

1874: First Settlers in Gunnison

Historical Vignette by Duane Vandenburg

One of the first groups of settlers ever to arrive in the Gunnison country came one year after Sylvester Richardson initial band of 1874. In late June of the following year, 1875, Richardson led another group in. This party had gathered in Colorado City in the spring of that year and then made their way with Richardson across the divide and into the new county of Gunnison.

They included J.C. McGriff of Massachusetts, David Smoot of North Carolina, Robert Montgomery of Indiana, Jim Ballard of Denver, and J.M. Ward of Denver. Ward would later recall coming to the Gunnison country, he was only eight years old. Richardson's ox team left Denver in late May and picked up the group in Colorado City.

The route taken was over Ute Pass, South Park, the Arkansas River, [00:01:00] over Poncha Pass, through part of the San Luis Valley via Sawatch, then Cochetope Pass with a two-day stop at the Los Pinos Indian Agency. After that rest, the Richardson group proceeded through Cochetope Canyon and then followed Tomichi Creek into the Gunnison settlement.

J.M. Ward recalled, "*There were then four or five cabins erected in the timber near the river opposite and below the Palisades, with about 25 people, half of whom were children.*" He recalled vegetable raising had been tried and pronounced a failure on account of sharp frosts. The prospective farmers of the Gunnison Valley were finding out about 70-day growing seasons.

J.C. McGriff located a ranch along the Tomichi, and there were already two ranchers who had come from Missouri ahead of him. One was a German and another originally from New England. Ute Indians passing from the Los Pinos Indian Agency into the Gunnison country were a menace. One known as Charlie Johnson, one of the chiefs.

On July the 2nd, 1875, the ranchers left the Gunnison country because Chief Ouray said he could no longer guarantee their safety. By the mid-1880s, the early settlers of the Gunnison country were thinking of bringing in cattle, and thoughts of

digging irrigation danced in their heads. It was tough in those days: indians all around, 70-day growing season eliminated a lot of farming, high elevation, heavy snow, isolation, and numbing cold. But the early settlers of the Gunnison country had staying power: Within five years, there'd be a mining boom. Cattle would sell for high prices to the mining camps, and railroads and smelters were headed in.

A new day was dawning.

Additional Information and links are below. These are compiled from various sources, references given when available

The history of settlement in Gunnison County flows from thousands of years of Ute stewardship to 19th-century surveying expeditions, culminating in a silver-era agricultural and mining colony.

The First Inhabitants: The Ute People (*Nuuchiu*)

Long before European explorers or American settlers arrived, Paleo-Indian and Archaic peoples hunted and traveled through the Gunnison Basin. By the 16th century, the region was the seasonal home of the **Ute people**.

Two primary Ute bands utilized the lands that now make up Gunnison County:

- **Tabeguache (Uncompahgre) Utes:** Occupied most of the primary Gunnison Valley, Cochetopa Pass, and surrounding mountain ranges. Led in the late 19th

century by Chief Ouray, they maintained a deep spiritual and practical connection to the valley.

- **Parianuche ("Elk People"):** Ranged primarily north of the Gunnison River into the high country.

The Utes were skilled horsemen and nomadic hunter-gatherers. They spent summers following game (elk, deer, bighorn sheep) into high alpine basins like Taylor Park and the Elk Mountains, gathering roots and berries. In winter, they retreated to lower-altitude sheltered valleys.

Displacement: Encroachment began in earnest with gold and silver discoveries. The **Brunot Agreement of 1873** stripped the Utes of 3.7 million acres in the San Juan and Gunnison regions. Following the 1879 Meeker Incident in northwestern Colorado, federal authorities forcibly removed the Tabeguache Utes from the Gunnison Valley to the Uintah-Ouray Reservation in Utah, opening the valley entirely to white settlement.

