The Colorado Rockies in 1874, Part II

Last week Clark Strong, a native of Winsted, was in the midst of a Colorado vacation. The time is July 1874, two years prior to Colorado's admission to the Union. The letter was written to his minister back in Winsted, but the envelope has been lost, and with it the name of the addressee. The party is enroute to Grays Peak, a 14,270-foot mountain located directly atop the Continental Divide, some fifty miles west of Denver.

"At 4 PM we left Georgetown for Grays Peak, a distance of 15 miles. For the first 8 miles following a canyon where the road was not very mountainous, but on either side of us as we were wending our way westward were sublime views of very high ranges and peaks. About six o'clock we reached a place at the base of the mountain road leading in the direction of Grays Peak, and while our ponies were feeding upon grass by the roadside, we sat upon a log and from our saddlebags took our lunch and ate. We were then fresh for climbing the mountain steeps before us, and three miles up these brought us to Kelso's Cabin or Grove's Hotel, only 3 miles from the peak. Here we stopped for the night and on these windy heights 11,200 feet above sea level, we found a good fire not only a pleasure, but also a necessity. The middle of the day is warm, but the nights often produce ice in July and August one half inch thick. This weather suited me, for it kept my slow liver ticking without any other medicine.

This house is kept by Mrs. G. M. Lane, a lady of intelligence and rich expression in frontier life and is only open during the summer months for the accommodation of tourists visiting Grays Peak and the mines near there. The snow here during the entire winter is said to be from 6 to 8 feet deep and packed so hard that loaded teams from the mines pass over the top from late autumn till early spring. During the summer of 1873, upwards of 500 people stopped over night at Kelso's Cabin enroute to the peak. Some were Germans, some English, but most of them Americans. A horseback ride of 25 miles that day inclined us to early rest, and under bed covering sufficient for a November night in Connecticut. Our sleep was sound and we slept notwithstanding the babbling streams just a few feet from our bedroom window.

Early next morning we were off on our ponies for Grays Peak, being clad for a wintry trip. One mile of wagon road brought us to the trail, which we found rough, stony and steep. The stones beneath our pony's feet seemed like a newly macadamized road, though the broken stones were much coarser and more loosely packed. Except near the base, the trail is zig-zag all the way up and in some of the steepest places the angles are made every 8 or 10 or 12 feet. We stopped every two or three minutes to give our ponies rest. We passed many patches of snow above, melting and running clear and refreezing. Before reaching the summit, we felt a good deal of stretching of the lungs caused by the rarified air of so high a region. Our ponies felt it too; their nostrils wide stretched to double their ordinary size seemed quite too small for such high up work. Such a test of the nobleness of the horse we certainly never saw before. They were only ponies weighing about 750 pounds, but were indeed beautiful examples of courage, patience and perseverance.

Two hours brought us to the summit of Grays Peak, 14,254 feet above sea level. None of us dismounted on the way up. The summit, not many rods long, without descent to the east or west, is shaped very much like an elephant's back and covered entirely with the same kind of broken stones that pave the trail. In appearance they resemble granite.

Standing here upon the vertebra of the continent, facing the east, the eye can stretch far away upon the Great Plains and their winding streams can be discerned by the Cottonwood trees that line their banks. The air is so clear that the naked eye can easily reach 100 miles or more.

Looking to the southeast we see Pikes Peak, 80 or 90 miles distant, whose towering height of 14,216 feet overshadow the lesser peaks around it and the black ridge extending from it to the southeast as far as the eye can reach. Nearer, we look down upon a large level body of fertile land extending many miles in length and breadth at an elevation of 9,840 feet above sea level, called South Park. As we are from 4,000 to 5,000 feet above, we can see its patches of timber and the course of its numerous streams with great distinctness. It is completely hemmed in by mountain ranges.

Beyond this park, Mt. Lincoln towers to the height of 14,123 feet about 40 miles distant from the peak upon which we stand.

Turning our faces to the west, we see on a small plateau, at the base of Grays Peak, Lake Barmar, a shining little sheet of water nestled deep down amongst mountain peaks. Looking a little higher, we see the southwest end of Middle Park, a terrain as large as all the New England states, and shut in on all sides by towering mountains. Its surface is undulating, having all the elements of a farming country and only waiting for development by man. Extensive forests of timber, game in great variety, hot sulphur and other medicinal springs, numerous trout streams and valuable mines are to be found here.

Those who wish to see the native wildness of this park must come soon, for the advent of men is making rapid changes. Several wagon roads are already opened to this place, and the elk and bear will soon disappear.

Raising our eyes still higher and looking far away upon the Pacific Slope, we have a most enchanting view of the Blue Range, and the eye can reach no farther in that direction.

We now face the north and within rifle shot, a little to the left, towers Irwins Peak, more steeple-like from our standpoint than any other. It is said to be 14 feet higher than Grays. In 1863, Richard Irwin, a Canadian explorer, was the first to ascend this peak. He pitched his tent there and raised the U.S. flag, the staff of which is still standing.

From where we stand looking north as far as we could stretch our sight, there were peaks upon peaks, most beautifully varying in form and dress. But the grandest were James Peak and Longs Peak towering in the distance above them all, the former being 13,262 and the latter 14,050 feet above sea level.

During all this time our ponies stand on this sublime height with head and eyes drooping; but what of that? Are there not men that would have done the same? I remember once riding over the Hartland hills in Conn. and upon reaching their summit, looked down upon the beautiful landscape of the Conn. Valley. Two men were hewing timber by the roadside. Stopping my horses, I said to them 'You have a beautiful picture here before you'. Looking up, holding on to their axes and casting their eyes around towards the valley, one of them replied, "I don't see it." Do you think those men would have seen anything on Grays Peak? Yes, they would have seen the logs that were in the pines upon the mountains, and the roads and trails leading to them."

-To be continued-

Historic Bytes
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