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La Plata, 1890-1893: Boom, Bust and Controversy

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La Plata, 1891-93
Boom, Bust, and Controversy

BY DAVID RICH LEWIS

La Plata was a small mining town nestled in the southern end of Cache County that flourished from 1891 until 1893. During its three-year heyday it caught and held the attention of all northern Utah. Today, the ghost town of La Plata reposes in relative obscurity, remembered by only a few, having little historical significance and even less historical evidence of its brief existence. But from the evidence that does exist, mainly in the form of contemporary newspaper accounts, a reconstruction of the town and the social, political, and economic controversies that surrounded its boom and bust is possible.

During the 1850s people in Utah witnessed the rise and growth of mining interests in the territory and throughout the West. However, early mineral prospects in Utah were limited by the sentiments of Mormon church leaders to the lead and iron ores needed for the production of tools and other implements. With recognition of the rich silver, gold, and copper deposits at Bingham, Park City, Alta, and other sites in the 1860s, Mormon as well as Gentile attention turned to these more precious ores. The majority of these mines, lying within a thirty-five-mile radius of Salt Lake City, came to be economically tied to and in some ways controlled by that city. Salt Lake became the center of trade and supply for the camps and the natural center for their ore output, thus reaping the economic and social benefits of industrialization. In this early mining boom the cities of Ogden and Logan were all but shut out from gaining any economic benefit in relation to Salt Lake through mineral wealth. Each city was immensely interested in furthering its economic and social position within the territory through mining, but neither could lay claim to substantial mines. In both cities prospectors and investors were present and interest ran high; the only thing missing was the location of a sizeable body of ore. In 1891 the chance discovery of lead and silver ore at La Plata opened the doors of prospective mineral wealth to Ogden and Logan, and thus La Plata's
story rightfully begins with one of many poems hailing the town's existence.

... A shepherd boy tending his flock on the glade,
Seized a stone to hurl at his sheep, when he made
A discovery that burst on his soul with amaze
As the wealth it contained was revealed to his gaze! ... 2

The discovery of ore at La Plata is as obscured by time and legend as the town itself. Differing accounts are numerous and only agree that in mid-July of 1891 a sheepherder named P. O. Johnson stumbled across a rich surface body of galena ore. The Ogden Standard records that a piece of rock was loosened by his sheep or chipped by his horse. The Logan Journal reports that Johnson picked up a rock to throw at his sheep. 3 Whatever really happened, when Johnson picked up the rock he noticed that it was unusually heavy and, apparently guessing its value, put it into his pocket as a "sinker" for good luck. Upon returning to his base camp, Johnson showed the specimen to his boss and foreman, W. H. Ney, who immediately realized its worth. Ney offered to become partners if Johnson would take him to the place where he had found it. Johnson agreed and took Ney up to the head of Bear Gulch above Paradise. After surveying the surface showings, the two proceeded to dig a trench two feet wide, eight feet long, and eighteen inches deep with the only tool they had—a broken-handled shovel. Much excited by the prospects, Ney and Johnson returned to camp, left another sheepherder in charge of the flock, and went immediately to Logan to stake their claim. The Journal reports that the two men reached Logan and "displayed a specimen of galena ore that was almost pure." Their claim was registered in the Paradise Mining District by H. C. Jackson as being discovered and located July 20, 1891. 4 Although they refused to give its exact location to the newspapers, word soon leaked out of the strike's whereabouts and the rush was on. Within two months what had once been a quiet mountain valley became the center of a boom that saw

2 Ibid. Excerpt from a poem by Frank W. Jackson.

3 Ogden Standard, August 14, 1891; Journal, January 1, 1892. Angus McKay, in an oral recording in the possession of John A. Shaw of Ogden, states that Johnson picked up the rock to throw at a chipmunk. McKay's story more closely corresponds to a story in the Standard, September 2, 1891, where H. C. Wardleigh picked up a rock to throw at a chipmunk, but "... the life of the frisky monk was prolonged when Wardleigh discovered that he had a fist full of heavy mineral." Other accounts claim that Johnson picked up the rock to "get the attention" of his dog who was chasing a chipmunk.

