



Photo Barbara Gal

Lakewood Grill at Night



Rockley Music, 1946

Photo courtesy Rockley Music

Return of the Neon— The Resurgence of West Colfax

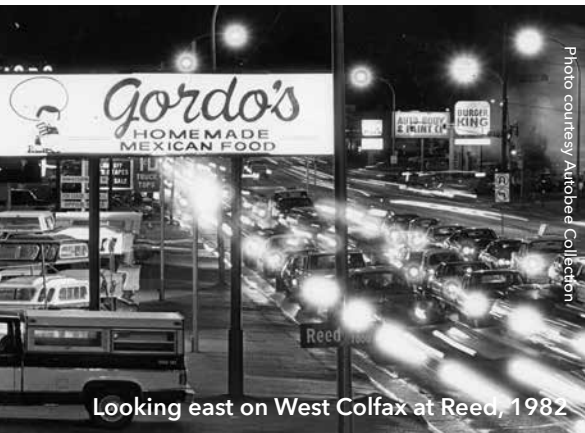
by M. Perry Williams

If you live in the metro area—whether a recent resident or an old-timer—you’ve heard of Colfax. Sure, it’s a major east-west thoroughfare, but that’s not why. Colfax Avenue has a brand—or perhaps better put—a personality . . . a neon personality.

Allegedly called the “longest, wickedest street in America,” by *Playboy Magazine’s* Hugh Hefner, Colfax earned its reputation as the nation’s longest continuous commercial thoroughfare—and the glitter and grit that comes with it. West Colfax, connected by history and geography to stretches of the avenue in Denver and Aurora, is a clearly delineated segment. And the Lakewood section of the historic avenue has a big story to tell that’s all its own.

West Colfax has been a player since it was a rutted, dirt path in the 1850s for some seeking a livelihood from the land and others in search of riches in the gold and silver mines. In 1865, this stretch of road—known then as Golden Road—was officially designated as Colfax Avenue, named after Schuyler Colfax, the sitting Speaker of the House of Representatives from Indiana, who would later serve one term as vice president under Ulysses S. Grant. Some historical accounts indicate the street-naming was his price for supporting statehood for Colorado.

Not long thereafter, newspaper magnate and railroad entrepreneur William A. H. Loveland, who masterminded the

