



# GRANDFATHER FIGURE

*The New York Times* called him "America's Copper King." And he was. At the turn of the last century, William Cornell Greene controlled \$100 million in capital — most of it related to mines, railroads and ranches in Mexico and Arizona — and his personal wealth was \$50 million. But, for our writer, the larger-than-life figure was much more than that. He was a source of pride, he was a source of shame and, more importantly, he was her grandfather.

BY TERRY GREENE STERLING

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**I** NEVER KNEW MY GRANDFATHER, William Cornell Greene. He died in 1911, when his youngest son, Charlie, my dad, was a toddler.

Since my father had no memory of his dad, he always referred to him as "the Colonel." As far as I can tell, "Colonel" was an early 20th century money-maker bestowed on many who, like my grandfather, didn't necessarily serve in the military, but displayed uncommon bravado.

The Colonel displayed uncommon bravado in spades. At the height of his Gilded Age career, when he was America's "Copper King," he controlled \$100 million in capital — most of it related to mines, railroads and ranches in Mexico and Arizona. In his prime, he was worth \$50 million. When he died in 1911, he was worth only a few thousand dollars.

Nevertheless, the Colonel left behind a cattle-ranching empire in Arizona and Mexico that sustained his wife and kids throughout their lives.

In Arizona, growing up on a family cattle ranch, I dreaded when history junkies asked me whether I was the Colonel's kin. I'd grit my teeth and own up to it. Next, I'd hear a story relating the Colonel's rags-to-riches exploits, his fancy hunting parties, his gambling, his Indian-fighting, his politicking, his con-artistry, his business acumen, his great vision, his thoroughbreds, his mansions, his Mexican mines, his cattle ranches, his private railroad cars, his bravery and, of course, his incredible strokes of luck — such as the time he gunned down Jim Burnett in Tombstone and was acquitted of murder.

When I heard these stories, I feigned boredom to mask pride and shame.

I was secretly proud to descend from such a larger-than-life character. But I was ashamed, too, of the reported ostentation and grandiosity, because I knew so little about the Colonel, and couldn't judge the veracity of the stories I'd heard. My father's loss was far greater, of course, because he grew up without the Colonel and

When William Cornell Greene died in 1911 at age 58, he had only a few thousand dollars to his name — a precipitous fall for a man once worth \$50 million.



yet lived each day in the shadow of his legend. My father tried to learn more about his father when, in the late 1960s, he and my mother, Sandy, hired historian Charles Leland Sonnichsen to write Colonel Greene's biography. The 1974 book, *Colonel Greene and the Copper Skyrocket*, provides a solid accounting of the Colonel's "spectacular rise and fall," but the book's portrayal of my grandfather as a person feels, to me, flat.

Here is what the Colonel passed down to me, through my father: DNA, a pocket flask, fish forks, his mother's family Bible, a handful of photographs, three letters, worthless stock certificates, random promissory notes, disjointed business correspondence, a little box made of copper extracted from his Mexican mine, two Japanese vases and a pair of samurai stirrups.

For this story, I assembled dozens of newspaper clippings and magazine articles. These clippings, along with the biography and the artifacts, are the only windows into my grandfather's heart.

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**W**ILLIAM GREENE was born in 1853 near Green Bay, Wisconsin. He was a skinny, pale, curly haired kid. His family called him Will. Once, he and his three siblings posed for a blurry, slow-shutter-speed, pre-Civil War portrait. He looks about 5, which means the portrait was probably taken just before — or just after — his dad, Townsend, was crushed to death.

Townsend was killed on a stormy night in 1858 when a tree fell on his buggy on a lonely road. His widow, Eleanor, and her four little children moved in with her parents. First they lived in Wisconsin, then in Minnesota.



Greene, shown here as a young man, made his way to Arizona in the 1870s to prospect and cut wood in the Bradshaw Mountains.

The Colonel grew up poor and fatherless. On lonely nights, he must have read Eleanor's family Bible. I've got it now, and it's packed with footnotes that would fascinate a small child — little Discovery-Channel-like factoids about biblical lands. He must have marveled at the drawings of ancient boxers, charioteers and gladiators.