4 Journal, July 22, 1891. The original claim is found in "The Paradise Mining Record," Book B, pp. 1–2, Cache County Recorder's Office, Logan. The claim lists the sheepherder's name as "Jno. O. Johnson."
hundreds of miners swarm over a five-mile area searching for those “glittering glades of glistening galena.”

The location of galena ore at La Plata activated an explosion of speculative interest in the neighboring towns of Logan and Ogden. The immediate reaction in Logan was immense. Local mining experts, prospectors, and businessmen flocked into the area to assess for themselves the strike’s legitimacy. Local business interests started planning stores to accommodate the miners and began to invest in ventures themselves. A stage line running three times weekly was quickly established over the old road, while the Cache County Commission, responding to petitions from men already at La Plata, inspected the terrain and considered the construction of a new road.

The reaction in Ogden was almost identical. Informed several days after the initial discovery by another of Ney’s sheepherders, Ogdenites soon dominated the scene, led by such men as Tom Harrison (also of Park City and Eureka), H. C. Wardleigh, Joseph Farr, Gid R. Propper, and C. K. Westover. In the first month local sources estimated that Loganites were outnumbered four to one. By August 12 the sheepherder named Johnson had sold his interest to Mayor I. D. Haines, George and Moses Thatcher of Logan, and Tom Harrison for $600. What became of Johnson after that is a matter of speculation. But one thing is certain, he would not have recognized that quiet hillside at the head of Bear Gulch six months after he left it.

News of the discovery and rush to La Plata spread quickly, pausing long enough to find poetic description in the words of Ben T. Brooks.

*Map by Julie Johnson.*

*Journal, August 12, 22, 1891; Standard, August 14, 1891.*
In early August of 1891 there were only eight miners reported to be living in the small well-timbered mountain valley, including H. C. Jackson, the Paradise Mining District recorder, who had left Logan shortly after the strike to take up residence, official business, and mining activities in the camp. But by October that number was estimated to be from 400 to over 1,000 people. The Standard estimated that during August, 100 people left daily through Ogden for a look at the La Plata strikes and the blossoming town.

On August 13, 1891, the miners present in camp, led by Tom Harrison and several Ogdenites, formally christened the town “La Plata” — Spanish, meaning “the silver” — after the name of the original claim. Informal town meetings were organized to begin the task of bringing some sort of order to the formation of the town. In the center of town a symbolic liberty pole was erected whereon residents inscribed their names. Several streets were surveyed and named: Harrison Avenue (after Tom Harrison), La Plata Street, Logan Avenue, and Washington. As workmen graded one of these streets, ore was uncovered, prompting the remark that “the whole country is full of it.” Along these streets Joseph Farr sold town lots of 25-by-75 feet for $2.50, the location being held by placing four logs in a square on the ground. Up to that point, prospectors had pitched their tents or parked their wagons haphazardly up and down the valley, but now what could be called a town slowly emerged, consisting of tents, dugouts, and cabins. The first log buildings are attributed to Tom Harrison as a headquarters for the La Plata Company and to H. C. Jackson as home and recording office. Local merchants hurriedly set up a few businesses and sawmills to provide the miners with needed goods and services. Bars apparently maintained the most steady business. On August 20 the Standard observed that “when one gets 9,000 feet above the sea while prospecting, he finds the air a little light for too much exertion and of course returns to Dan’s for a revival.” Dan Ensign’s bar faced a demand “which threatened to do up his stock in trade 24 hours before relief” and in fact did.

* Standard, January 5, 1892.
† Ibid. August 16, 1891; Journal, January 1, 1892.
§ Journal, August 22, 1891.
Besides alcohol, two of the most pressing desires of the miners in La Plata were for the construction of a new road from either Ogden or Logan and for the establishment of a mail route. The existing roads from both directions were long and rough. With ore sitting in heaps awaiting shipment, camp members petitioned both the Weber and Cache county commissions, calling for these improvements. Logan was quick to respond. On August 26, 1891, the commission traveled to La Plata, was impressed with its future, and contracted with N. W. Crookson to push a road from Paradise up East Canyon and Bear Gulch to La Plata. After many delays caused by the rough and precipitous nature of the canyons, the Logan road was opened on September 17, 1891. Officials from Ogden got off to a faster start but finished much later. The decision to build a road up Middle Fork Canyon was made on August 19, but because of the difficult nature of the terrain and the need to build more miles of new road than the Logan route the project was not completed until October 30 and even then was still “very rough.”

