotel by enlarging it, and doubling the width of the building and adding a 3rd level.

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The Strater Opera House was in operation in the 1890's and on in to the early 1900's. Prior to their moving out of Durango, Henry Strater's wife Carrie, entertained the guests here playing the piano. The Opera House had a reputation of acquiring some of the best entertainment available for the times.



Columbian & Strater Hotels in 1895 with the Opera House

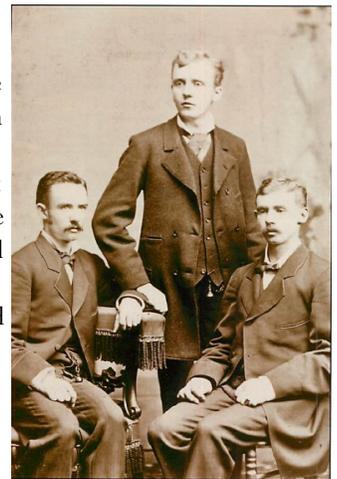
THE COLUMBIAN HOTEL, CONTINUED.

Both hotels claimed they were the finest hotel, each laying claim as the “only first class hotel in Durango“. The Columbian, now run by C.E. Applegate, advertised the “best of modern conveniences” including forced air heating. Henry ran his pharmacy from the Columbian, and was very successful.

During the year of construction of the Colombian Hotel (1893), the country was entering a time of economic upheaval due to the major devaluation of silver. The U.S. was still on the silver standard, while Europe was embracing the gold standard and was no longer backing paper currency with silver. The U.S. Government, how-

ever, tried to promote silver against gold and lost. By 1895, the 371.25 grain silver dollar only contained fifty cents in silver. By mid 1893, Durango was already reeling from the effects of the silver devaluation. On August 31, the Durango Herald announced the liquidation and sale of the entire stock of the Strater Thorp Drug Company. Henry and his family experienced the dissolution of their investments and their dreams as they lost not one, but both hotels back to the bank of Cleveland in foreclosure. A gentleman in Cleveland named John McBeth, bought both hotels and came to town to renovate the hotel and to negotiate a new lease

arrangement. He and Mr. Rice were able to negotiate a lease, and after 90 days the Strater Hotel was once again open for business. One can only imagine how distraught the Strater Family was to see their own hotel, now owned by someone else, still operated by Mr. Rice. Henry had also lost his pharmacy. This devastating financial disaster also impacted Henry’s father, Anton, who died within weeks of the hotel’s reopening. The obituaries blamed the depressing financial crises as one of the factors leading to his illness and eventual death.



*(Left to right) Frank, Henry and Fred Strater circa 1879
Courtesy of Carol Strater*



*(Left to right) Fred, Mary, Henry and Frank Strater
circa 1863*

A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS

After losing both hotels to foreclosure, and after losing his father, Henry and his wife Carrie moved to Philadelphia. Compounded with their financial troubles was the heartache associated with losing their only two children, one stillborn, and one who passed away only hours after being born. After 1898, they relocated to Cuba as Henry was chasing a business opportunity to export tobacco and sugar cane. His nephew, Frank, went with him on this adventure. Just as the timing in Durango proved disastrous because of the Silver Panic, so also their decision to go to Cuba proved to be poorly timed.

This was no fault of the Straters, it was just a matter of unforeseen events. During the 1890's, Cuba was under Spain's rule. It rebelled, seeking independence. War erupted in 1895.

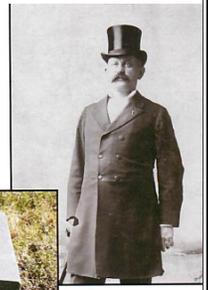
In 1898, the U.S. entered the war against Spain, and this conflict was called the Spanish-Cuban-American War.

In spite of political unrest, Henry and Frank moved forward and harvested their crop of tobacco and sugar cane. The crop was on the dock in Cuba, preparing for shipment to the States. Because of natural developments, an embargo by the US halted all shipments. Their entire crop sat, spoiling on the dock. Distraught, they dumped the entire harvest into the bay. The value was over one million dollars! Yet another fortune was lost.

Henry died at age 55. The cause of death was cirrhosis of the liver. The most common cause of this disease is over consumption of alcohol. If this was truly the case, we certainly sympathize with him. His wife Carrie moved back to Cleveland and lived out the remainder of her days with relatives. They are both buried in Cleveland. Their only legacy remains in the name of the hotel that they built with their pioneering spirit and fortitude.



Henry Strater in Cuba



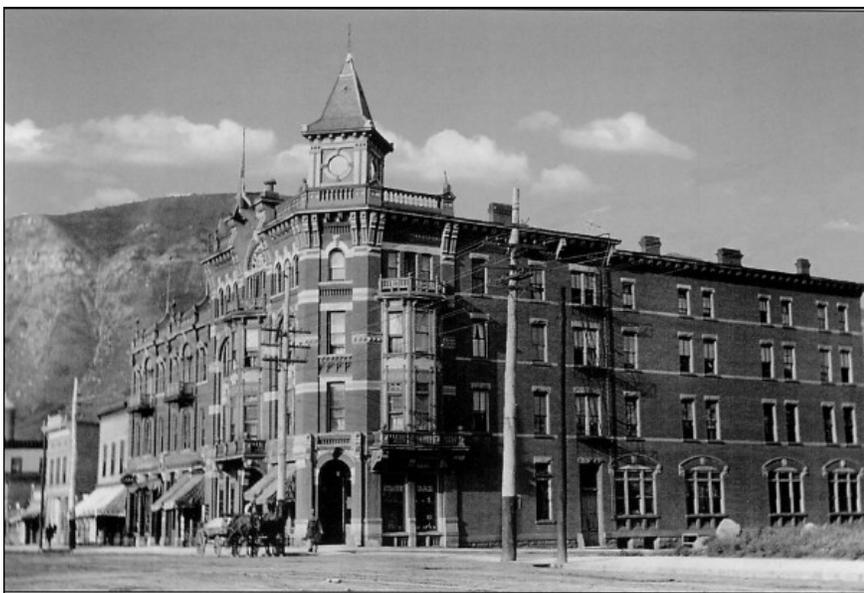
Henry Strater 1905 (Circa)



Henry Strater's gravesite located in the Calvary Catholic Cemetery, Cleveland Ohio.



Henry and Carrie Strater along with their nephew Frank Strater in Cuba



This photo has special significance because it clearly shows that the Strater Bar was still in operation when this photo was taken. The picture was taken after 1898. We know that, because the Savoy Hotel (now named the General Palmer) is seen at the left edge of the photo. The Savoy hotel was not built until 1898, ten years after the Strater's Grand Opening.

Courtesy of the Roderick E. Barker

HUNGRY FOR HISTORY?

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STORIES AND COLOR
PHOTOS.