

Translated by Irene T. Woodall, March 1995

## The Paragons

Boulder can be reached via U.S. Highway 36. The road leads north from Denver, passes typical bedroom communities, rugged ranch houses, and immaculate industrial areas. Then there is a steep incline from the top of which a beautiful valley comes into sight. Boulder lies nestled among trees and pasture land and is flanked by the towering, red Flatirons, the southwesterly extension of the Rocky Mountains. It is a city which, ever since its inception almost 150 years ago, has increasingly become an example of the good urban life.

When visitors and citizens sing the praises of Boulder's quality of life, they are referring to the uninhabited greenbelt land, the downtown and residential areas with all their trees, flowers, and 56 parks, and the challenges of 80 km of bike paths and 70 km of hiking trails, practically at one's doorsteps. They don't realize that most of these advantages are not gifts from Mother Nature, such as the sunny and mild climate or the spectacular surroundings, but the result of hard work and many dollars.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan cleric who fled to America in 1959 before the Chinese invasion of Tibet, obviously knew right away that this town is the manifestation of an ambitious concept. It is possible that Boulder's spectacular setting increased the receptive powers of the pious man. Or maybe the 4,000-meter-high, snow-capped Rockies reminded him of the home land he left behind. Be that as it may, when the holy man reached the top of the incline on U.S. Highway 36 during his travels 20 years ago, he saw a hidden, but to him, very real utopian place in the valley and town that were spread out in front of him, and he knew that this was the place for his own Utopia. Educated at Oxford in religion, arts and science, and philosophy, he founded the only exile-Buddhist school in the entire western world in Boulder - a Shangri-la and earthly paradise in the Rocky Mountains.

His Naropa Institute is regarded as a Buddhist-inspired liberal arts college. The curriculum for the 500 students includes meditation, yoga, t'ai-chi, Sanskrit, Tibetan grammar, Buddhist psychology, but also such western sciences as cultural anthropology and gerontology.

Some people consider the Buddhist university Boulder's spiritual center. If this is true, it is only because, despite all its advantages, the city has remained a designer product, invented rather than grown naturally and fashioned rather than inspired. The poet Allen Ginsberg, guru of the beat generation and director emeritus of the Naropa Institute, regularly comes here for meditation. At the beginning of July 1994, he will welcome the remaining members of the beat generation who will converge here from all over the world in order to celebrate the poet and the good old times through jazz, poetic readings, exhibits, and workshops.

However, Boulder boasts an even older university which owes its existence to the city's first settlers. Only one year after the city was founded in 1858/59, like so many during the height of the goldrush in the Rockies, some of its citizens already clamored for the construction of a school, which was very unusual in the Wild West. Barely ten years later, they gathered a considerable amount of donated

money and land and started construction of the university.

During a time when most of the area's communities struggled to obtain handouts from the government in the form of new prison construction or other secure sources of income, Boulder's citizens showed a remarkable determination to shape the future of their community according to their own ideas.

And they were successful: Today, the Boulder campus of the University of Colorado, with its manicured lawns and well tended flower beds, extensive parks, and crossing-free bike paths, is one of the largest in the U.S. (25,000 of the 85,000 inhabitants are students). This, in turn, has encouraged companies and institutes, who need highly qualified employees and can offer a stable work environment, to settle here. For example, government research outfits such as the National Center for Atmospheric Research, international biotechnology firms, as well as companies in the computer industry and other high-tech industries. The best known local company is probably Celestial Seasonings, the leading purveyor of herbal teas.

Except for a short time during the gold rush boom of the founding years, heavy industry did not gain a foothold. It does not fit the concept that seems to get stronger from generation to generation: That artificially created spaces do not interfere with nature but actually enhance it. In order to realize this vision of an improved habitat, influential citizens established the Boulder Improvement Association in 1903, which is still active today.

In 1910, members of the City Council were concerned about Boulder's visual aspects because of the rapidly increasing population and the tumultuous economic development and therefore hired the prominent landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., who, among others, designed New York's Central Park and the parkland surrounding the Capitol in Washington, D.C. In contrast to other cities, Boulder was envisioned as a place where its citizens would live and work in an increasingly comfortable and pleasant environment, in accordance with Olmsted's principles.