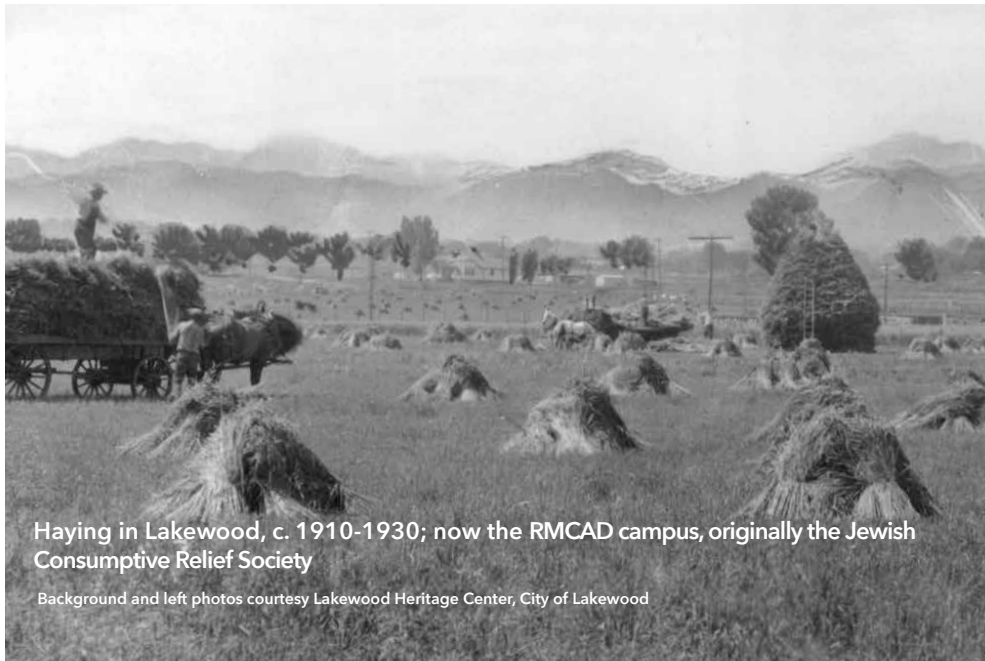


Looking east on West Colfax at Reed, 1982

Photo courtesy Autopeel Collection



Davies' Chuck Wagon Diner, 1990



Haying in Lakewood, c. 1910-1930; now the RMCAD campus, originally the Jewish Consumptive Relief Society

Background and left photos courtesy Lakewood Heritage Center, City of Lakewood

Some of the best examples of neon signs at two still-existing West Colfax motels.



Photos this page Barbara Gal

The Big Bunny Motel, once called Bugs Bunny Motel until Warner Bros. threatened a lawsuit



Denver to Golden Railway, platted a proposed real estate venture along West Colfax in 1889 and called it "Lakewood"—80 years before that name would be officially chartered as a city. In 1904, the heroic Dr. Charles Spivak and the Jewish Consumptive Relief Society (JCRS) opened a sanatorium on 100+ acres, just north of Colfax between Pierce and Kendall Streets. The sanatorium cared for tuberculosis patients free of charge—and this service would continue for more than a half century.

At this stage, the region was dominated by its agricultural roots, but its entrepreneurial spirit was well evident: hay wagons, vegetable and fruit carts and other agricultural peddlers traversed West Colfax to sell to locals as well as the Denver city dwellers. Soon West Colfax was paved in 1918 . . . and the world

took notice. As the gateway to the Rocky Mountains became more accessible—it attracted those seeking to capitalize on its popularity.

As World War I ended and the early stages of the automobile culture caught on, motor inns began to open in the 1920s. Vacationers traveled to Colorado and funneled along West Colfax to visit the "purple mountain majesties," and the landscape and economy of West Colfax began to change. What had been primarily an agrarian culture, now had to co-exist with the coming commercial development for which Colfax would become known.

War swept the world again in 1939, and by 1941 West Colfax and its now plentiful motels housed the work force for the government's ordnance plant. This plant, operated by Remington Arms on the site that is now the Federal Center, handled three shifts and employed 20,000 people at its peak.

After WWII, the economic engine of West Colfax revved up. Faster-paced expansion came to the corridor as new neighborhoods began to take shape. Many of the larger landowners took profits from homebuilders as post-war throngs scampered to the idyllic suburbs for a house with a white picket fence and the pursuit of the American Dream. The region experienced a housing boom and population more than doubled in a decade, driving even more investment in commercial development.

The 1950-60s were the highpoint of the heyday for West Colfax. The world was coming to West Colfax—not just to pass through on the way to the mountains, but to stop, shop, eat, and play in the neon avenue's glow. The new City was born in 1969, first as "Jefferson City" and then changed within months to "Lakewood." Locals and visitors enjoyed Taylor's Supper Club, Jess & Lil's Barbecue, Davie's Chuck Wagon Diner, Lakewood Grill, Dino's Italian, Gordo's and many others added their brands to the unique West Colfax experience. During this era, West Colfax was the place to be.

Then came the 70s. Rockley Music celebrated 25 years on West Colfax (in 1971), and Casa Bonita opened (1974) . . . but with the disco decade comes a big change for West Colfax—the completion of Interstate 70, which re-routes traffic patterns and triggers the beginning of a downward spiral. Much like the

character Sal Paradise in Jack Kerouac's seminal Beat Generation novel, *On the Road* (in which Colfax is mentioned numerous times), the famous avenue fell on hard times. The glitter lost its luster—the neon signs flickered and went dark. Businesses big and small—mom & pops and department stores—failed, moved, or simply closed their doors.