The second desired convenience, the establishment of a mail route to La Plata, was eventually organized from both Ogden and Logan. Legend has it that as a boy of eighteen, David O. McKay, future president of the Mormon church, carried mail into the mining town from Huntsville before the establishment of these regular routes.

During this initial rush period many people drifted into and out of camp, looking at the prospects and making some of their own. At times reporters estimated 1,200 to 1,500 people a day visited La Plata and the surrounding area. Both the Standard and the Journal spread the sentiments of camp members against vagabonds, rascals, speculators, and other “loathsome peoples.” On August 18, 1891, the Standard reported that notices had been posted to the effect that “Chinamen and Dagoes” would not be permitted in camp; such camp rules were typical of the western mining fears and prejudices held against the hard working and lower paid foreigners. Yet, the news of the La Plata strike brought with it the wave of transient miners, mining businessmen, and firms that accompanied all western booms.

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*So impressed that two of its members, W. D. Cranney and J. F. Wright, later resigned and became actively involved in the La Plata boom.  
*Standard, October 30, 1891.  
*In a recorded interview of Orson Miles of Paradise, in the possession of John A. Shaw, Miles specifically states that McKay carried only local mail and newspapers from Ogden Valley on an informal basis.  
*Deseret Weekly (Salt Lake City), 43:339. “It is safe to say that there are now 20 men in this camp that have been in every mining camp in the U.S. and Mexico.”
Ogden, Logan, Salt Lake and Park City men, along with investors from as far away as Colorado, Montana, and even Boston, were soon running the larger operations. Many small-time local miners soon leased their claims to these companies to be worked in a more efficient manner for a percentage of the profit. Most important among these early companies was the Sundown-La Plata Company, controlled by George and Moses Thatcher of Logan. It was a consolidation of the original and most productive properties, the Sundown and La Plata mines, which until early 1892 were still partially owned by W. H. Ney. The Sundown-La Plata and other stock companies, such as the Ogden-La Plata and the Red Jacket-La Plata, provided the capital investment needed to exploit the mineral potential of La Plata and create the economic basis for a town.

Because of the lateness of the 1891 season, miners and companies carried out their work at a frantic pace. Ore was hauled out and placed in dumps, waiting for the completion of the roads and shipment to the smelters of Salt Lake, Omaha, and beyond. Even before the road was completed, several shipments of ore were sent by way of Logan from the Sundown-La Plata claims, putting pressure on Ogden to complete her route.

The La Plata rush gained notoriety mainly through the newspapers of northern Utah, but eventually word of it spread from San Francisco to New York. Although most people involved proclaimed it "Utah's Leadville," others were more skeptical, trying to discourage the mindless rush to La Plata and the depopulation of surrounding areas and to protect themselves in case it proved a bust. "The showing so far is good, but does not justify the noise it has received... It is well that they are close to home, so that those that are disappointed do not lose much time." On August 23, 1891, the Standard noted, "We shall not desire the wholesale abandonment of farms and shops... In a word, we oppose the idea of going crazy until we know whether the prospects are worth going crazy about." But few people were disappointed, and as time went on the worth of the strikes was assured and people did go a little crazy over La Plata:

The Thatcher brothers were also deeply involved in mining investments in California and particularly in the Bullion-Beck mine near Eureka, Utah. There may have been no Ogden investors of greater imagination and determination than the Thatchers, backed by their very prominent Logan bank. Thanks to Professor Charles Peterson of Utah State University for these and many other observations.

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Mathew Malqueen, who became insane while prospecting at La Plata and was at first ordered to the insane asylum... died at St. Louis, October 10... he discovered some valuable property in La Plata but did not live to develop it.

The influx of prospectors, merchants, and investors occurred within months of the discovery. The resulting town and controversies that grew out of La Plata’s boom are a direct reflection of the rapidity of this rush, the major cities involved, their citizens and their desire to control the potentially rich area for their own advancement. Reputed to be “the most quiet and orderly mining camp ever established,” La Plata nevertheless brought together the social and economic elements, including a certain amount of unrest and conflict, typical of western boom towns.