Explorers and Namesakes (1760s–1860s)

- **Early European Trappers:** Spanish explorers passed near the region in the 18th century, followed by French and American fur trappers who worked the Gunnison and Taylor rivers for beaver pelts in the 1820s and 1830s.
- **Captain John Williams Gunnison (1853):** In 1853, Captain Gunnison led a U.S. Army Topographical Engineers expedition through Cochetopa Pass to survey a potential central route for the transcontinental railroad. While he deemed the rugged Black Canyon impassable for rail, the valley, river, and eventual county were named in his honor after he was killed in Utah later that year.
- **Early Prospectors (1860s):** Gold discoveries along Washington Gulch and the Taylor River in the 1860s brought small, scattered groups of miners, though persistent conflict and winter weather kept permanent towns from taking root right away.

The First Permanent Settlers: Sylvester Richardson and the "Gunnison Colony"

The true transition to permanent Euro-American settlement was driven by **Sylvester Richardson**—a geologist, teacher, and explorer widely regarded as the founder of Gunnison.

1. **The 1873 Reconnaissance:** Richardson first entered the region with the Parsons prospecting expedition in 1873. While most miners left when the expedition dissolved, Richardson stayed behind, enchanted by the agricultural and mineral potential of the wide, fertile valley.

2. **The Gunnison Colony (1874):** Returning to Denver, Richardson recruited investors to form the "Gunnison Colony" stock company. In April 1874, he led a party of settlers over snowy Cochetopa Pass. After careful surveying to ensure they were east of the official reservation line, they established a camp near the confluence of Ohio Creek and the Gunnison River (just north of the current townsite, near the Van Tuyl Ranch area).
3. **Laying the Foundations:** The colonists built log cabins, established a sawmill along Mill Creek, built a bridge across the Gunnison River, and planted crops. Although harsh winters and isolated conditions forced many original colonists to leave, Richardson remained.

The Boom Era (1879–1880s)

By 1877–1879, major silver and coal strikes in the surrounding mountains (at Crested Butte, Pitkin, Tincup, and Irwin) triggered a rush into the region.

- **County Organization (1876):** Gunnison County was officially carved out of Lake County when Colorado gained statehood in 1876.
- **Incorporation (1880):** The town of Gunnison was formally incorporated in 1880, serving as the central supply, banking, and agricultural hub for the high-mountain mining camps.
- **Ranching Takeover:** As mining stabilized, settlers recognized that the high valley's abundant water and natural grass made it ideal for cattle, laying the foundation for the region's enduring ranching legacy.

<https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/gunnison-county>



Wildflowers by Mt Crested Butte

From middle of July to the first week of August is the best time to see wildflowers around Crested Butte - Wildflower Capital of Colorado. This photo was taken on Deer Creek Trail between Mt. Crested Butte and Gothic.

Gunnison County, named for the American explorer [John W. Gunnison](#), is a large, mountainous county in west-central Colorado. A sparsely populated county of 3,260 square miles, it includes some 1.5 million acres of national forest and wilderness lands, including the **Gunnison National Forest**, Collegiate Peaks Wilderness, and West Elk Wilderness. Lying west of the [Continental Divide](#), Gunnison County is bordered to the north by [Pitkin](#) and [Lake Counties](#), to the north and east by [Chaffee County](#), to the south by [Saguache](#) and [Hinsdale](#) Counties, and to the west by [Ouray](#), [Montrose](#), and [Delta](#) Counties.

About a third of the county's 15,324 residents live in the county seat of **Gunnison**, situated along the [Gunnison River](#) in the large valley of the same name. The western end of the valley is home to the Curecanti National Recreation Area and Blue Mesa Reservoir. These and other recreation areas bring thousands of tourists to the county each year. In addition, the town of [Crested Butte](#), in the mountains north of Gunnison, is a popular skiing and winter resort destination. Formerly a coal mining town, Crested Butte reflects the broader economic shift in Gunnison County's history from ranching and mining to tourism.

Native Americans

The Gunnison County area has a long history of human settlement, beginning with [Paleo-Indian](#) and [Archaic](#) period peoples in the western part of the county and continuing with the [Ute](#) people from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Two distinct bands of Utes occupied present-day Gunnison County: to the north of the Gunnison River ranged the Parianuches, or “elk people,” while the Tabeguaches (later called the Uncompahgres) frequented most of the Gunnison Valley and the surrounding mountains. The Utes hunted [elk](#), deer, and other mountain game. They also gathered a wide assortment of roots and wild berries, including the versatile yucca root. In the summer they followed large game into the Gunnison Valley and other parts of the high country, and in the winter they camped in places like **Glenwood Springs**.