The 80s and 90s were gloomy times. Even though a few seeds were sown to help the struggling avenue, the grit outpaced the glitter along West Colfax. But a new century brought new hope. The City was amid a new urbanism movement as a new downtown was born at Belmar. With that process well on its way, civic attention shifted to the City's historic heart, West Colfax, with the knowledge that light rail was coming to the corridor in 2013.

With the new millennium, many of the seeds planted prior begin to sprout—and the West Colfax community rose up to meet the opportunity the new century had to offer. While many had met their demise, a number of West Colfax's iconic businesses and stalwart entrepreneurs were still in place—Casa Bonita, Chicago Restaurant, Dino's Italian, Lakewood Grill, Davie's

Chuck Wagon, Pasternack's and Rockley Music, just to name a few. Some had changed ownership, but not business name—but most were run by the same well-known families—the Rockleys, the Di Paolos, the Clarks, and the Margottes—along with the next generation who joined in the family operations—and they were ready to roll-up their sleeves for West Colfax.

Put into motion by Mayor Steve Burkholder, a two-year effort involving 200+ citizens resulted in a plan to bring the avenue back. Began in late 2003, this blue-ribbon committee was chaired by Councilman Bob Murphy, a local businessman and West Colfax corridor resident, who would go on to be Lakewood's next mayor. He was joined by prominent West Colfax entrepreneurs and community leaders, including Nina Rockley, Doug Stiverson, Tom Murray, Joe Margotte, Greg Stevinson, and Bill Marino, then the current chair of the Lakewood Planning Commission. The goal of the committee was straightforward—build a framework not only to resuscitate the avenue, but allow it to thrive—or in the inimitable words of Nina Rockley: "Make it sparkle again!" Around this same time, a large part of the historic JCRS sanatorium was purchased by Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design (RMCAD), bringing



Photos courtesy RMCAD

RMCAD campus, originally the Jewish Consumptive Relief Society



Pop-up arts festival during the opening of the W Line

new creative energy to the corridor—a harbinger of good things to come.

The freshly minted *West Colfax Avenue Action Plan*, published in 2006, took a few years to gain traction. But in 2009, now Mayor Bob Murphy tapped Marino to build on the recommendations in the plan and devise a strategy to establish a business improvement district in the corridor. A two-year campaign began, supported by the West Colfax Community Association, its president Bunny Malm and many long-time West Colfax advocates. The new business improvement district (BID) was approved in a landslide special election in 2011, creating a spark that would contribute to the coming renaissance and provide a platform for a soon-to-be-born arts district.

Simultaneously, City planning staff parlayed an EPA grant into a community effort to rally behind the formation of an arts district (also an objective in the Action Plan) and passed the torch over to the newly formed business improvement district to nurture with an eager and able “champions group,” a steering committee of locals charged with moving the fledgling arts district forward. Regaled with a name and bold brand, “40 West Arts” (courtesy of design students at RMCAD—a name that paid tribute to Colfax Avenue as part of U.S. 40), the new arts district was ready to become part of West Colfax glitterati.

The fuse was now lit, and the City and the West Colfax community forged a productive partnership that

would fan the flames of change—and help usher in a burst of new economic activity at a level not seen in decades. More new businesses opened (and stayed open) in the subsequent two years than had done so in the previous decade—numerous new eateries, a coffee roaster, and the avenue’s first Gold LEED® certified building, designed and built by Weston Solutions, as part of its development of 4+ acres on the corner of Garrison and West Colfax.

And amid all this, the long-awaited opening of light rail arrived April 25, 2013, triggering young families and millennials to notice the area—because of light rail, because of the arts district, because it was still affordable . . . and because it was as an active and engaged community.

Mayor Murphy added to the momentum with comments following the opening of RTD’s W Line: “With new, more flexible zoning, the catalytic impact of light rail, fresh creative energy from 40 West Arts and RMCAD, and the quirky history that makes Colfax cool, West Colfax is poised to be the next big thing in metro area real estate.”

