

Photo: Elaine Freed

The recent inventory of ornamental iron fences was made possible by a grant from the Springs Area Beautiful Association and the Pikes Peak or Bust Bicentennial Committee.

Students participating in the inventory:

NORTH JUNIOR:

Robin Jones, Theresa Pellow, Mike Yowell, David Pickle, Lee McRae, and Joe Spear. Faculty Coordinator: Myron Klingensmith.

THE COLORADO SPRINGS SCHOOL:

Deborah Donner, Ann Brossman, Ann Rieger. Faculty coordinator: Al Adams.

Elaine Freed, Project Director, wrote an article on the Old North End Iron Fence Inventory for the May, 1976, issue of *Americana Magazine*. Please direct inquiries to Ms. Freed at 2111 North Tejon, Colorado Springs, Colorado 80907, (303) 636-2251.

COLORADO SPRINGS' HISTORIC IRONWORK



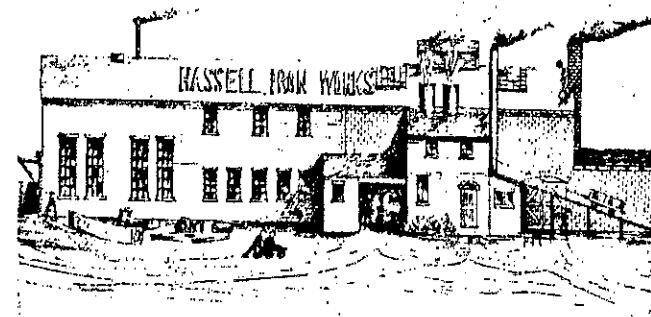
Ornamental ironwork was one of the great loves of Americans in the late nineteenth century. Victorian homeowners bought up iron castings—fountains, urns, cretings, benches, statues, railings, bridle posts and boot scrapers—as quickly as foundries could turn them out. During that decorative era a house was not a home—certainly not a fashionable home—unless it had an ornate finial atop the highest tower, a heavily scrolled iron gate on the front walk, and a cast iron settee in the latest “rustic” style under a favorite shade tree.

Of all the tons of iron that remain from those by-gone days, none pleases the eye more than the delicate cast iron fences that border the front lawns of old residential areas in Colorado and neighboring states. Actually, the affinity for iron fencing was nationwide during that period, promoted by a burgeoning iron and steel industry. Foundries and iron works, concentrated in the East but scattered throughout the Western states as well, sold their ornamental fences through catalogs and then shipped them by rail to retail agents or directly to buyers.

Colorado Springs, home of the Hassell Iron Works, has an especially handsome collection of decorative iron-fences dating from the late 1800s. The fences represent a happy union of taste and technology, combining intricate design with durable materials at a price which made them attractive alternatives to wood, wire, and hedging. Ornamental iron fences required a high initial investment, but since they were almost maintenance-free (and usually out-lived their owners), they offered a long-term economy. Foundry-cast ornamental ironwork cashed in on the prestige and status traditionally accorded hand-crafted wrought iron, but at a fraction of the cost.

The designs were irresistible: Roman arches over fluted spearheads, surrounded by Gothic tracery and Classic scrolls, all fitted together in a graceful and repetitious expanse. Foundries standardized sizes to cut production costs; typical iron pickets and line posts stood about three feet high, gate posts a bit higher. Occasional shortened versions were set into sandstone pedestals.

Not all patterns were elaborate. We fault the Victorians for their fussy tastes, but they had a more discerning eye than we usually give them credit for. One of Hassell's most popular iron fences repeated a simple pattern of overlapping arches with no embellishments whatever. He achieved a similar effect of spare elegance from stylized floral castings set atop plain iron pickets. Hassell used traditional forms as well, and offered his clients a seemingly infinite variety of designs.



Penrose Public Library
The Hassell Iron Works in 1898

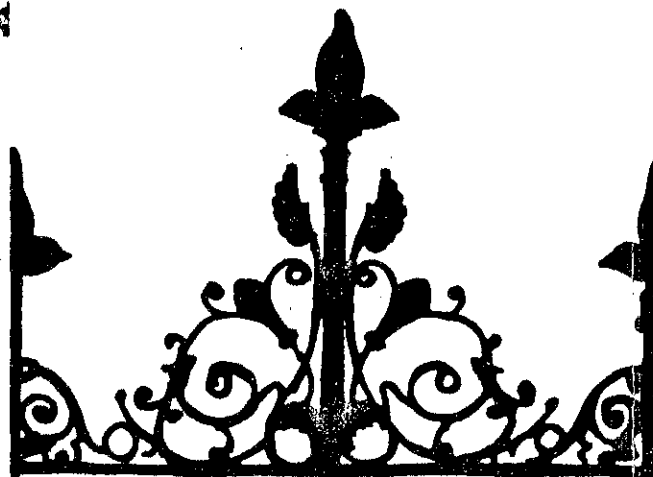


William Hassell came to Colorado from New York in 1885 seeking a cure for his tuberculosis. After homesteading in the late '80s he set himself up in the fence business, then built a foundry which combined ornamental ironwork with the manufacture of mining equipment. The iron business of that era was fiercely competitive and foundries shamelessly copied each other's wares. Other firms which sold iron fences in Colorado Springs included the Denver Iron and Wire Works, Barbee of Chicago, Barnum of Detroit, and Cincinnati's Stewart Iron Works; the latter company did a vigorous business all over the country.

Despite competition, the Hassell foundry dominated ornamental ironwork sales in the Pikes Peak region. Because they reflected a common origin and shared tastes, the Hassell fences offered a homogenous ingredient amid the diversity of Victorian architecture. Varied in design but identical in size, the fences provided a harmonious image when, combined together, they linked a half-dozen homesites along a city street.

Hassell's decorative ironwork can be found in all the early residential areas of Colorado Springs and its neighbor, Manitou, as well as many other Colorado communities including Cripple Creek, Aspen, Denver, Salida, and Buena Vista.

Photos by Catherine Taylor



The Old North End

