

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 300: THE THOMAS GUTHRIE PIERCE ROOM

Thomas Guthrie Pierce, the man who built Durango.



Thomas Guthrie Pierce

Born in Cheriton, Iowa in 1869, just four years after the close of the civil war, Thomas Guthrie Pierce was a pioneer and successful entrepreneur in early Colorado. Born to a family of seven children; while still a young boy, Thomas was verbally and physically abused by his father. Thomas ran away from home at age 14 and crossed the wild frontier alone, with little but the clothes on his back and his keen wits to sustain him. He somehow managed to travel to the panhandle of Texas, where he was given shelter and employment by the famous cattleman, Charles Goodnight. The year was 1885. Thomas worked for Goodnight for two years before leaving for a better paying job on the narrow-gauge railroad that ran over Marshall Pass, between Salida and Gunnison Colorado. The Marshall Pass line, at 10,852 feet high was the very first railroad to cross over the continental divide.

Thomas worked on the Marshall Pass railroad for two years, eventually saving enough money to send back east for his entire family; all except the abusive father who was left alone in Iowa. The Pierce family agreed to meet in Crested Butte, Colorado where there was employment in the mines. After a deadly spring snowslide killed his older sister Dora and her two-year-old daughter Grace, the grief-stricken family left Crested Butte and all of its sad memories behind and moved to the fledgling boom town of Durango, Colorado. It was early summer of 1891 when they arrived.

Thomas had a desire to own his own business; so along with his brothers they started the first of two phenomenally successful restaurants in Durango. The Pierce brothers' restaurants were very profitable and soon they had enough cash to branch out into other ventures. It was during this time that Thomas met and married his first wife, Isabell Mathis. They would give birth to thirteen children over the course of their marriage.



Pierce Brothers Restaurant on Main Avenue.

Thomas bought a ranch in New Mexico, and the brothers started raising sheep. Soon they had over 2,000 head of sheep and needed additional investments to put their money to work. Thomas started and operated two local coal mines, the Sunshine and the Peerless. He was involved in precious metal mining on Red Mountain and in the La Plata mountains. He also owned a brickyard



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just outside of town where he manufactured bricks for the rapidly expanding town of Durango. Sadly, Belle Pierce died unexpectedly from an infection following surgery, April 5, 1917.



Sunshine Coal Mine

During the depression year of 1935, Thomas married his second wife, the lovely widow, Lilah Matilda Stonebarger-Powell. Thomas would father three more sons with Lilah, making him the proud father of sixteen children.



Thomas and Lilah

The coal from Thomas' mines heated numerous homes in Durango, fueled the narrow-gauge trains, and was used as coking coal for the gold and silver smelters located on the Animas River. During the depression years, Thomas gave away uncounted tons of coal to needy families who did not have the financial ability to pay him.

The bricks manufactured at his brickyard were used to construct a great many of the homes and business buildings in Durango and surrounding towns, making Thomas a central figure in the actual construction of Durango. Notable among them are the Smiley Building, The J.C. Penney Building, and the addition on the magnificent Strater Hotel.

Thomas Pierce lived a long, honorable life, always ready to lend a helping hand, giving generously of his means to those less fortunate. He was respected as one of the early founding fathers of Durango. Thomas Guthrie Pierce, age 83, passed peacefully away at his home in Durango, Colorado on January 21, 1953. His wife Lilah and all his children were gathered

around his bedside.

Tom Pierce's funeral was one of the largest ever held in Durango. Hood Mortuary and the grounds outside were overflowing with dignitaries, lawyers, and business people of all kinds, as would be expected at the funeral of such an important and beloved figure. Mingling along with the "respectable people" in the crowd was a large contingent of Mexican, Greek, and other immigrants from the slums of Durango; all the little people, the poor people, the forgotten people who Thomas had helped to survive during the bitter depression years with free loads of coal. They had come to pay their last respects to the man who had generously helped them in their time of need. It was a fitting tribute to the life of an extraordinary, kind, and generous man. Thomas would have liked that.

There is an excellent 30-minute utube presentation on the Life and Times of Thomas Guthrie Pierce, presented by the Animas Museum and the La Plata County Historical Society. Type this URL in your browser. <https://youtu.be/CsGBmymttcw>

