



mountain peeks

Aspen envy

by Gary Sprung

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED Aspen envy last winter when I learned that Aspen has 50 miles of groomed nordic skiing tracks, while Crested Butte has only 12--when we're lucky. Last February and March, the storms all blew in heavily from the northwest, giving Aspen day after day of powder and its record snowfall while we got stuck with the dregs, our infamous trace to three inches. (We get it good when they come from the south.) I skied Ajax during those \$5 days and telemarked down a backcountry thirteener in a storm and discovered Aspen's excitement....But then the next day those lift lines grew to twenty minutes.

A lot of people in Crested Butte gave up sophisticated jobs or professions to live here, yet many now seem to be leaving for just that desire. At the *Chronicle*, we sometimes oogle over the *Aspen Times'* ample copy space and invariable three sections. Our former editor, Paul Andersen, has just taken a job at *Aspen Times*. Artist Barbara Greene moved there this summer to establish her own gallery in the Jerome, while Pat Dawson promises to leave, perhaps to Carbondale, for her own diversification. Pat's son, Lou, tried out both Aspen and Crested Butte...and chose Aspen.

With more theatre, music and film festivals, dance, museums, bigger ski mountains, higher wilderness peaks (six nearby fourteeners) and magnificent Independence Pass, Aspen has Crested Butte beat hands down as *The Rocky Mountain* resort. Even their politicians are top-notch!

No wonder it draws in such money. I wouldn't mind sharing some of that. I'd like the international flavor, too. I would not like the rent.

So what the hell am I doing here?

Well, there are those other examples like Sandy Cortner, Hershel Augspurger, and Wes & Mary Beth Light, who've tried that big "real world" and can now say, "I came back."

The Lights made my list much longer on the minus side than on the plus. After two years of stimulating professional development--she in banking and he as the county's lawyer--they returned from Aspen and noticed it's *quiet* here. That's nice after suffering the incessant city-like noise. Aspen is no longer rural. It shows in the state of mind.

Mary Beth and Wes also did not like the rent, which cost them twice as much as their mortgage here. The rent causes many business failures, too.

They warn that the pie may be bigger there, but there are more people cutting it up. Retail merchants there suffered last year as overall sales tax increased but each business generally did worse because of overabundant competition--three fur stores, three ice cream stores, three shoe shops, etc.

"The prices are so high you have to go to Glenwood Springs for shoes. I couldn't find a pair of

dress shoes for less than \$200 in Aspen," Mary Beth complained.

We noticed more polarization there. Disputes end up in the hands of lawyers and courts. "I see in Crested Butte (which is more typical of the Western Slope) more of a tendency to work together to accommodate and compromise," he said.

Aspen has traffic jams and lots of commuting employees forced to live down-valley who often resent their living situation. Waitpersons "tend to be grumpy," Mary Beth observed. "They work at establishments they can't afford to eat at. The quality of tourist service is not nearly as high as here. It's really noticeable."

So what's valuable in this comparison? It teaches me that I'll never leave this best-of-all-places-to-live except for a mighty good job. (Hmmm....maybe I could find that job in Aspen...)

The comparison gives us hints about the future of Crested Butte. Those grumpy employees remind us of our community's virtues and of the costs of sacrificing family tourists for jet-setters. I feel Aspen's visual character is being ruined by the construction of very large buildings without respect for the historic charm of the old mining town. That tells us we should protect our maximum lot size and our zoning concerns in general.

Maybe we should couch our political talk in terms of "Aspenization." But what would that mean?

"Aspenization is wearing designer jeans instead of a clean pair of 501 Levis to eat a burger at the Nickel," Sandy Cortner replies.

To me, it's the 200 people I saw on the four miles of trail I ran in the Maroon Bells wilderness last summer.

Are we becoming Aspenized?

"If we are going that way, it's at a snail's pace," said Bill Crank, our town manager who has spent considerable time on both sides of the Elk range.

Still, when I see a \$40 million Mt. Crested Butte hotel and \$350 golf clubs on sale at Skyland, I've got to wonder.

Probably, we never could be another Aspen, even in a hundred years. Our ski mountain, though great, just doesn't cut it. We don't have as much room, we're farther from the mainstream of travel, and there are only so many rich people to go around.

Crested Butte's fun, caring and laid-back community is by far its greatest strength. CBMR seems to have recognized this in its newest marketing plan. Besides we get more snow--on the average--than *them* on the other side of the mountains.

I've got to end this on a serious note. I think that if we're going to reexamine our zoning laws or encourage a "better business climate" we ought to first rekindle that old growth forest; only then should not be "growth" "growth," "growth" "what kind of growth do you want?"

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