Once again, Ben T. Brooks, the unofficial poet of La Plata’s early success, noted the meteoric rise of the town:

A day or two of busy rush, Had made a little town,
Two mines were showing ore in sight, “La Plata” and “Sundown.”
For many weeks the hills around, Were searched by earnest men,
And claims were staked and records made, Quite tiring Jackson’s pen.

The town grew up quickly along the main streets. By October 17, 1891, there were reported to be twenty-eight log cabins and as many tents. By the first of January, when most people had left for warmer climates, the Journal could report seventy buildings and a population of 150 substantial citizens, including 19 women and 13 children, although later reports indicate a decline to 100 residents. The winter of 1891–92 was a long one with temperatures as low as –22°F and snow three to four feet deep. For most of the winter the road to Ogden remained snow-bound. With contact to the outside world limited to Logan, a tight-knit social life developed among the inhabitants of La Plata. As always, bars were the focal point of society where men gathered to talk business, silver, and politics and to wile away the slow production months of winter. Except for drinking, dancing, music, and “occasional taffy pullings,” life was perceptibly lackluster, especially when compared to the expected bustle of the long-awaited summer mining months.

By July 1892 the population had increased to 600 citizens. Three rows of cabins stood on the west side and two rows on the east side of La Plata.

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11 Standard, October 25, 1891.
12 Journal, January 1, 1892.
13 Standard, January 5, 1892.
14 Ibid., October 17, 1891. The Journal reports twenty-five cabins during the same week.
the La Plata hillside. Buildings were mainly log cabins with sod or shingled roofs, some being two stories and some sporting false fronts. Later that year, frame buildings adorned the main street, which boasted a pretentious boardwalk. 20 At its height, La Plata maintained a substantial business community consisting at different times of several provision, dry goods, and grocery stores; barber shops and butcher shops; two or three boarding houses and hotels; restaurants; and seven or eight liquor establishments. Some of the latter also functioned as gambling halls, including the Miner’s Exchange which served as an exchange office, gambling hall, and a place to “deal out stimulants to the boys.” 21 Also gracing the town were a branch of the Thatcher Bank of Logan, a combination post and stage line office, blacksmith and hardware shops, several sawmills down the valley, a jail of sorts, and reportedly the photographic studio of Albert Lang. Like most boom towns, La Plata had its own news sheet, the Special Courier. It was published by William Glasmann of Ogden, also the publisher and editor of the Ogden Standard, but the La Plata sheet only lasted the latter part of 1892. 22

No chartered government was ever set up in La Plata, which was run, more or less, by loosely democratic town meetings. A. B. Hayes and Gid R. Propper, both of Ogden, were elected chairman and secretary of the town, while the Cache County Court appointed C. K. Westover as deputy marshal and James P. Laws as postmaster and justice of the peace in La Plata. Since the town lay just inside its boundary, Cache County laws were enforced along with the town’s own ordinances against minorities, vagrants, and claim-jumpers. The county court set yearly business license rates for La Plata at $800 for a liquor saloon, $600 for a wholesale liquor establishment, $40 for boarding houses, $20 for a lunch counter, and $40 for a meat market—the first two rates indicative of the county’s desire to control liquor (or profit from it) and the amount of business necessary to make such an establishment a profitable venture. 23 Cache County also controlled voting and levied taxes, all of which tied La Plata politically to Cache County and Logan.

By nature, the majority of La Plata’s population was transient—moving out in winter, following reports of new strikes in the surround-

20 Ibid., October 17, 1954.
21 Journal, February 4, 1892.
22 As with the photographs of Albert Lang, no copies of this paper have been found by the author, although it is possible they both might exist in private collections.
23 License rates found in the Cache County Court Record, Book C, Cache County Hall of Justice, Logan. Minutes of town meetings or town records for La Plata, if any, could not be located.
ing area — and never really committed to making La Plata a permanent settlement." An agricultural hinterland was not practical in the high mountain valley, especially considering La Plata’s proximity to Ogden and Logan, and grazing was limited by nature to high summer pasturage. Although the companies and smaller claims employed some men year-round, people were warned by both the Standard and the Journal not to go looking for jobs in La Plata because of the already abundant labor force. But for most residents in 1892, La Plata was a thriving boom town, prompting Keeler Westover to comment, “Everything is lovely and the goose hangs high.”