When the Colonel was about 12, his grandparents temporarily moved to Orange County, New York, so he and his sister could get proper schooling there. (Eleanor, his mom, stayed in Minnesota with her other two kids.)

In New York, he grew into a slender, curly haired teenager. He quit school at 15, high-tailed it to New York City and clerked for a tea merchant on Eighth Avenue for a couple of years. Then he headed west.

We aren't exactly sure what he did next. Possibly, he was a surveyor. In 1872, he was someplace toughing it out in "icy wastes," but he didn't detail the location. When he was 20, in 1873, he leased a Texas farm north of Dallas. The few letters I have hint of mood swings.

In 1873, he penned a tidy letter to his cousins in New York, extolling the grand possibilities of Texas and his farm. A year later, he had failed at farming. In a despairing letter to his mother, he wrote, in part: "I enclose a money order for twenty dollars. ... If I had the money to spare I should send it at once but I have not got but about sixty dollars and have nothing to do. I should buy a wild horse and try to sell him when broke at enough advance to pay me for my trouble and risk. I think that I can make more at that than I can on a farm."

Next, he made his way to Arizona, where he prospected in the Bradshaw Mountains and cut wood to make ends meet. It probably took weeks for him to learn that his mother died of "consumption" in 1876. The two had been diligent correspondents, but not a single letter from Eleanor to her son remains in our family archive.

By 1880, the Colonel had moved to the Tombstone area. Soon, Southern Arizona and Northern Sonora, Mexico, were one land to him — warm sun, vast grasslands, rivers lined with cottonwood forests, and hills veined with copper. Spaniards and Basques who'd mined the hills for silver and gold left slag pits rich with unwanted copper. The Colonel figured, if he could get financing, he'd get rich just mining those slag pits.

In 1884, the Colonel still hadn't found his fortune. But that year, in Tombstone, he married Ella Moson, a divorcee with two kids and a small inheritance. The couple eventually lived and ranched in Hereford, a quarter-mile or so away from the San Pedro River. Ella and the Colonel had two daughters of their own — Ella and Eva. The Colonel often spent time away from them, traveling around Southern Arizona and bordering Sonora looking after cattle and prospecting. Again, it was all one big country to him. He ran cattle from the grasslands of Sonora up to Hereford, where he fattened them on alfalfa.

In 1897, he dammed the San Pedro so he could irrigate his alfalfa fields. This infuriated a downstream water-user, Jim Burnett. Unbeknown to either the Colonel or Ella, Burnett dynamited the Colonel's dam on a warm summer day.

That was the same day Ella allowed their two daughters and a friend to go down to the river to wade at a favorite spot. But when the two older girls went into the river, they were either pulled under or swept away. The dam explosion had changed the river's channel. Only Eva survived.

The Colonel, in a rage, blamed Burnett for killing his daughter. Days later, he shot Burnett to death at the O.K. Corral in Tombstone, bellowing a passage from Epistle of Paul to the Romans, a passage he likely learned as a child reading the family Bible: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord!"

At his murder trial, the Colonel claimed self-defense. "I meant by saying, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord,' that Burnett had tried to kill me and he had met the same fate himself," the Colonel testified.

He was acquitted.

The Colonel's wife, Ella, never recovered from her daughter's death. Imagine her guilt — and the Colonel's rage — for letting the kids go down to the river unsupervised. Imagine her anger at the Colonel for being gone so much on those prospecting trips, and for leaving so much in her hands. The tragedy destroyed the marriage.

The Colonel's daughter Eva would later say her grieving



A labor dispute, combined with mounting business debts, the Panic of 1907 and the Colonel's grandiose visions, forced Greene (center, hand raised) out of the mining business.

mother suspected the Colonel had begun an affair with Marie Proctor, a young Tucson typesetter. In a court deposition, Eva would remember her mother telling her, "Your next mother will be Marie Proctor."

In 1898, Eva stayed with her mom and refused to see her dad on Christmas Day.

The Colonel spent Christmas without his family. He wrote Eva a letter saying he was "bitterly disappointed."

