



UTE PASS HISTORICAL SOCIETY & Pikes Peak Museum

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Climbing Pikes Peak 1943

Memoir by Mary Lou Nelson Penny

As soon as we had taken our last finals of the spring semester at K.U., Jun and I packed our bags to catch the next train to Colorado Springs. We had been married February 6, and this was to be our honeymoon! It was war time, and life was not normal in just about every aspect of our lives. We were nineteen, very much in love, and life was exciting.

Love is not quite all one needs in life. We didn't have a car or money tucked away, but we did have loving and understanding parents. My dear, sweet Dad (Dr. W.O. Nelson) took us and our bags in to town and across the river to the railroad station, slipped some bills into our pockets and kissed us goodbye before heading to the hospital to care for his patients. It used to be that Lawrence had both Santa Fe and Rock Island railroad lines, each with its own station and separated by the Kaw (Kansas) River. In order to arrive in Colorado Springs, we needed to take the Rock Island. The old song declaring, "The Rock Island line is a mighty fine line" proved true.

The Rock Island delivered us safely to its station in Colorado Springs. We breathed in the cool dry air of the Rockies, grabbed our bags and looked for Mr. Armentrout who would drive us up Ute Pass to Green Mountain Falls in his huge old touring car, called "The Stage." With all the windows down, we were driven through Manitou, past Patsy's with the tempting fragrance of candy in the making, past the oriental shops and the high pitched sound of tinkling bells, past the Indian shops with the rhythmic beat of the Indian drums. Then we passed the massive form of the kneeling Indian pouring bubbling Manitou soda water into a bowl just as he had for all those years.

There was only one other passenger on The Stage with Jun and me. She was very quiet, but as we moved on up and into the Pass, I had a chance to speak with her. As we talked, I began to realize that this was my childhood friend, Mary Olive Dusenbury! What fun she and I had when we were about ten. She was one of the lucky ones who got to live in Green Mountain Falls all year long. She taught me so much about the trails, the plants, the two streams—even how to make a toy birch bark canoe. Happy memories. We had both grown up. Now we were back in Green Mountain Falls, we parted—she to her cabin and Jun and I up to ours.

Getting into our cabin was always a little bit of a problem. Yes, we had a key. In fact, we had a handful of keys. There were keys for the front door, the back door, the little cabin—front and back, underneath both the big and little cabin. Sometimes a lock wouldn't work, so we would just get a new padlock and put it on. Well, don't worry. We got in. It took little time to "retake" the cabin. We were the first to get back that spring, so we needed to try the faucets, turn on the refrigerator, open windows on the sleeping porch, to enjoy that special smell of the cabin before we cranked up the old wood burning range to warm up the kitchen and bathroom.



Edgar Armentrout Stageline, 1946.

Three round trips per day.

Wellington Collection

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Nobody was there to challenge our right to sleep on the sleeping porch. It was ours! The next morning, we rejoiced to do as we pleased--sleep in, cook our bacon and eggs on the old range (having to get a fire going again), hiking down to check the stream, the lake, the birds, the clouds in the sky--what freedom! The mountains loomed before us--begging to be climbed. Our little cabin is perched on the "first step" up on Mount Esther, but we decided that it might be a good idea to acclimate before heading up to the top of this, "our" mountain.

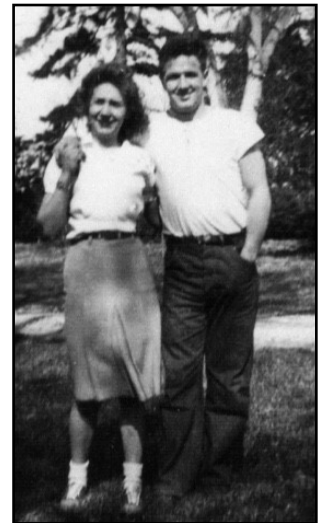
After a couple of days we could wait no longer and prepared to hike up Mount Esther. Jun was a pretty big guy (track and football), so I packed a good sized lunch for us to enjoy, put it in our one back pack along with potato chips, a couple of Hershey candy bars and a couple of bottles of pop. We always considered it wise to start our hikes first thing in the morning as that gave us a better chance to get back home before the rain, which usually fell around four in the afternoon. It was about nine or so before we left the cabin.

