

A Portion of
CHAPTER THREE
“Rocky Mountain Jim”

From “The Story of Early Estes Park” by Enos A. Mills
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James Nugent, “Rocky Mountain Jim”, appears to have come to Estes Park in 1868, and built his cabin in Muggins Gulch, on the road from Estes Park to Lyons. His cabin stood at the mouth of the first gulch on the right as one descends Muggins Gulch. Jim’s associates, his uncertain and irregular past, his braggadocio, bravery, chivalry, liking for poetry, and writing of doggerel, his debauches, moods, kind acts, his white mule, his picturesque dress, his romantic association with Miss Bird, the cowardly manner in which he was shot and his dramatic death—all these make him the star character who has thus far played in Estes Park scenes. Meddling parents with a lovely maiden in the background may have started him on his reckless way. He may have been “a nephew of General Beauregard” and hailed from the South, but he also claimed to have been the “son of an English army officer stationed in Canada”. He seems to have served with both the Hudson Bay and American Fur companies, and to have bushwhacked in the Kansas “border warfare”, and may have been with both Quantrell and Hamilton.

“Rocky Mountain Jim’ came down from Estes Park last Tuesday, bringing along 300 pounds of trout for a share of which he has our thanks. Jim never forgets a friend, nor an enemy, either.”—Boulder News, November 14, 1873.

The Boulder News of October 17, 1873, contains this item:

“Rocky Mountain Jim’ is talking of writing a book. Jim has, under a rough crest, no mean abilities, coupled with a heart that beats right, and if he writes a book we predict it will

not be tedious and unreadable.”

It is known that Jim had a mass of written matter just before he was shot, but I have failed to find any of it. The refrain of one of his love ditties was—

“While in Muggins Gulch not far away,
Lived a poor trapper.”

Jim hunted, trapped, kept a few cattle, and made frequent trips to Denver and Boulder. On a few of these trips he was drunk and quarrelsome, but generally he was jovial and generous. All old timers along the way between the Park and Denver with whom I have talked, say that they were “always glad to see Jim and his white mule coming”.

July 6, 1869 he lost an eye and very nearly lost his life, in a fight with a bear in Middle Park. While creeping upon some deer, near Grand Lake, armed with only a revolver and knife, his dog came running up, closely pursued by a bear and her cubs. The bear at once turned on Jim, who fired four shots into her before she downed him; then with his knife he continued fighting until he became unconscious. He was lying in a pool of blood when he came to, and near by was the dead bear. He was very weak and terrible “chawed up”. His left arm was dislocated, his scalp nearly torn off, and one eye was missing. He crawled to his camp, mounted his faithful mule and started for Grand Lake. Twice he became unconscious and fell off . But each time, when he revived, the mule was found near by and remounting with great pain and difficulty, the journey was continued. At Grand Lake his yells for a time frightened the few settlers, who were expecting an Indian raid. When, at last, they ventured out and found Jim lying unconscious, one remarked: “Indians are ’round, sure; here is a man scalped.”

Later, in Estes Park, Jim appeared to Miss Anna E. Dickinson in this light:

“...at “Evans’s”, in front of a crackling wood fire, with time a plenty for confabulation, a confabulation that was made more “pecooliar” by the presence of “Rocky Mountain Jim”, who, having peregrinated up to see us, sat contentedly and looked at us with his one bright eye, finally in quaint language and with concise vividness narrating many a tale of bear and other desperate fights, one of which had two years before nearly ended his days—had broken his right arm, stove in three ribs, torn out his left eye, and “chawed” him up generally, and yet left spirit and grit enough to tell a good story well and to get through a close shave bravely.”