A year later, Ella Greene died in Los Angeles, in the same hospital where I would be born decades later. Ella was 41. She died from ovarian-surgery complications. And grief. The Colonel shipped Ella's body to Bisbee two days later, so she could be buried next to their drowned daughter.

The headstone reads: *ELLA. Beloved Wife of W.C. Greene.* There is no biblical quotation or romantic-poetry verse on the headstone, just Ella's birth and death dates and one word: "Peace."

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**T**HAT TYPESETTER? She was my future grandmother. Her original name was Maria Benedict. She spent her early childhood with an American dad and a Mexican mom and four big brothers on a small ranch in the Santa Cruz Valley of Southern Arizona. The ruins of the little adobe where they lived still stand on a bluff overlooking the rich, wide, cottonwood-lined

Santa Cruz River. On this ranch, the Benedicts scraped by through farming, boarding horses and raising cattle.

When she was a little girl, Maria's parents both died of natural causes within the span of a few years.

Maria was adopted by a childless white couple, Frank and Mary Dowdle Proctor.

The little girl became Marie Proctor. She got along with her new father, but her relationship with her new mom was rocky.

In Territorial Arizona, Mexicans were sometimes lynched, and Mrs. Proctor herself voiced no fondness for Mexicans. She made Marie, who was half-Mexican, ashamed of her Mexican blood. She forbade Marie from ever seeing her four dark-skinned brothers.

Marie kept her Mexican heritage to herself. She learned to keep secrets.

She had a small inheritance from her real parents, and it funded her education at a Catholic convent in Tucson. There, she likely developed her lifelong devotion to the Virgin Mary, the only mother she could count on.

Mrs. Proctor, Marie's adoptive mom, was a confidante and sister-in-law of Ella Greene, the Colonel's wife. If Mrs. Proctor heard of marital troubles between the Colonel and Ella, she would have taken Ella Greene's side. But Mrs. Proctor couldn't trash-talk the Colonel. Her husband, Frank, was the Colonel's close friend and employee. Imagine Mrs. Proctor's feelings when the Colonel eloped with Marie in February 1901.

SHORTLY AFTER the Colonel and Marie eloped, they were ensconced in a luxurious apartment at the Waldorf, in New York.

The Colonel was 25 years older than Marie. He'd grown fat, and his curly brown hair was laced with gray. In the style of the day, he wore a walrus mustache.

By the time he married, he was well on his way to success with his Cananea, Sonora, copper ventures about 40 miles south of the Arizona border.

He needed money to boost the Cananea copper production. He had an office on Broad Street, in New York, where stocks were literally sold on the street curb. He could sell anything to anyone, and he relied on small investors to give him working capital.

In the Gilded Age, if you were white, American and a male, you had a shot at great wealth, thanks to the country's vast resources. Gilded Age millionaires believed the world was theirs for the taking, and they likened wealth to a virtue. It didn't matter what you had to do to get rich, the thinking went, as long as you got rich. What's more, there was little regulatory control in the financial markets, which meant robber barons could engage in smarmy but perfectly legal battles to wrest companies away from each other.

The robber barons soon set their sights on the Colonel's mines. By 1906, Cananea was a bustling town, complete with high-tech smelters and a railroad. That year alone, the Colonel's Cananea mines produced an astounding 50 million pounds of copper ore.

But the Colonel wasn't content with being who *The New York Times* called "America's Copper King." This was his tragic flaw. He was never content with what he had. He always wanted even more.

He wanted to build an empire that extended from the Sierra Madre up through Chihuahua and Sonora into Arizona. It was all one big country to him, and he wanted to own it all. His dream empire included the copper mines in Cananea, of course, but also lumber and railroad companies, cattle ranches, and gold- and silver-mining claims. To finance his dream, he created new companies, sold stocks on Broad Street, took out loans collateralized with his own stock, and milked capital from robber barons.

It was never enough money — he was a man with too many dreams — and the robber barons knew he was always financially stressed. They tried to reduce the value of his company stock, sometimes with rumors. One group said the mine was running out of copper — definitely a lie, because it's still producing copper today. The Colonel must have been secretly frantic as he borrowed from one company to feed another, or shored up prices by buying massive blocks of stocks in his own companies. Plus, he'd spread himself way too thin.