Because I had been taught to not trespass people's property, we headed down the road from the cabin before catching the trail up Mount Esther. It was always an exciting moment to leave the road, head down toward the stream, pass by the giant boulder with a "K" painted on it and leave behind the little rustic bridge that crossed the stream. Upward, always upward we began our adventure. We passed the Kirkpatrick cabins and a couple others that are near the stream, then on along the old trail that followed it. Under the aspen, blue spruce, fir and pines were small wildflowers, grasses, sedum, gravel, boulders (small, medium and large), waterfalls=small, medium and large-shade=cool and sunshine=warm and warmer-all along the upward path.

We were young (19) and in pretty good shape, but with the steep incline and reduced amount of oxygen we were both breathing audibly and needed to stop often. One good excuse to stop was to enjoy our pop and candy bars. Later on we cupped our hands and drank from the stream. We would each find a good boulder to sit on, catch our breath and enjoy the beauty around us—sunlight with shadows playing on the wet river rocks and tiny plant life tucked around and under the boulders, the rushing tumbling stream—peace and beauty, God's gift to us. Jun was enjoying all this that I had loved all my life.

A little over half way up the mountain we had to go around and past the power house, a medium sized red metal building that had been there ever since I could remember. We always pointed it out to visitors as we could see it and the beautiful Crystal Falls beside it from our cabin and the village below. We appreciated it for its giving us electric power that it had produced with the huge growling machines that were fed by the rushing, roaring waterfall of Crystal Creek. This was the same stream that flowed down the mountain to below our cabin to join Fountain Creek, and then the Platte River, and then the Arkansas River, and then the Mississippi River, and then the Gulf of Mexico.

That day the old tin building was silent, but I remember clearly my anxiety it had caused me as a child. There was the loud roaring of the falls but the power plant was a roaring red monster that nearly deafened us as we struggled to get around it on the steep slope of the mountain. The whole pathway was made up of boulders of varying sizes that had tumbled down here following the great flood of Noah's time. In time, there was deterioration of the granite and plants started growing among this mass of boulders that had tumbled down from the heights of Pike's Peak. Eventually a forest developed that covered this "first step" up the great mountain.



Jun and
Mary Lou Penny

*Photos Provided by
Mary Lou Penny*

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After Jun and I passed the power plant, we still had about a third of Mount Esther to climb before we would reach the top. On this stretch of the trail, there was no shade to give us relief from the heat of the sun. There were few trees growing on the upper reaches of these two mountains, Esther and her “twin”, Rebecca, the mountain on the other side of the stream. There had been a great fire, we were told, which had burned from Cheyenne Mountain clear over to Wilkerson Pass many years ago. There were still many charred, still decaying tree trunks lying on the ground when I had hiked up along this same route as a child. Change comes slowly at this high altitude.

You know, when you are in Woodland Park and look out to see the Peak, there is that stretch of the highway that zigzags back and forth multiple times over on the right side of the Peak? That is called the switch-backs, short lines (roads), one above the other with a U turn at each end-there must be five or six!



Well, when I see it, or even bring it back to my mind, I can tell you all you will ever want to know about it. It was overwhelming when it was before me, in reality, I had to go back and forth along each part of that road (with Jun always up ahead of me) and struggling to go up to the next one (zig or zag) above me. Many thoughts were going through my mind-questions: Whose idea is this? Is Jun unhappy with our marriage? Am I going to come out of this alive? How can we possibly make it to the top? I was struggling to get the next breath and had to keep telling my legs, “You can do it!” Of course Jun was struggling too, but I was thinking, “It must be easier for him or we wouldn’t be doing this”. Of course Jun was not having an easy time of it. I thought of Louie Unser and wondered what he thought of this road as he had whizzed along it-back and forth, back and forth. Louie almost always won the annual race up Pike’s Peak. Each year Dad would stop at his gas station in Manitou near the statue of the Indian pouring out the Manitou water. Louie would adjust the carburetor and our engine would be happy to be in the mountains.