Though many of the transient population were local people, it was in no way a Mormon community. No ward was ever formally established in La Plata, and, in fact, the population of the town voiced its disapproval of the appointment of J. P. Laws as postmaster “because he is Mormon.” Another exceptional feature of La Plata was that it never had a cemetery. Though a report in mid-August 1891 asserted that “if things do not change, a graveyard will be La Plata’s next addition,” Angus McKay recalled that no man was ever killed or buried in La Plata. Sick or injured men were shipped to the Logan hospital as quickly as possible.

During the summer months the number of women and children naturally increased. Anticipating the coming summer boom in population, La Plata asked for and was granted a school district, #221, on March 8, 1892. A 5 mill school tax was assessed in 1893, but no school was established. The summer months of 1892 also brought in two or three “working girls” or “soiled doves,” but they were soon escorted out of town.

Miners below the surface in La Plata made $3.00 a day, not including room and board, while surface workers earned $2.50. It was estimated that for $12.00 monthly a miner could live well in La Plata. The Deseret Weekly pointed out that beef was cheaper in La Plata than in Salt Lake, bread was ten cents a loaf, and prices in the stores were “but little higher than in the city.”

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51 As witnessed by the brief depopulation of La Plata in the spring of 1892 by reports of a strike eight miles away at Porcupine (Buster City). Journal, April 30, 1892.
52 Standard, July 18, 1892.
53 Journal, December 1, 1891.
54 Standard, August 20, 1891. Cf. Angus McKay tape.
55 Orson Miles tape.
56 Standard, August 6, 1892; Deseret Weekly, 42: 399.
By the end of 1891, in that first short season, 280 tons of ore had been shipped out of La Plata, most of it going through Logan. No total figures on the amount of ore mined in La Plata are available, but it is estimated that during its short productive life $3,000,000 worth of ore was produced.  

La Plata was in most respects the typical mining town. Men worked long and hard, social life centered around the liquor establishments, business was run on credit awaiting the payment of miners by the companies, and Fourth of July celebrations turned into brawls pitting sheep-herders and cowboys against miners. It was a hard life that depended on the economy as dictated by the mines and the prices of that ever elusive galena ore.

The population in La Plata was largely made up of people from Ogden and Logan. That fact, coupled with the establishment of competing roads and services and the wealth that the strike was expected to bring, naturally made La Plata the focal point for antagonism and competition between the two cities. From the first news of La Plata's discovery the stage was set for a controversy that would engulf the newspapers and cities of Ogden and Logan.

A poem printed in the Journal shortly after Ogden’s first ore shipment outlines the conflict between Ogden and Logan:

The Ogden City papers say, That Ogden shipped some ore away, That into Ogden came one day, Over the Ogden rocky way. It seems that Ogden all turned out, On Ogden streets without a doubt And shook up Ogden with the shout, That cheered the teams from Ogden route. This Ogden road has great renown, For Ogden built it up and down The shortest way that Ogden found, From Ogden to La Plata town. If Ogden folks do not believe, That Ogden will more dirt receive ’Tis well that Ogden did relieve, Her heart, so Ogden need not grieve. Now here from Logan everyday, We ship a lot of ore away, And don’t go wild and make a noise As would a lot of little boys. Let Ogden ’til she is sore, She’ll have the fun, we’ll have the ore.

From the first report of the strike, both cities made major claims on the economic future of the camp. The Standard called it “Ogden’s Eldo-
rado," while the *Journal* pronounced Cache County "the coming mineral producer of the Territory." Conflict between the cities centered on two major arguments: which way the ore would be shipped and which road was better. This mixture of newspaper rivalry and civic boosterism added to the publicity of the camp and tended to "sensationalize" almost everything about it. At a time when the newspapers already differed in their political views, the issue of La Plata only fanned the flames of rivalry to a more open conflict.33

During the initial discovery and rush period, a question arose over which county La Plata was in. After Washington Jenkins, the original surveyor of the Weber-Cache boundary, decided that the town was in Cache County by less than one mile, Ogden, not wanting to lose the prize so easily, made overtures to local La Plata leaders (who were predominantly Ogdenites) to move the town site to the southeast, into Weber County. They argued that this would make a better town site with more room, closer to the center of the mineral belt, and closer and more accessible to Ogden. Few people took this proposal seriously, though enough did under the leadership of James Slater to establish a rival camp dubbed "Mound City." Nothing much ever became of this movement, and Ogden faced the necessity of pushing a shorter road up to La Plata to remain in competition with Logan, prompting Ben Brooks to note:

... And Ogden, Logan—rival towns—
Did then make up their minds
To each make roads to tap the wealth,
Of La Plata's growing mines. ... 35

The road controversy took up a good share of the editorial pages of each newspaper through the rest of 1891 and into 1892. Each paper firmly believed that its road was the better of the two and the other was "not in it at all." The argument started with the construction of the roads and the question of which would reach La Plata. Gradually, the question of distances and grades became the hot issue. Logan claimed a road of 22 to 24 miles in length that was "down hill all the way" from La Plata. Ogden claimed its road was 22 to 23 miles long and of "gradual descent." On this point the argument raged.

33 *The Journal* was Democratic while the *Standard* was Republican.
34 *Standard*, August 23, 1891.
35 Ibid., January 5, 1892.
Logan’s road to the La Plata mines is to go via Mineral Point. No wonder they call it “down hill all the way.” It is a sheer descent, so steep that a bird scarcely dare attempt it... (Standard, September 9, 1891.)

Those who have once gone [to La Plata] by way of Ogden now return via Logan. One close of the Ogden road is like a Canadian toboggan slide—it lasts a life time. (Journal, August 22, 1891.)

After the opinionated, though rational, statements came the slanders and personal attacks.

One very distressing symptom of Logan's mining fever is that some of the most peaceful and easy-going people of that town—the newspaper editors for instance,—have taken to thinking with their lungs. (Standard, October 1, 1891.)

No one will deny, if talk were master, that Ogden would be on top. For she wields a weapon that would put to shame the classical instrument with which Sampson [sic] slew his 10,000 — and it is the same kind of weapon. (Journal, September 12, 1891.)

Another problem connected with the roads was maintaining them during the winter months. During the winter of 1891-92 the Logan road was kept open, and regular shipments of ore went to Logan from the Sundown-La Plata Company. On the other hand, as pointedly noted by the Journal, the Ogden road was snowbound from early December until late May of 1892, with only a brief opening in mid-January. Because of its closed road, the Ogden-owned Red Jacket Mine which faithfully shipped its ore via Ogden was unable to get any ore through. During this first winter the Logan road became established as the only reliable link to civilization and the main route for ore to travel for the following year; Logan had temporarily assured herself of economic control of the La Plata mines.

The major point of controversy between Ogden and Logan extended this road competition. It hinged on the issue of which way the ore would be shipped and which city would receive the benefits associated with it. Given relatively equal shipping and freighting costs, the condition of the two roads became the deciding factor. With the Ogden road late in opening, snowed in early, and admittedly rough in between, Logan gained an early lead in shipments. The first load of ore was shipped to Logan on September 2, 1891, and consisted of 3,600 pounds of ore from the Sundown-La Plata. After shipping ten tons to Omaha and paying all operating expenses, $30.00 per ton profit was realized. From then on shipments of ore were made on a regular basis. The first
load shipped to Ogden arrived on November 2, 1891. It was transported by Billy G. Wilson and consisted of eight wagons carrying 50,000 pounds of ore. This shipment was met by the mayor and other Ogden dignitaries and a brass band. After several speeches, the wagon train paraded down main street with great pomp and ceremony. The Logan paper took this opportunity to ridicule Ogden’s excitement with the poem quoted earlier and the comment that "... practically the same arrangements had been made for its [the ore’s] reception that we might have expected for a circus. ... Such an event in Logan excites no comment ..." because it is a regular occurrence." Although Logan’s dominance as a shipping point would decline in later years, during La Plata’s boom period by far the greater part of La Plata’s production was shipped from that city.