Was he manic?



Mary Benedict Greene, the Colonel's second wife, said her husband's private life differed from his hard-drinking, foul-mouthed legend.

Or scared?

"He was running one of the biggest copper mines in the world, and holding his control by a slender thread," *The New York Times* wrote in 1908. "He was opening up one of the most inaccessible timber tracts on the continent, and all through his [timber] concession he was opening up [silver and gold] mines of doubtful merit. He was building a railroad across the mountains and was extensively engaged in cattle raising. Then, 3,000 miles away from these operations, he was trying to market some \$40 million worth of securities, running pools in his stocks, and speculating in the market."

In 1905, the Colonel was so desperate for capital, he organized a three-week Gilded Age hunting trip into the Sierra Madre. He wanted potential investors who could see the possibilities. Some of them later reported that the Colonel actually had the animals rounded up ahead of time for the hunters. Hundreds of creatures — deer, bears, rabbits, birds — were slaughtered. But the Colonel never got the money he needed.

He could never have enough money. He spent too much, borrowed too much and lent too much. Everyone knew he was in trouble.

His young wife, Marie, in the meantime, changed her name to Mary. She spent more and more time at their new mansion in Cananea. It was painted white and, naturally, was trimmed in green. It had an orchard and rose bushes. On one side, there was a step where the Colonel could get into his buggy when it was drawn up. It was surrounded by a rock wall.

Mary and the Colonel lived downstairs, and the kids lived upstairs. She was almost always pregnant. From 1901 to 1910, she would have six children. She also mothered Eva, the Colonel's daughter from his first marriage.

Sometimes, Mary heard stories about the Colonel's drinking and partying on his many business trips. Even the Colonel's Apache bodyguard acknowledged his boss threw "wild parties" in New York.

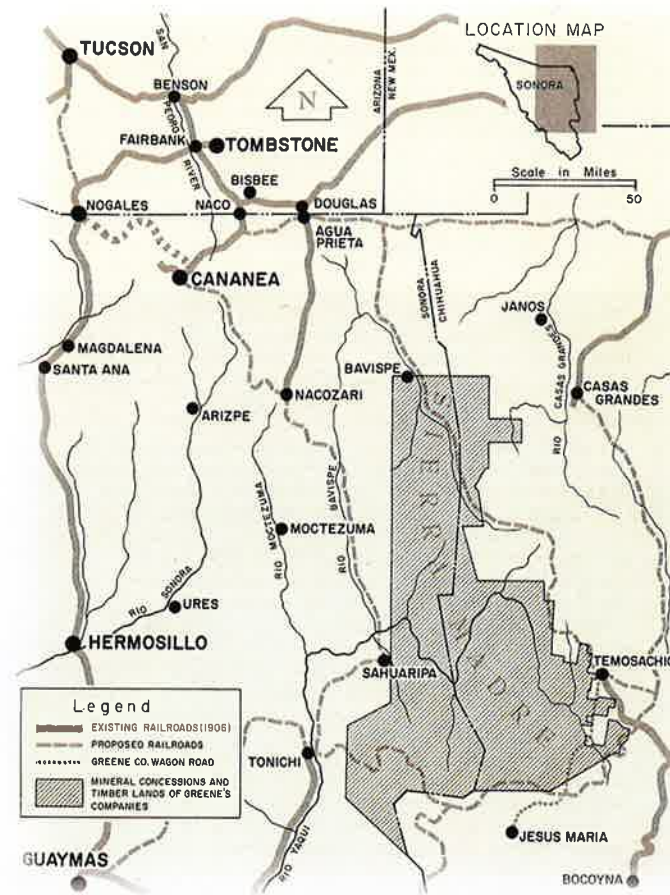
Mary viewed the Colonel differently. When he was home, she said, he had only one or two whiskeys before dinner. As for that legendary temper, she claimed he only yelled at her one time, when they were coming back from a trip to the mines, his horses spooked and she wouldn't jump out of his buggy at his command. She said he only swore once in front of her, and that was when he hurt his finger on a train window and said "damn."