Gunnison Expedition

Europeans did not reach the Gunnison County area until the early 1800s, when French trappers arrived. [William Gilpin](#), who would later become Colorado’s first [territorial](#) governor, passed through the region on his way to Oregon in 1845. In 1853 Captain John W. Gunnison, a former explorer of the Salt Lake area, was asked to find a rail route to the Pacific through the Rocky Mountains. In late summer, after a brutal journey over the [Front Range](#), he arrived in the valley that would bear his name. Gunnison got as far as the Sevier River in western Utah, where he and all but four of his men were killed in an attack by a group of Paiute people.

Mining and County Formation

In 1861 [gold](#) was found along the Taylor River, but Ute attacks halted attempts to create mines during the 1860s. The [Treaty of 1868](#) created the Consolidated Ute Reservation, which pushed the Utes to the western portion of what would become Gunnison County. Prospectors also found gold in other gulches around the northern part of the county as early as 1867, but mining did not seriously begin until 1872, when silver ore was found in the **Elk Mountains**.

After becoming enamored with the area in an 1873 expedition, Sylvester Richardson organized the first white settler colony in the Gunnison Valley in 1874. Members of Richardson’s party, which numbered fewer than twenty, found well-watered farmland along the river, and they also found coal in one of its tributaries, Ohio Creek. But the colony failed to attract more settlers until 1879, when other gold and silver discoveries in the mountains brought more people to the region. Richardson, a geologist, was also the first to note the marble deposits of the Crystal River valley. Two towns, Clarence and Marble, were established there in the early 1880s, but significant activity would not occur in the valley until the turn of the century.

Meanwhile, Colorado gained **statehood** in 1876, and the next year Gunnison County was established as a 12,000-square-mile partition stretching from the foot of the Continental Divide in the east to the Utah border in the west. Between 1881 and 1883, the county ceded land for the creation of Pitkin, Montrose, Delta, and [Mesa](#) Counties, obtaining its current size and shape.

By the mid-1870s, the mountains of Gunnison County were dotted with many small mining camps. Crested Butte began as a supply camp at this time and was incorporated in 1880. Coal mined in the Crested Butte area provided the energy that helped gold and silver miners blast away rock to access veins and separate the precious metals from stubborn ore. In addition, increased demand for marble and the arrival of railroads in the Crystal River valley during the late nineteenth century led to a surge in [marble quarrying](#) around the town of Marble. In 1905 Channing F. Meek, the former president of the Colorado Coal & Iron company, came to Marble and formed the Colorado Yule Marble Company. Demand for the decorative white stone surged over the next two decades, and marble from the Crystal River valley was used to build such national landmarks as the Lincoln Memorial and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

As it did elsewhere, silver mining in Gunnison County petered out by 1893 with the exhaustion of accessible ore and plummeting prices. Gold mining continued, peaking between 1908 and 1913. With the exhaustion of precious metals, Gunnison County miners shifted to coal production. By 1882 mines built by the [Colorado Fuel & Iron Company](#) made the Crested Butte area the most productive coal site in the Colorado Rockies. But soon tragedy struck: in 1884 the Jokerville Mine exploded, killing fifty-nine workers. The company rode out rumors of retaliation by other miners and soon after opened Big Mine, which became one of the most productive coal mines in the state and remained in operation until 1952.

In 1961 the Crested Butte ski resort was established on Mt. Crested Butte, contributing to Gunnison County's growing tourism economy and putting the ex-mining town on the path to becoming a premier winter sports destination.

Farming and Ranching

While Gunnison County's mountain mines hummed during the 1880s, a number of farms and ranches were established in the valley below. Following the [Meeker Incident](#) of 1879, most of the remaining Tabeguache Utes were removed to the Uintah-Ouray Reservation in Utah, and the Gunnison Valley was opened to white agriculture. Hay and potatoes became staple crops, and cattle and sheep ranching also became profitable. By 1900 these industries had eclipsed mining as the most important activities in the county. That same year, the economic transition was marked by the

inaugural celebration of Cattlemen's Days. It has become an annual event that celebrates the county's agricultural history and hosts one of the most popular rodeos in the nation.

