

FIRST DRAFT

Friendship and adventure blossomed in the Colorado Rockies 150 years ago



BOB SILBERNAGEL

In 1873, in the isolated grandeur of Estes Park, a strange friendship bloomed between a refined Englishwoman and a grizzled, one-eyed mountain man.

Isabella Bird, 42, was returning to England when she stopped in Colorado in autumn 1873 and decided to visit Estes Park.

Rocky Mountain Jim Nugent, who'd been mauled by a grizzly bear four years earlier and lost an eye in the fracas, greeted Bird and her male guide outside his rough cabin near the park.

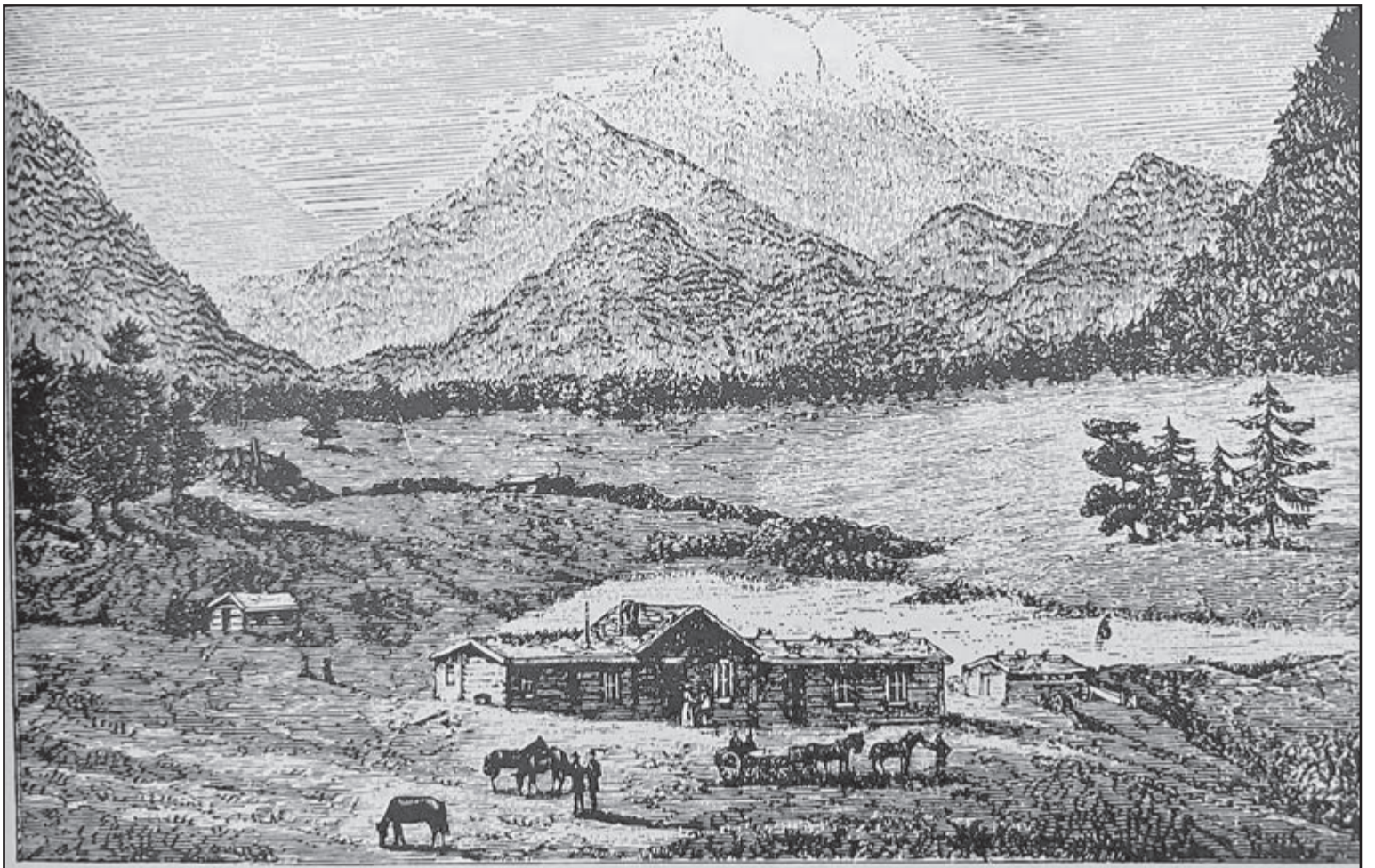
He cursed his barking dog, but upon seeing the woman, he stopped and offered her a drink of water from a battered tin can.

"We entered into conversation, and as he spoke I forgot both his reputation and appearance," Bird wrote in her book, "A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains." "For his manner was that of chivalrous gentleman, his accent refined, and his language easy and elegant."

After a brief chat, Bird turned toward Estes Park. But Jim hollered after her, "I hope you will allow me the pleasure of calling on you."

She did. They rode horses together, held long conversations, climbed Long's Peak and enjoyed each other's company.

Isabella Lucy Bird was born Oct. 15, 1831, in Yorkshire, England. She was a frail child with multiple ailments, and in 1850 she underwent surgery to remove a tumor from her spine. But she continued to suffer, and her doctor advised travel to



MY HOME IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

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A drawing of Isabella Bird's home during her 1873 stay in Estes Park. From "A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains." Main log structure is the central cabin occupied by Griffith Evans and his guests. Bird rented one of the outlying cabins from Griffith.

distract her from the pain.