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IN THE AMERICAN WEST, from about 1890 to 1920, poor workplace conditions for underpaid miners spawned a rampant socialist movement and a rash of mine strikes. Only 40 miles south of the border, the Colonel's mines employed thousands, but American miners were paid more money than Mexican miners for the same work, and Mexican miners were paid more money than Chinese-immigrant miners.

The Colonel insisted that socialist "out-

## Greene's Mexican Empire



side agitators" kicked off the June 1906 Cananea strike, in which thousands of Mexican miners demanded equal pay for equal work. The strike turned bloody. It began when Mexicans and Americans were shot at the Colonel's lumberyard (Mexicans say Americans shot first, and vice versa) and the Colonel met a crowd of marching demonstrators on a Cananea street. He stood in his horseless carriage, propping a big leg on the seat, dressed in a light summer suit with a white tie. He tried to explain, in Spanish, his reasons for not paying more. It didn't work. The demonstrators kept marching.

There are two different stories about what happened next.

The Colonel said he ordered his employees not to shoot demonstrators unless they were attacked first.

The Mexicans said the Colonel's men fired unexpectedly into the peaceful demonstration, killing an 11-year-old boy and several adults.

The strike was completely subdued in a few days, thanks to the arrival of American vigilantes and Mexican soldiers. There were executions. The handling of the strike was deeply offensive to Mexicans, who still view the event as a harbinger of the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

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THE STRIKE DROVE off some New York investors, and the Panic of 1907 drove off even more. On one day in 1907, stocks tumbled drastically. There was a run on banks, and sev-

eral became insolvent. Small investors grew skittish, and banks became very cautious about lending.

The Colonel's fortune had, by now, plummeted from an estimated \$50 million to \$14 million.

Desperate for money, the Colonel joined forces with two men, Thomas Cole and John Ryan. They eventually squeezed him out of his copper company and all but a few thousand dollars of his remaining fortune. "In fact, they broke him, but it was all cold-blooded business. Greene put himself in this vulnerable position, and could only trust his luck to get out whole," *The New York Times* reported in 1908.

He didn't get out whole.

The Colonel was crushed, emotionally and physically. He had developed a heart condition, and he was darkly depressed. His empire had vanished. So had his dreams. He jumped on a boat and sailed to Japan, which held endless fascination for Americans at the time.

A colleague sorted out the bankruptcies associated with the Colonel's companies while the Colonel purchased Japanese curiosities in Tokyo — brass lamps, a crab doorstop, and heavy samurai stirrups that could eviscerate a man or a beast.

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I'VE HEARD STORIES about the Colonel's dark mood when he returned to Cananea from Japan. Every day, when he had his morning coffee, he faced the copper mines that he developed, fought for and lost. His friends and relatives — people he'd hired, mentored and nurtured — were now suing him for mismanaging his companies.

But he still had to support his family. He still had his ranches on both sides of the border. He could still raise tens of thousands of cattle in Mexico, fatten them on his neighboring ranches in Arizona, and ship them off for slaughter. And he still had his beloved horses, which he kept in a stable near the Cananea mansion.

By 1911, he was beginning to dream big again — this time about damming up rivers — when his horses spooked on a Cananea street, throwing him out of the buggy. He broke several ribs and his clavicle, but he got up and walked toward the mansion. Pneumonia set in later in the week, and he soon died.

He was 58.

"Copper King is Taken by Death," *The New York Times* reported.

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HE LEFT ONLY a few thousand dollars, because he'd put the ranches in Mary's name. Mary had trouble raising the kids without him. She married her ranch manager, Charles Wiswall, about seven years after the Colonel died.

Mary died in 1955. The Greene family shipped the Colonel's remains from Los Angeles back to Cananea. His bones are buried next to hers.

After Mary died, the Mexican government expropriated her largest asset — the Colonel's ranch in Mexico. "Cananea is at last freed," one Mexican newspaper reported.

Stateside, the Colonel's adult children squabbled in court over the detritus of Mary's estate.

I eventually got his samurai stirrups. 