Western State Colorado University

Accompanying Gunnison's agricultural boom was the opening of the State Normal School in 1911. The first college on the [Western Slope](#), it was founded as a preparatory school for teachers. In 1923, due to its expanding and highly respected liberal arts programs, the name was changed to Western State College of Colorado. New buildings, including a library and the president's house, were added during the 1930s. After **World War II**, enrollment steadily increased, peaking at around 3,000 in 1970. In 2012, with student body of 2,300, the college was renamed Western State Colorado University.

Natural Areas

Gunnison National Forest was established in the spring of 1905. Forest Rangers were initially met with suspicion and hostility from area ranchers anxious about the potential loss of grazing land. But these fears proved unfounded; as it did elsewhere, the [Forest Service](#) allowed livestock to range on forest land, and at the same time made painstaking efforts to ensure that grazing did not compromise the health of the forest.

In 1964 the Wilderness Act permitted the establishment of a number of wilderness areas in Gunnison County, including West Elk Wilderness in 1964 and the Collegiate Peaks and Raggeds Wildernesses in 1980.

Blue Mesa Dam and Reservoir

Blue Mesa Dam, a 390-foot earthen barricade on the Gunnison River a few miles before it enters the [Black Canyon](#), was designed in the mid-twentieth century as part of the **Colorado River Storage Project**. The project's ultimate goal was to build an interstate system of strategically placed dams and reservoirs that would store and regulate the flow of the [Colorado River](#). The part of the project on the Gunnison River included not only Blue Mesa Dam but also the Morrow Point Dam and power plant, and was referred to as the [Wayne Aspinall](#) Unit. With the [Bureau of Reclamation](#) overseeing construction, work on the Blue Mesa Dam began in 1961 and ended in 1971.

In addition to helping the Bureau of Reclamation achieve its goal of regulating the Colorado River, Blue Mesa Dam contributed to Gunnison County's rapidly growing tourism industry. Blue Mesa Reservoir, one of three reservoirs at the center of the

Curecanti National Recreation Area, soon became a hotspot for boating, fishing, camping, and hiking.

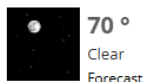
Today

As indicated by the popularity of its reservoirs, national forests, and the Crested Butte Ski Resort, the Gunnison County economy today relies heavily on tourism. Twenty-five percent of employment in the county is in the leisure and hospitality sector. The tourism industry as a whole creates jobs for 1,870 people, more than the seven biggest employers in the county combined. However, most of these jobs pay an average of only \$17,000, leading a significant number of residents to rate county employment opportunities as “fair” or “poor” in the county’s 2013 Biennial Survey.

Ranching remains an important and attractive aspect of Gunnison County’s identity, as well as an economic driver. Gunnison ranches produce an estimated 3 million pounds of beef each year valued at \$13 million, and many tourists have reported that the sprawling ranches make the county landscape more attractive, especially in winter. Organizations such as the Gunnison Ranchland Conservation Legacy, founded in 1996, work to keep ranching profitable and environmentally sustainable.

Along with employment opportunities, Gunnison County also faces challenges related to school funding, a higher-than-average poverty rate, and a housing shortage. However, the same rural charm and scenic beauty that attracts so many tourists appears to have also won the hearts of county residents, as they continue to report satisfaction with their quality of life and to recommend Gunnison County as a place to live.

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A tale of a first Gunnison Fourth

Posted Wednesday, July 2, 2025 5:23 pm

David Primus | Special to the Times



(Author's note: The following is based on documented facts; I have added details as I imagined them.)

In the spring of 1873, Sylvester Richardson joined the Parsons Expedition in Denver, serving as geologist. They traveled to the Gunnison Valley to prospect for mineral riches near today's Crested Butte and Taylor Park. At the end of the summer, all but Sylvester went back to Denver. He had fallen in love with the Gunnison Country and stayed throughout the fall to explore the area. Back in Denver during the winter, he talked of the beautiful Gunnison Valley and how it would be an ideal place to start the Gunnison Colony, without the evils of liquor, gambling and prostitution.

