



Colorado College, the Rocky Mountain West, and **The State of the Rockies Project**

By Dr. Walter E. Hecox

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Colorado College today, as for the past 136 years, is strongly defined by location and events of the 1800's. Pikes Peak abruptly rises out of the high plains that extend from the Mississippi and Missouri rivers towards the west. Peaking at 14,000 feet, this eastern-most sentinel of the Rocky Mountain chain first attracted early explorers and was later the focus of President Jefferson's call for the southern portion of the Louisiana Purchase to be mapped by Zebulon Pike in 1806. Gold seekers in 1858 spawned the start of the "Pikes Peak or Bust Gold Rush" of prospectors and all manner of suppliers to the mining towns. General William Jackson Palmer, while extending a rail line from Kansas City to Denver, in 1869 camped near what is now Old Colorado City and fell in love with the view of Pikes Peak and red rock formations now called the Garden of the Gods. An entrepreneur and adventurer, Palmer selected that site to found a new town with the dream that it would be a famous resort—complete with a college to bring education and culture to the region. Within five years both Colorado Springs and Colorado College came into being in the Colorado Territory, preceding Colorado statehood in 1876.

Early pictures of present-day Cutler Hall, the first permanent building on campus that was completed in 1882, speak volumes to the magnificent scenery of Pikes Peak and the lonely plains. Katherine Lee Bates added an indelible image of the region. In 1893 she spent a summer teaching in Colorado Springs at a Colorado College summer program and on a trip up Pikes Peak was inspired to write her famous "America the Beautiful" poem. Her poem helped spread a celebration of the magnificent vistas and grandeur of Pikes Peak and the

surrounding region, and provided bragging rights for Colorado College as "The America the Beautiful College."

The last quarter of the 18th century was challenging both for Colorado Springs and Colorado College. Attempts to locate financial support in the east and ease the travails of a struggling college were grounded on the unique role of Colorado College in then President Tenney's "New West" that encompassed the general Rocky Mountain region. His promotion of this small college spoke of Colorado College being on the "very verge of the frontier" with a mission to bring education and culture to a rugged land. Even then, Tenney saw the college as an ideal place to study anthropology and archeology, use the geology of the region as a natural laboratory, and serve the mining industry by teaching the science of mineralogy and metallurgy. In the early 1900's a School of Engineering was established that offered degrees in electrical, mining, and civil engineering. General Palmer gave the college 13,000 acres of forest land at the top of Ute Pass, upon which a forestry school was built, the fifth forestry school created in the US and the only one with a private forest.

Subsequent decades brought expansion of the institution, wider recognition as a liberal arts college of regional and national distinction, and creation of innovative courses, majors, and programs. The unique Block Plan, implemented in the 1970's, consists of one-at-a-time courses lasting three and one-half weeks each that facilitate extended course field study, ranging across the Rockies and throughout the Southwest. Thus CC has a rich history indelibly linked to the Rockies.

Today is no different: CC has new programs that meet evolving challenges in the Rockies, including environmental

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and Southwest studies programs, a sustainable development workshop, and exciting fieldwork offered by a variety of disciplines. Students can thoroughly explore the Rockies through the block plan and block-break recreation.

The State of the Rockies Project

The Colorado College State of the Rockies Project is designed to provide a thoughtful, objective voice in regional issues by offering credible research on challenges and problems facing the Rocky Mountain West, and through convening citizens and experts to discuss the future of our region. Each year the Project seeks to

- **Research:** offering opportunities for collaborative student–faculty research partnerships
- **Report:** publishing an annual Colorado College State of the Rockies Report Card
- **Engage:** convening companion State of the Rockies monthly talks and other sessions.