Another side to this controversy was the boosterism that each city displayed in making its reports and claims on La Plata. In almost every article the home town is made out to be the economic center for the growing camp. Slogans such as “Ogden’s mines” and “Cache Valley’s mineral producer” were liberally used. This boosterism underlay the conflict between the cities. Each was striving to carve out an empire for itself and expand its influence. At the same time, this rivalry benefited La Plata by giving it enough exposure to attract the attention of the territory. Behind the civic activism of the newspapers lay more personal motives. The Journal was financed and run for several years by the Thatcher family and in-laws, the same Thatchers who owned banks in La Plata and Logan and controlled the Sundown-La Plata Company. Frank J. Cannon and William Glasmann of the Ogden Standard held business and mining interests in the Ogden-La Plata Company. Not motivated solely by personal or business gain, each side nevertheless did its best to promote its own city in relation to La Plata and attempted to bring the mining town within its own sphere of influence, recognizing the fact that "every dollar spent in mining now helps every branch of industry and every business in this city and county."38

The competition between Ogden and Logan occurred between other expanding cities. This “urban imperialism,” the desire of growing towns to exploit the wealth they find directly around them and use it for social and economic gain, surfaced throughout the American frontier.39 In the

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38 Ibid., November 3, 1891.
39 Journal, November 4, 1891.
40 Ibid., January 1, 1892.
Ogden-Logan instance, both towns had relatively reasonable claims to La Plata, equal access in terms of distance, the capital and the manpower to develop it, and the desire to do just that. But during La Plata’s boom Logan’s road allowed her to dominate the economic and social scene.

Promotional efforts notwithstanding, most of the elements that eventually contributed to La Plata’s demise were already present by the winter of 1892–93. It was only a matter of time before the town collapsed. The first storm clouds darkening La Plata’s horizon developed over the questionable classification and ownership of land on which the town and some of the mines were located; was it mineral or agricultural-grazing land? In August 1891 the Standard recognized and reported that La Plata rested on lands claimed by the Central Pacific Railroad. By act of Congress on July 1, 1862, and amended July 2, 1864, the Central Pacific was granted twenty-square-mile alternate sections of land to help finance the building of the transcontinental railroad and telegraph line, *mineral lands excepted.* Apparently in 1884 D. P. Tarpey purchased title to the area from the Central Pacific and in 1887 sold it to John H. White who still held the title at the time of the La Plata strike. On June 23, 1892, White filed suit in Ogden District Court, against Fred Thackwell, Willis Booth, John T. Rich, et al., of the Sunrise Group Mines, for trespassing on his land and removing valuable mineral deposits. White’s lawyers contended that since the land had been classified as agricultural-grazing when the title had been purchased, any subsequent discovery would not affect the title. Attorneys for the miners claimed that it was obviously mineral land, and therefore, under federal law, they had the right to its use. At about the same time, Fred Thackwell, et al., brought suit in the Salt Lake Land Office against the Central Pacific which was trying to obtain original patent on the land, maintaining the same position as White had. Because these suits lasted from 1892 until 1894, with restraining orders in effect part of the time that closed most mines, La Plata all but dried up and died. Eventually, White settled for the $5,000 bond that the companies had put up to continue work; and the Salt Lake Land Office — whose decision in 1892 was appealed and upheld by the General Land Office in Washington, D.C., in 1894 and by Secretary of the Interior Hoke Smith in 1895 — ruled in favor of the miners.* These major cases, numerous smaller disputes over

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* For information on these cases see *Standard*, June 15, 1892, June 24, 1892, February 24, 1893, March 5, 1893; *Journal*, June 29, 1892, August 31, 1892, March 24, 1894, October 19, 1895. Original records of the White case in Ogden District Court are missing and believed destroyed by a fire.
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mines crossing claim lines and running into each other underground, and the threat of appropriation of land by the railroad created tension and litigation in La Plata that caused a loss of jobs and a loss of faith in the future of the camp.4

In 1892 and 1893 the United States faced a period of economic change. The presidential term of Benjamin Harrison (1889–93) left the country in dire economic straits with high tariffs, an unstable treasury, hard times for farmers and industry, and too much “cheap money.” In attempting to stabilize the economy in 1893 Grover Cleveland obtained the repeal of the Sherman Silver Purchase Act of 1890, which obliged the U.S. Treasury to purchase 4,500,000 ounces of silver monthly and to issue treasury notes redeemable in bullion. Demand for silver dropped immediately. In the ensuing depression and silver panic of 1893 many businesses, national banks, and mining towns failed. In response to the depression, manufacturing businesses reduced their production, therefore reducing the demand for the coal, iron, and lead used in many areas of industry. With slack demand for both silver and lead, market prices dropped drastically and La Plata’s economy began to buckle. Local businessmen began to pull out and investors withdrew their capital for more stable investments.