May 12, 1874 was a brisk, blue-sky day as Sylvester and his party of colonists viewed the Gunnison Valley from today's college hill. They had just arrived after an arduous trip, getting stuck in a spring snowstorm near Colorado Springs, then crossing the Continental Divide over Cochetopa Pass. Looking at the scene before them they saw a broad expanse of flat land, surrounded by mountains. Lush grasses and wild hay covered the valley floor. To the left, they saw the meandering Tomichi Creek heading toward its confluence with the Gunnison River. Nearby was the Los Pinos Agency's cattle ranch, managed by Alonzo Hartman. Both rivers were lined with willows and cottonwoods, creating welcoming green, shady areas.

Walking down the hill, they came to a crossroads. The trail continued west, but the most heavily traveled trail headed north, toward the high mountains. Richardson had already chosen a location for his colony — an important stop for travelers, a well-known ford of the Gunnison River at today's Hwy. 135 bridge. It would be a busy summer for the colonists — erecting tents, staking homestead claims, planting potatoes and alfalfa, and building a bridge over the river.

By the spring of 1875, the colony had been moved south to the site of present-day Gunnison. As Independence Day approached, Richardson planned a big celebration. It was to be held at "Old Colony Park," the first location of the colony. Three miles north of town, the colonists loved the park near the ford of the beautiful cottonwood-lined river. In preparation for the celebration, a large bonfire ring was built, the brush cleared, and makeshift tables constructed.

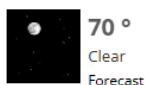
On the morning of the Fourth of July, almost all the settlers of the valley, some coming nearly twelve miles, walked or rode horses to the park. They brought wonderful dishes to share, all made from local products. A fatted calf had been roasting in a pit overnight. Sylvester Richardson, known as "The Professor," climbed to the top of a stump and gave the first speech. He talked on the importance of their new settlement in the west, and how it would succeed for many reasons.

"Its most characteristic feature is the entire absence of intoxicating liquors," he said. "Instead, the Gunnison River afforded a cool and refreshing beverage which never had, nor ever can have, a superior." He told of "the brave men who ninety-nine years prior had signed the Declaration of Independence and thereby forfeited their lives and estates. And today it required brave men, and women, too, to carve out homes in such an isolated wilderness."

He went on to talk about the benefits of the Gunnison Country — plentiful, high-quality coal, silver and gold in all directions, and easily irrigated fields for growing hay and crops. He and Lon (Alonzo Hartman) had big plans to layout a town with streets wide enough to turn around a six-horse team and wagon. Each street would have a small ditch to allow residents to easily grow trees and lawns, just like they remembered back east.

Sylvester raised a large American flag, and invited everyone to eat lunch and enjoy themselves. The afternoon was filled with horseshoes, fishing and horse racing. Others relaxed on picnic blankets, enjoying the view of the mountains and the flag waving in the slight breeze. As evening came on, a large bonfire was lit. Sylvester surprised everyone by tossing small pieces of strontium and barium into the fire, resulting in vibrant colors of red and green.

(David Primus is a Gunnison-based historian and writer.)



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The Gunnison Colony

Posted Thursday, June 24, 2021 12:00 am

Sylvester Richardson, often regarded as the founder of Gunnison, first came to the Gunnison Country in 1873. He was a member of the Parsons Expedition exploring for gold in the Elk Mountains near present-day Crested Butte. The expedition soon dissolved due to the panic of 1873 and the miners left. But Sylvester stayed – he had fallen in love with the area and spent the remainder of the year exploring.

Sylvester Richardson, often regarded as the founder of Gunnison, first came to the Gunnison Country in 1873. He was a member of the Parsons Expedition exploring for gold in the Elk Mountains near present-day Crested Butte. The expedition soon dissolved due to the panic of 1873 and the miners left. But Sylvester stayed – he had fallen in love with the area and spent the remainder of the year exploring.