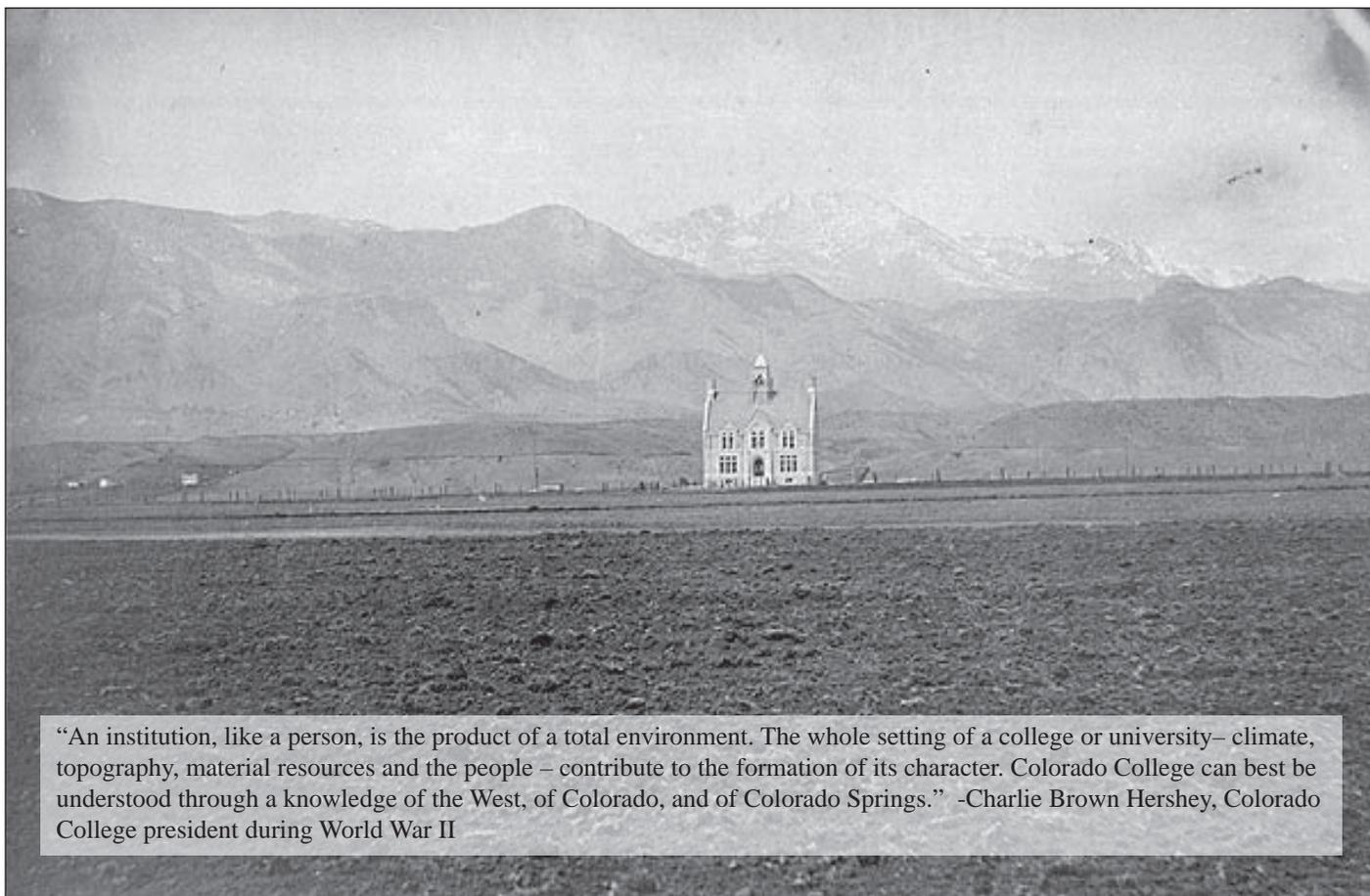
Taken together, these three arms of the State of the Rockies Project offer the tools, forums, and accessibility needed for Colorado College to foster a strong sense of citizenship among our students, graduates, and the broader regional community.



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© Walt Hecox, Field Trip in San Luis Valley, CO



© Colorado College, Cutler Hall in front of Pikes Peak

“An institution, like a person, is the product of a total environment. The whole setting of a college or university— climate, topography, material resources and the people – contribute to the formation of its character. Colorado College can best be understood through a knowledge of the West, of Colorado, and of Colorado Springs.” -Charlie Brown Hershey, Colorado College president during World War II