Clearly, some agreed with the Mayor, as 2014 marked a year filled with announcements and milestones: As 2014 drew to a close, the local BID estimated more than \$220 million of public and private investment in various stages in the corridor—the 1st Bank’s headquarters expansion and TerumoBCT’s new headquarters building, together totaling \$100M+, are two examples of projects bringing new energy and new jobs to the corridor. And The Village at Oak Street project of 255 multi-family residences is just one of a number of developments bringing more than 1500 new residential units, either in the ground or in the planning stages, to the West corridor. Three long-time West Colfax businesses deepened their investment: Colorado Frame & Art built a striking new building across from its old location, Don Jelniker restored the “Hidden Victorian” connected to his Grow Store, and Veldkamp’s completed an expansion for its florist, garden and gift center. Add to this the opening of Metro West Housing Solution’s awarding-winning Lamar Station Crossing multi-family community, the first TOD project on the W Line, the millions of dollars in public improvements along Wadsworth, Lamar, West Colfax, and Pierce—either complete, in progress, or in planning—and 40 West Arts earning its designation as a state certified

creative district, one of only 12 in Colorado—and the corridor was clearly on the move.

Broad Street Realty also entered the market in 2014 with a high-impact and high-profile transaction. The Bethesda-based real estate investment and development firm purchased the old JCRS Shopping Center for more than \$8M in May of 2014 and immediately announced new plans for the retail center, which included a new name—Lamar Station Plaza, a direct reference to Lamar Station on RTD's new W Line, located just two blocks south of the plaza. "We have a clear vision for Lamar Station Plaza," said Broad Street CEO Michael Jacoby. "We want to create something unique—something that fits the character of the corridor and becomes an attractive destination where people can shop and socialize." Following this announcement, current tenant Casa Bonita, the iconic Mexican-themed restaurant and entertainment destination; and new tenant Planet Fitness, the popular, community-focused health club franchise signed long-term leases.

"I believe in a few years, we'll all look back and say '2014 was the tipping point for West Colfax,'" said Marino, who heads up the local BID and chairs the 40 West Arts board. "Not everything is coming out of the ground just yet, but if you look closely there's a lot happening in the corridor and plenty more ready to pop!"

Artists and creative enterprises are often the vanguard that revitalizes an area, so it is no surprise they are part of the West Colfax rally. Faye Crowe, artist, sculpture, and architect, moved her office and studio into the district: "I wanted to get in early and be a part of the transformation!" Rick Yaconis relocated The EDGE Theater and has seen his audience numbers nearly double. Partners Ron Abo and Kevin Yoshida of the Abo Group, an urban

design and sustainable architecture firm, bought the historic Lakewood Lanes building and moved their business to West Colfax: "The evolution of the corridor is happening before our eyes. We not only want to be part of it—we want to help shape it," added Yoshida, now a member of the local BID board of directors and co-chair of the new West Colfax Vision Group. Wendy Scheck of Liquid Metal Coatings, located in the corridor for almost 15 years, sums it up: "It feels like we creatives now have a home in 40 West Arts District." To further catalyze this momentum and help accommodate the influx of creatives, the City and a number of community partners are in the final stages of discussions with Artspace—an award-winning national developer of affordable live/work space for artists—to bring a new artist enclave to the corridor.

So what's next for West Colfax? The consensus is more—more creative businesses, more creative placemaking, more investment, more residents, and more visitors. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? "Whether you look at this as history repeating itself or a natural real estate evolution," added Marino, the Mayor is spot on—West Colfax is back! With such a deep commitment from the City and the momentum created by the local community, West Colfax is in the beginning stages of a transformation. Just as investment and development transformed West Colfax in the 1920s and again in the 1950s—it is in the process of being transformed again."

Jack Kerouac's Beat Generation cronies would not be surprised about the resurgence along West Colfax. A poet's eye can capture the spectacle—the neon and neighborhoods, the motor inns and motels, the diners and dance halls, the people, places, and history—all part of the ever-changing character of Main Street Colorado and a community rising up to celebrate the glory of the past and the glitter still to come.



Photo Steven Haire

The Lakewood-Wadsworth Light Rail Station represents a huge economic and artistic investment by the City