In early 1874 he decided to colonize the Gunnison Valley and began talking it up in Denver, calling it “The Hub of the Wheel”. He convinced thirty people to invest \$100 each (\$2,000 today) in the “Gunnison Colony” stock company. In April the investors left Denver during a big snowstorm and slowly made their way via Colorado Springs over Ute Pass to South Park, over Poncha Pass to Saguache, over Cochetopa Pass to the Los Pinos Indian Agency, then to the Gunnison Valley. While at the Agency they were warned that the Gunnison Valley might be west of the 107th degree of longitude, which still belonged to the Utes. Richardson was fairly sure it was east of the 107th and had brought surveying equipment to prove it. Starting at a known point near the Indian Agency they began surveying, arriving at the confluence of Tomichi and Quartz creeks (today’s Parlin). From there, they carefully measured the distance to the site of the new colony – thirteen miles. Based on the survey, they confirmed that the proposed site was indeed east of the 107th and available to colonize.

They began working immediately to lay out the colony, building log houses, and constructing a bridge across the Gunnison River. Richardson traveled up the Ohio Creek Valley to explore coal deposits near Carbon Peak. Others traveled north to placer mines in Washington Gulch. In the fall, a group went to Trinidad to purchase a sawmill. They hauled it back over La Veta and Cochetopa passes on wagons pulled by fourteen yoke of oxen. Arriving in the Gunnison Valley, they searched for the best spot to locate the mill and decided to put it on a branch of Ohio Creek, now known as Mill Creek.

It wasn't easy starting a new colony. Floods the next spring took out their new bridge. Mining was booming in the San Juans and many deserted to find their fortunes there. With no market for milled wood, the sawmill was sold and moved to Lake City. By spring of 1877, a new town company was formed. A year later, a third town company was formed and laid out with wide streets and irrigation – this became the present town of Gunnison.

All of this made me wonder – where was the original Gunnison Colony? Based on a series of articles written by Sylvester Richardson in *The Gunnison Review* in 1875 and a map published by the Hayden Survey in 1877 (above), it is likely the original colony was about two miles north of town on the Van Tuyl Ranch. In the map above, note only one building is shown at the present location of Gunnison. The other buildings are just south of the Gunnison River as it heads west toward the Palisades. The bridge and the colony was probably about 3/4 of a mile west of the current Hwy 135 bridge at Garlic Mike's. The next time you walk the north end of the Van Tuyl trail, realize you are probably walking through the site of the original Gunnison Colony.

The Connection

<https://www.castlepinesconnection.com/sylvester-richardsons-hard-knock-life/>

Sylvester Richardson's hard-knock life



Article and photo by Joe Gschwendtner



Because of the universally recognized beauty of Elizabeth Richardson, the home, the hostel and the Bennet Springs Post Office from 1862-1865, came to be known far and wide as Pretty Woman Ranch.

Sylvester Richardson was a driven man. Raised in New York's Catskill Mountains, he worked in the family vineyard near the Hudson River. No vintner he, and in his 30s dreaming bigger dreams, Richardson migrated west, first to Wisconsin. There he attempted to capitalize on his horticultural experience by starting a nursery. Unfortunately, lacking critical skills and the victim of bad weather, he was unsuccessful.

What with the 1859 excitement in Denver and surrounds, he joined the crowd, but as a grocer in Denver. Good move; the miner's needed supplies. A bit short on credit savvy, he was talked into opening an account for a local outfitter to the mining industry. This was poor judgement, as the debtors were hucksters using his provisions to finance their escape from their own creditors.

In 1861, now married to the former Elizabeth Bowers of Wisconsin, the Richardsons moved 25 miles south, settling on the west side of the first Territorial Road (Daniels Park Road opposite the 16th hole of The Ridge golf course). Their first home was a dugout cabin of 8×10 feet. Recognizing the possibilities, and with the birth of their child named "Denver," the couple built a larger facility that would serve as a home, hostel, and the Bennet Springs Post Office from 1862-1865. Because of the universally recognized beauty of Elizabeth, the home came to be known far and wide as Pretty Woman Ranch. Lodging and quartering horses and feeding and housing visitors was sufficiently profitable to where the Richardsons set aside \$2,000, a handsome sum in those years.

Having profited from the hospitality business, Sylvester sought more and acquired a herd of blood cattle. His tenure as cattleman turned out to be brief. Within months of buying the animals, it was determined by local authorities that the cattle he bought were rustled when the rightful owner produced the proper documents of ownership. At this juncture in life,

some men would have called it quits, but again Sylvester rolled the dice by acquiring a stock of sheep which had been driven west from the Missouri River. Mountain mutton was in short supply, the owner had the proper paperwork and Sylvester launched yet another endeavor.