Olmsted's recommendations were very detailed: In his report, "Improvement of Boulder, Colorado," he discussed which type and size of trees should be planted along the streets and squares as well as their function - to give shade or hide ugly buildings. He argued for above-ground or underground utility lines and the shape and material of street lights. He sketched the layout of playgrounds, recreational facilities, reservoirs, streets, trails, observation points, gardens, parks, farms, forests, and he also described actions that would have a shaping and protective impact on the environment.

Not all of Olmsted's recommendations were carried out; but many of his ideas are still contained in the City Code. They influenced the ordinances which restrict the City's growth to one to two percent per year and thus increased the value of real estate. They inspired the purchase of land in Boulder's vicinity that is financed through a special tax: The belt of land around the City, consisting of parcels that are pristine or gently used, has increased to approximately 24,000 acres.

One of the town's leading architects, Henry Beer, confirms that the City Code of rules and regulations

is enforced carefully by the different agencies and departments. Since the beginning of the 60's, no building may exceed 50 feet in height. The so-called "blue line", an imaginary line which runs approximately 360 feet above Boulder, is from the same era. The City may not provide water above this line. In this way, building activity is discouraged on the mountain backdrop.

Such concepts, regardless of whether they were originally proposed by Olmsted or not, certainly created the results that he envisioned. The citizens are not so eager to make a fast buck which they then take somewhere else to enjoy, but instead they use the advantages the town has to offer in order to lead meaningful lives.

Such an extent of planning creates a euphoric state of mind that the citizens of this enviable town, as well as envious outsiders, call "Boulder mentality." Typical representatives of this mental state are sports-oriented or are active outdoors in an unspoiled environment. If the surroundings can be perfected, the human body also lends itself to perfection. Boulderites who want to stay in shape can work on their bodies almost all year long, since the sun shines nearly 300 days a year.

Today, Boulder is a mecca for enthusiasts of extreme sports activities who gather here from all over the world. Boulder is home to some of the best rock- and iceclimbers, trick skiers, paragliders, pilots of ultra-light aircraft and hot-air balloons, bungee jumpers, and long-distance runners.

However, even common athletes appreciate the favorably high altitude for their training: It increases the number of red blood corpuscles and their oxygen-binding capacity. But above all, they appreciate the sports culture, the unsatiable interest in fitness and sports activities. Many amateurs take their cues from the professional athletes and compete with them on the trails, the rock walls, the slopes, and in the air. It is rumored that many people have four or five pieces of sports equipment in their garages and use all of them in one day in order to improve or to maintain their level of performance.

The drug culture, as practiced by beatniks and hippies, who celebrated their fitness mysticism on top of nearby mountain peaks while being high on LSD, has been replaced by a "clean" drug: An athlete's body produces endorphins during strenuous and dangerous feats, which produce a similar feeling.

Fitness is king in this town. Every other person is either on roller blades, a mountain bike, or is jogging through the downtown area. If you ask people what they are doing, you won't find out what their jobs are, but whether they are into rock climbing or skiing. On busy bike paths a speed limit (25 km/h) had to be instituted because of the daily races by daring bicycle riders; and during the summer months, the paths are patrolled by police with radar guns.

So many bodies of steel demand professional care and maintenance. There are probably more practicing doctors of sports medicine, osteopathy, and holistic medicine, chiropractors, massage and aroma therapists, herbalists and acupuncturists per square mile than anywhere else.

It comes as no surprise that Boulder has a very high standing on the list of best places to live in the United States. On the list of the 50 healthiest places in America, it takes first place. "Nothing can

touch their quality," assures Norman Ford, who published a book on the hierarchy of urban perfection. People who want to move to Boulder, however, will find a snake in this Garden of Eden--the cost of living and real estate prices are high due to growth controls. Neither poverty nor dark skin colors have much of a chance here. The wealthy and the white folks keep to themselves, and to some people who know the town well, this is not enough. There is no spice in a society that is so homogenous. Tom Noel, a prominent historian who received his doctorate from the University of Colorado, thinks his home town is unreal. "Everything is so damned alike, and nobody ever seems to grow up."

In national newspapers, Boulder is sometimes labeled "the most politically correct city in America," or "tofu town" or "tea town" because of the healthy habits of its citizens. It is obviously difficult to live with such a paragon of a city. I believe, Boulder is simply too good to be true.

*(This article, "Die Musterknaben", by Clifford D. May, appeared in GEO magazine, No. 2, April 1994, p. 98-107.)*