Along with this general depression of the economy, declining silver and lead prices, and the years of litigation, La Plata also suffered from natural weaknesses. By 1893 the veins of galena ore had begun to dwindle in the smaller mines. Larger operations equipped with gasoline-powered hoists and pumps kept up the work, but as they dropped lower they too began to draw increasing amounts of water and their veins diminished. The physical environment of La Plata also created problems. Winters were long and harsh, and the difficulty of transportation through the canyon roads raised the cost of shipping ore until it was no longer competitive on the already declining markets. In the face of these basic problems, the town of La Plata faded soon after it was born.

With many of the same problems that confronted La Plata, some boom mining towns managed to live on even after their ore ran out because of the businesses, farms, or railroads that had been established during their heyday. But La Plata did not last long enough to create any kind of permanent establishment with which to support itself after the

4 During this time, even unaffected mines slowed or shut down. Owners knew from past experience and legend to fear the greed of the grasping and influential railroads. See Journal, September 12, 1891, September 10, 1896.
mines failed. The real boom in La Plata lasted only a couple of seasons and was followed by a sporadic "afterlife" that persisted into the twentieth century.

In 1895 the Journal reported that it had been "generally supposed that the camp has been dead for the last three years." Claims had been worked periodically during the years of litigation and after, but little progress or profit was made. Encouragement continued to come from both newspapers to revitalize the town, but La Plata as a town never returned. From 1894 on the La Plata mines were worked by local firms as well as Iowa, New York, and Boston companies, with leases and ownerships changing hands every few years. In 1896 reports that copper had been discovered in the Sundown–La Plata properties stirred excitement, and the cry went out that it is "copper that will make La Plata great." Copper, gold, silver, lead, zinc, and quartzite were all mined but never in large enough quantities to support a profit-making enterprise. In 1902 the La Plata Consolidated Mining Company under the management of U. V. Withie of New York made the best attempt, employing twenty men and reportedly sending $2,000 worth of ore to Ogden monthly for several months. Optimism bubbled to the surface once again: "There are prospects, and good ones too, of La Plata becoming a big mining camp...." In 1906 Joseph Heald, secretary of the La Plata Consolidated Mining Company, re-leased the La Plata mine for two years at 20 percent of the profits. A high-grade vein of galena ore was discovered but ran out soon after. As late as 1906 the legend surrounding the La Plata strike kept a few prospectors searching for "that big find."

During this later flurry of activity Ogden finally came to monopolize the output of the mines, receiving all of the ore that came out of La Plata. With improvements at the mill and smelter in Salt Lake and lower freight rates from Ogden, the Logan road soon fell into disrepair. The upsurge of activity in 1902 prompted talk in Logan of putting the road back into shape, but the estimated cost of $1,000 proved prohibitive. Logan's inability or lack of desire to compete in a tightening economic

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44 Journal, July 16, 1895.
46 Ibid., September 27, 1902.
market left the way open for Ogden and eastern capitalists who were economically sound enough and willing to gamble on the uncertain future of the mines.

Today, La Plata has been reclaimed by the environment. The buildings, streets, and mine entrances have all but vanished. Except for the ruins of several cabins, old machinery, and the piles of tailings at the mouth of mines marked by protruding cart rails, one would never know that a bustling town of nearly 600 people had existed there. Gone, too, are most marks of the controversy and excitement that its brief existence created. Though relatively insignificant in the general view of Utah history, there is a broader lesson to be seen in La Plata’s existence. The La Plata experience portrays the competitive and booster-oriented nature of towns seeking economic betterment and the power that local newspapers wielded over their communities. In addition, it shows the westerner’s fear of the powerful and grasping nature of the railroads in their quest for land and a transportation monopoly. Above all, La Plata mirrors the western mining boom and bust experience in all its excitement, controversy, and color. La Plata was typical of hundreds of boom camps, yet it was unique in its own experiences and people. As the Standard put it, “the truth about La Plata is quite as strange as any fiction that the ordinary scribbler can invent.” Yet, La Plata did exist, and in its existence captured the excitement, expectations, and imaginations of the people of Ogden and Logan.

"Standard, September 6, 1891."