The lines that follow are a condensation of what Miss Bird wrote concerning Jim:

“Among the scrub not far from the track, was a rude, black log cabin; with smoke coming out of the roof and window. It looked like the den of a wild beast. The mud roof was covered with lynx, beaver and other skins laid out to dry, beaver paws were pinned out on the logs, a part of a carcass of a deer hung at one end of the cabin, a skinned beaver lay in front of a heap of peltry just within the door, and antlers of deer and old horseshoes lay about the den. The den was dense with smoke and very dark, littered with hay, old blankets, powder flasks, old books and magazines, and relics of all kinds. The owner, a broad, thick-set man about middle height, with an old cap on his head, with a hunting suit falling almost to pieces, a digger’s scarf knotted about his waist, a knife in his belt and a revolver sticking out of his breast pocket of his coat. His face was remarkable. He was a man about forty-five and must have been strikingly handsome. He had large gray-blue eyes, deeply set, a handsome, aquiline nose, a very handsome mouth. His face was smooth-shaven except for a dense mustache and imperial. Tawny hair in thin, uncared-for curls, fell over his collar. Desperado was written in large letters all over him. He had no better seat to offer me than a log, but he offered it grateful unconsciousness. I read my letter, ‘The Ascent of Long’s Peak,’ and was sincerely interested with the taste and acumen of his criticism on the style. He is a true child of nature; his eye brightened and his whole face became radiant, and at last tears rolled down his cheek, when I read the account of the glory of the sunrise. He then read us a very able paper on Spiritualism which he was writing. He told stories of his early youth, and of the great sorrow which had led him to embark on a lawless and desperate life. His voice trembled and tears rolled down his cheek. Essentially an actor, was he, I wonder, posing on the previous

day in the attitude of desperate remorse, to impose upon my credulity or frighten me; or was it a genuine and unpremeditated outburst of passionate regret for the life which he had thrown away? I cannot tell, but I think it was the last...Yesterday a gentleman came who I thought was another stranger, strikingly handsome, well dressed and barely forty, with sixteen shining gold curls falling down his collar—the redoubtable desperado. Evans courteously pressed him to stay and dine with us, and he showed singular conversational dexterity in talking with the stranger, who was a well informed man. I left on Birdie, Evans riding with me as far as Nugent's. I should not have been able to leave if Mr. Nugent had not offered his services (to take her over the snow-drifted roads and ice-streams to near Loveland). Evans said I could be safer and better cared for with no one. He added: 'His heart is good and kind, as kind as ever beat. He's a great enemy of his own, but he's living pretty quietly for the last four years.' The two men (Evans and Jim) shook hands kindly. Some months later 'Rocky Mountain Jim' fell by Evans own hand—shot from Evans' doorstep while riding past his cabin."

Evans was drunk when he shot Jim. The stories that Jim was in love with Evans' daughter, and that he insulted her, are stories that seem not to have become known until after the shooting. Evans and Jim were incompatible; both drank heavily at times, and they had several quarrels. Evans was associated with those who were scheming to secure fraudulently the whole of Estes Park for Lord Dunraven. Jim opposed his land scheme, and opposed it with threatening armed presence, and his pen. At the time that Jim was shot he seemed to be making a winning fight against the land scheme. Naturally the old-timers were with Jim, and a consensus of their opinions is that "English gold killed Jim for opposing the land scheme".

Evans told the writer that he shot Jim for insulting his daughter. But incidental remarks of Evans to the writer concerning the affair did not harmonize with the studied assertion. A claim is made that there was a woman in the case; a woman to whom Dunraven and Jim were both paying attention. The common belief of the neighborhood at the time of the shooting was that "Evans was hired to do it". It does seem that Evans was only an agent when he did the shooting, but his hatred for Jim and the hatred of his backer, the land unpleasantry and the

whisky all combined in causing Evans to do the shooting.

A friend, by the name of Brown, who was with Jim at the time of the shooting, gave Abner E. Sprague an account of it a day or two after it happened. Here is the substance of it: Jim and a friend were returning from a ride and stopped to water their horses at the little stream by Evans' house. Evans and Dunraven were in one of Evans cabins drinking—possibly Evans was being toned up to the deed. When Jim left the stream Dunraven, putting a double-barrel shotgun into Evans hands, said: "I want you to protect me." Evans took the gun, and as Jim passed near, fired two shots in rapid succession, and without warning. The first shot missed Jim and hit an old stage coach that stood by; but Jim, as the result of the second shot fell from his horse with a load of buckshot in his body. At the trial one witness swore that Dunraven said to Evans: "Give him another; he's not dead yet."

This fellow, Brown, disappeared a few days after the shooting and has never been heard of since. It is probable that Lord Dunraven paid this important witness to disappear.

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