In 1864, the Territorial Road was re-routed further west along Plum Creek. The Ranch, while still widely known, had lost its visibility and business rapidly fell off. Apparently the sheepish bet he made to supplement his income provided meager returns. So, just as Lady Luck left him again, so did his wife Elizabeth, and they were divorced in 1868. She returned to Wisconsin with Denver in tow and remarried.

Sylvester was not done however. Moving west once more, he became the driving force of an expedition into the Gunnison River Valley, and eventually settled a place named Richardson's Colony in 1874. Today he is known as the founder of Gunnison County.

<http://www.estyranch.com/history-of-gunnison-county/>

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The History of Gunnison County

Gunnison county is located on Colorado's Western Slope. Gunnison county is the area surrounding the current towns of Gunnison and Crested Butte. It is made up of alpine valleys, majestic 14,000 foot mountains and deep scenic canyons, including the rugged Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park. Several swift-flowing rivers and creeks pass through the area, which has allowed it to flourish.

The early inhabitants of the Gunnison county area were Ute Indian tribes. Colorado's Utes once consisted of seven bands with as many as 10,000 members. Spanish explorers passed through the area more than 400 years ago while searching for wealth and a route to California. They sold the Utes their first horses. The Utes were considered to be a relatively peaceful tribe and rarely caused the early white men any trouble.

In the early 1800's, mountain men and fur trappers moved into the area. Furs were never easy to obtain in the rugged Colorado Rockies and a drop in prices collapsed the area's fur trade in the 1840's.

In the early 1850's, the demand arose for a transcontinental railroad to join the East and West. Due to the ruggedness of the terrain in the Rockies, the best route was a subject of serious debate. In 1853, Congress passed a bill that called for four teams of Army engineers to survey a route. Captain John Gunnison of the Army Topographical Engineers was chosen to survey a central route. Gunnison was forty-one years old and had eleven years of wilderness surveying experience.

Gunnison's expedition left Fort Leavenworth, Kansas in June of 1853. On September 2, they crossed Cochetopa Pass. The team was encouraged by the expanse of open land they found beyond the pass—at least until they reached the Lake Fork canyon through which the Gunnison River passed. While looking for a way to bypass the huge crevice, they found a deeper crevice called Black Canyon with its 2,500 foot walls and turbulent, rushing water. The team decided to cross at Lake Fork and did so with great difficulty. The continuing rough terrain found west of Lake Fork convinced Gunnison that a railroad route through this area was impractical. Note: His opinion was later proven to be incorrect, as the D&RG railroad did build a route through the Black Canyon of the Gunnison in the 1880's.

Gunnison's expedition ran into disaster when Paiute Indians attacked the group in October 1853 in the Green River area of Utah. Gunnison and eight of his men were killed in the attack. The surviving members continued on and concluded the mission in 1854.

In the latter part of the 1850's miners began moving into the Gunnison county area in search of placer gold. Growing pressure from the increasing number of whites in the area created friction with the Utes and several miners were killed, which caused other whites to flee the area. Many small prospecting parties continued to work the area through the 1860's and 1870's. In 1870, coal was discovered near the present site of Schofield.

In 1873, Dr. John Parsons of Denver became convinced that the Gunnison area was rich in mineral wealth. In 1873, Parsons led a prospecting expedition of thirty men into the area. One of these men was Sylvester Richardson, a geologist, wanderer and dreamer, who saw the Gunnison area as a land of opportunity. He would later become the founder of the town of Gunnison.

In April of 1874, Richardson led a group of twenty settlers out of Denver and toward the Gunnison area. Strong snowstorms caused some members to abandon the journey and return to the comforts of Denver. The remaining members continued on to the present site of Gunnison and divided the land into lots. Some began building cabins. During the harsh winter of 1874-75, all of the original settlers except Richardson had either moved on to other areas or returned to Denver.

In 1875, Richardson returned to Denver to recruit more settlers. Only three returned with him. Two of the three were the Outcalt brothers, John and William.