Of course the cars had to stay on the road, but why should I have to do that? I decided to take a short cut and climb straight up from the road I was on to the next road above me. I might even catch up and could hike closer to Jun. We could shorten the climb that way. That proved to be too exhausting. I stumbled, grabbed hold of some grass, slipped and was afraid I was going to fall and roll on down-nothing to stop me. With great effort, I crawled to the next level.

Finally, there were no more switchbacks. We had reached the top of that part of the mountain and soon were over to the place where people stopped their cars to look down into the “bottomless pit”. We didn’t spend much time enjoying the view from there. It was just after that location, as I recall, that we looked up and saw a plume of grey smoke going up into the sky near the right side of the summit. “We’ll catch the train down!” With renewed vigor, but still needing more oxygen than was available, we attacked the Peak head-on. Nothing was going to stop us now. We were almost “home free.”

The summit house was open, but there was no train on the track! It had already gone down. The smoke was just from the engine as it held the train back from zipping down out of control. The thoughts we had of the usual doughnuts and hot chocolate didn’t have much appeal. The man behind the counter wasn’t very friendly. We looked at each other and tried to figure out what we could do. “Would you let us sleep on the floor?” “No!” In a little bit he came back to us with a proposition. The cook had gone down to the Springs to spend the night. We could have his room for ten dollars. We didn’t have ten dollars. Our thinking was,

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"It's all downhill from here. Let's rest a few minutes and head down." The sun was just setting and there was a beautiful sunset starting to take over the western and northern sky. I guess I was a little "high" on the lack of oxygen and started running down the cog railroad tracks. Jun ran and grabbed me to make me stop. I must have been thinking "Let's finish this trip fast!"

It was still a long way down. We continued taking note of the beauty of the gigantic sunset dominating all of the northern sky: streaks of bright red with lines of gold riding above them. They were like fingers pointing toward the sun that was sinking fast in the west. Blue clouds with shades of pink around the edges and some separate smaller dark blue ones that led our eyes toward the plains. Out there hanging over the plains was a huge balloon of a thunderhead with pure gold outlining its dimensions. Kansas could expect the coming storm.



Photo by Judy Perkins

It was not long before our descent quickly took that from our view. We followed the cog line that men had laid a hundred years before we were to depend on it to lead us down to Manitou. Thankfully the small steam engines were capable of scaling the heights of this great mountain. That must be about eight thousand feet-almost straight up on some of the stretches-from Manitou to the summit.

The sun was giving us less and less light. At the time we were there, I remember thinking, "I want to remember what it is like being here in the dark tonight." I do remember, and I find it delightful that one spark of a recollection brings more and more to mind. We had no flash light, but there was a fairly large piece of the moon in the sky giving us all the light it had to offer. Sometimes the moon was hidden from us by a part of the mountain or a cloud would diminish the light. Most of the time there was scarcely any sound, but the movement of the air was generally upward, and sometimes there was a very strong breeze in our faces. Once we did hear the sound of an animal's movement over by the forest. What could it be? Eyes do not shine unless there is light reflecting in them, and we often pointed out to each other where we could see a pair of eyes shining not too far from us. We were thankful for whatever the moon could do for us, and we tried to caution ourselves to not let our imaginations delude us. But we also wondered how many eyes were watching us. What kind of thoughts did those critters have? We stayed as close together as we could.

There were gulches and canyons across which there were trestles to carry the train. We knew some of them were high (we couldn't see how high). Some were long (we experienced that). Jun was usually able to take them standing up and always with his knees flexed so that he was ready to deal with whatever might be different from what he was anticipating. It made me remember that he was used to diving from the high board at the swimming pool. I always stayed closer to the ground. In this combat roll, I knelt down as we approached each trestle and accomplished each mission on my hands and knees. At times there seemed to be total darkness, and the moon gave us little light--- especially in the canyons. I was not sure whether I was safer in front of him or behind him. He was agreeable with whatever I felt I needed. It was a worry whether or not we would know when we were nearing a trestle. The blessing is that he could smell the creosote as we approached a trestle. I had burned out my sense of smell in chemistry class, and was surprised to learn he could give us that warning.