Her first trip, to eastern Canada, occurred in 1854, and resulted in her first book, "The Englishwoman in America." As with her Rocky Mountains book, it was based on letters Isabella wrote to her sister Henrietta in Scotland.

Nugent's early life is less clear. He was probably born in Montreal, but the date is uncertain. He left home as a teenager

after a failed romance, and began trapping for fur companies. He told Bird he became an Indian scout for the U.S. Army. She suspected he was a marauder during the Kansas-Missouri border battles of the Civil War.

About 1868, he built his cabin on the road to Estes Park, where Bird first met him.

Bird had traveled to New Zealand in 1872. She then sailed to Hawaii, where she fell in love with the landscape and people. She rode to the top of a volcano and witnessed native islanders riding ocean waves on boards that she said looked like coffin tops.

She discovered something that initially appalled her Victorian sensibilities: Women in Hawaii — both natives and non-natives — rode horses astride. They put one leg on either side of the horse, instead of riding sidesaddle, the approved method for proper English ladies.

Riding sidesaddle wreaked havoc with Bird's back, and her guide suggested she try riding astride, in a Mexican saddle with a horn in front.

"It was only my strong desire to see the volcano which made me consent to a mode of riding against which I have so strong a prejudice," she wrote in a book about Hawaii.

By the time she reached the mainland, she had abandoned sidesaddles entirely, wearing a Hawaiian dress and Turkish trousers for riding. Before she left Colorado, she had joined Jim and others on wild gallops through the timber, up and down mountains and had herded stubborn longhorn cattle.

In Estes Park, she boarded with a jovial Welshman named Griffith Evans. He had a large main cabin, and several nearby cabins, one of which he rented to Bird.

Bird was a keen observer but could be brutal about people and places. Mormon women in Salt Lake City "were ugly, and their shapeless blue dresses hideous," she wrote. California's Native Americans were "degraded" and "perfect savages." Cheyenne, Wyoming, along

with Fort Collins and Longmont, Colorado, were ugly and unfriendly, marred by greed and debauchery.

But, when she reached Estes Park, Bird could barely contain her wonder.

"This is a glorious region," she wrote on Oct. 2, 1873.

"I live mainly out of doors and on horseback, wear my half-threadbare Hawaiian dress, (and) sleep sometimes under the stars on a bed of pine boughs."

Estes Park, she said, was "an unsurveyed 'no man's land,' and mine by right of love, appropriation and appreciation."

And there was Jim, whom she always addressed as Mr. Nugent. He recited poetry to her, discussed nature, religion and current events. He was charming, loved by all children and most women who encountered him, she said. But he was also dangerous, especially when drinking.

In early October, Isabella, Jim and two young men set out to climb Long's Peak, the 14,259-foot mountain now within the boundaries of Rocky Mountain National Park. She described the ordeal in a lengthy chapter in her book.

The hero of the expedition was Mountain Jim, who refused to let her give up. "Jim dragged me up, like a bale of goods, by sheer force of muscle," she wrote.

She believed he was in love with her, but he didn't suggest marriage. And she was glad. "His life, in spite of a certain dazzle ... is a ruined and wasted one," she declared.

She left Estes Park on Oct. 20 riding a horse named Birdie, and made a 400-mile solo journey that took her to Denver, Colorado Springs, Manitou Springs, South Park, then back to Estes Park. The Park, she said, was more beautiful than any place she visited in Colorado.

She reconnected with Jim, who poured out his soul to her in a three-hour conversation during a snowstorm. He told her of his depravity in his ear-

lier life, but made her promise not to reveal any details. They argued but made up a few days later, and Jim accompanied Isabella to Greeley in early December, where she boarded a train and left Colorado for good.

Her last vision of Jim was of him riding away "with his golden hair yellow in the sunshine, slowly leading the beautiful mare over the snowy plains back to Estes Park."

Isabella Bird returned to England, but soon embarked on more adventures. She traveled to Japan, China, Korea and Malaya. When she returned home, her sister Henrietta died, and Isabella married a physician named John Bishop. But he died in 1886, leaving her with a substantial inheritance. She set sail again, this time as a missionary. Nearing age 60, she headed to India, Tibet, Kurdistan and Turkey. When she was 70, she made her first trip to Africa.

In 1892, she became the first woman to join Great Britain's Royal Geographical Society. She spoke before the House of Commons and won a variety of international accolades. She died in October 1904.

Jim Nugent didn't fare so well. In June 1874, he was shot by Griffith Evans outside Evans' cabin. They reportedly argued over Griffith's plans to lease most of Estes Park to the English Earl of Duravan. Nugent lingered for three months, but died in September 1874. Griffith was not charged with a crime.

Sources: "A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains," by Isabella L. Bird; "The Hawaiian Archipelago," by Isabella L. Bird; "Love in the Park," by Marshall Sprague, American Heritage magazine, February 1967; "Historical Background for Rocky Mountain National Park," National Park Service, www.npshistory.com/series/berkeley/rensch3/rensch3f.htm.

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Isabella Bird circa 1899, wearing a Manchurian gown.

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