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As nearly as I understood it, we had about nine miles of track to reach our destination, the safe haven of Manitou. Finally we saw a light, then a few more. How lovely those lights appeared to us. I remember looking across the way, over to the right. We were passing a large house with lights aglow inside. A man came to the large window, and I watched, as he pulled the drapery closed. Jun was intent on our goal and had not noticed my lingering. I hurried to catch up. Street lights—how beautiful! No lights were on in stores we passed going down until we got to the last one, a lunch room at the intersection. We asked to borrow their phone to make a local call.

Betty Liebrand and I had been in Girl Scouts together in Lawrence and then pledged the same sorority at K.U. Jun and I sometimes double dated with her, but we knew she was living in Colorado Springs for the summer. Her father was an officer out at Fort Carson. It was questionable that we should call anybody at this time of the night, about ten thirty. But this was pretty close to being an emergency! Betty said for us to come on over. They would be leaving first thing in the morning to go to work, but she would leave the door unlocked and would leave the bedroom door opened at the top of the stairs. We told her we would catch a city bus and head her way.

The bus driver seemed to be a nice fellow. He was. When we asked him for a transfer to the Broadmoor area, he said he couldn't do that as his was the only bus out, and he was heading to the barn. All the other buses had stopped running for the night. He must have heard our moans, turned to look at us and said, "You folks look pretty tired." What an over-statement that was. When we told him our plight, he said that address was not too far off his route. He would take us over to Cheyenne Boulevard where the Leibbrands lived. Yes, sometimes angels appear as men, and we had just met one.

When we awoke in the morning, the Liebrands had left. The house was still. Neither of us could move without suffering. Jun explained to me that this was the way he felt every year after the first football practice in the fall. We were sunburned and wind burned. Our hair looked like we had been in a tornado. The white sailor hat Jun wore with the brim turned down, and my old cowboy hat with the leather thong to hold it on had done as good a job as possible. Our jeans were really pretty well shot, but we scrubbed ourselves clean and saw in the mirror what the sun and wind had done to our faces. The backpack did need attention. The sandwiches were still in there, a bit squashed and ready for the Liebrand's garbage pail. We dusted off our clothes and headed out to catch a bus to Manitou and hitch hike up the Pass to Green Mountain Falls.

The cabin looked more beautiful than it had ever looked. The bacon and eggs had never tasted better.

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Gazebo and Land Office,
 September 8, 2020, Green Mountain Falls
Photo by Jon Van Sant

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Dear Patrons,

This is a great big thanks to all of you who stepped up with generous donations to help with our budget deficit during this Pandemic. With your help and some grant requests, we will be able to get through the rest of this year in good shape.

It looks like we won't be able to do our annual Patron Event next January because of the Pandemic, but we should be able to do it in 2022. It has been the year that everything was put on hold. We have decided to look at virtual ways to continue our mission of sharing and preserving our history. May you all stay well and stay safe.



Donna Finicle
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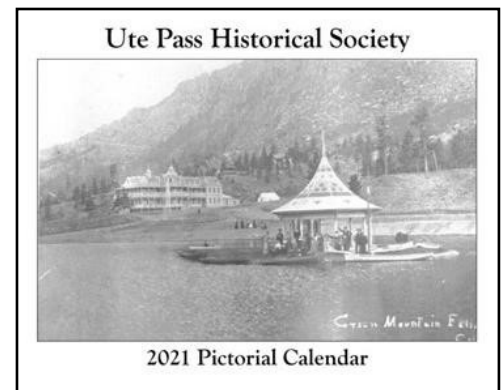
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82nd Annual Bronc Day, 2020
Judy Perkins and visitor at the Land Office
Photo by Darlene Jensen



Volunteer Joe Olds finishing up
repairs on the Land Office
Photo by Judy Perkins



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