

QUEEN OF THE ROCKIES

She Skied Over
Engineer Mountain

By

Carolyn Fountain Ballew



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Martha Gray Carr

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Ballew, Carolyn Fountain
Queen of the Rockies

DATE DUE	
JUL 9 '79	JE 22 '94
APR 7 '80	AP 3 '95
JUL 22 '80	SE 29 '95
MAY 23 1981	BE 19 '95
JUL 8 1981	
AG 21 '81	
ILL 1-28 '86	
Comstock, M	
AG 07 '88	
IV 28 '88	
JE 06 '91	

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I read with interest this account by Carolyn Ballew of Amarillo, Texas, and commend it to the reader for its vivid descriptions of a most unusual adventure.

Her earlier booklet about the Rocky Mountain area around Lake City concerns the unexplained disappearance of Eugene Wilson from his heritage ranch near Powder Horn. She is continuing to gather information regarding the whereabouts of Eugene Wilson.

Mrs. Ballew has published a number of articles and stories in various magazines and newspapers and raises a family in Amarillo between her numerous exploration parties into the Rocky Mountain area of the West.

J. R. Hallingworth



Carolyn F. Ballew

Carolyn Ballew

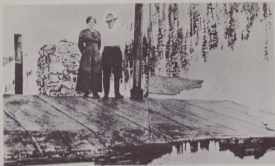
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Cover By Mansel Wilbanks



Martha and Fred Gray on rooftop at Animas Forks, Colorado, shortly before skiing over Engineer Mountain in 1918. The snow is as high as the roof in places.

QUEEN OF THE ROCKIES

By

Carolyn Fountain Ballew

It was almost dark when Martha and Fred Gray skied into the tiny mining town of Animas Forks, Colorado, and made their way to Harry Little's log cabin. Twelve to fifteen feet of snow covered the surrounding San Juan Mountains and only the roof of the small cabin was visible.

"Looks like we'll have a lot of digging to do before we can stay in there tonight!" exclaimed Fred.

"When Harry sent us the key, he said there would be a shovel under the door, Fred," replied Martha, taking off her skis.

The five mile journey from their home in Eureka had been up hill all the way and the weary young couple rested for a short while before digging their way like gophers down through the snow to get the cabin door open.

After building a roaring fire and preparing a warm meal, Martha

and Fred settled down for the night. "You know, Fred! That old bachelor sure has a good bed!" she said, just before turning over and going to sleep.

Tomorrow they would head for Engineer Mountain — towering 13,190 feet in the distance. Fred had planned to make the treacherous journey alone and send Martha and their furniture by train to their prospective new home in the Lake Fork Valley. However, when Martha heard his plans to ski over Engineer, she was determined to accompany him. "It's too expensive to buy a ticket for me, and to pay for shipping our belongings too, Fred; so I'm going with you!"

Knowing that his wife of two years was a good skier and capable of making the difficult trip over the rugged mountains, Fred did not protest.

Martha had made her way to the West from Joplin, Missouri, with relatives in a covered wagon when she was only a young girl. Her uncle and aunt settled in Clayton, New Mexico, with their three children in 1911. Vernon County, Missouri — where Martha Sager was born — was a long way off, and the determined young woman had a whole new life before her. She remained in Clayton with her relatives for a year before venturing to Durango, Colorado, where she found employment keeping house for various families.

By the time 1916 had rolled around, the energetic young woman had met Fred Gray, a blacksmith's helper, who was working at Sunnyside Mine in Eureka. After a two year courtship, they were married at Aztec, New Mexico.

Young Gray had formerly driven six-horse ore wagons all over the mountainous terrain around Silverton, Eureka, and Ouray, Colorado — hauling ore, machinery, and supplies for the Ashenfelter Company, the Johnny Donald Company, and many other such companies. He drove his wagons to remote places in the San Juans that are only accessible by jeep today.

Martha's industrious young husband had also carried mail from Ouray to Silverton over a narrow, winding wagon road — blasted out of the side of a high, rocky mountain, known today as the Million Dollar Highway. Snow slides often got forty feet deep in the winter months, and Gray would go over the top carrying his mail, regardless of the danger involved. Ten to twelve feet of snow covered the ground round about.

In the spring he carried the mail by night before the snow began to thaw during the day. The horses knew the trails and they never faltered.

Spending the night in their friend's cabin was almost like a second honeymoon for the pair; for Fred had brought his bride to Animas Forks after their wedding, and they had resided there for a year before moving to Eureka. A saloon, a grocery store, and three families made up the hamlet of Animas Forks at the time. The three men were watchmen for different mines.

While living in Eureka, which was later destroyed by a flood on the Animas River, Martha often rode horseback to Ouray and back. While on these trips to the "Switzerland of America" she saw six-horse-



"Little Gray Home in the West" near Powderhorn, Colorado.



Martha and Fred Gray in their front yard.



Kitchen range purchased in 1918.



Martha frying fish on modern range.

teams pulling ore wagons over the narrow mountain road to Camp Bird Mine. It was not unusual for her to see thirty such teams at one time — delivering ore from various mines. The lead team of horses always matched. The second team of pointers also matched, as did the wheel team that was hitched to the wagon. A bay was matched to a bay, a black with a black, a gray with a gray, and a sorrell with a sorrell. "It was one of the most delightful sights one would wish to see!" said Martha. "They were beautiful!" These were memories she would never forget.

After spending a warm and cozy night in Harry Little's cabin near the Animas River, Martha and Fred awoke to find a bright sunny day awaiting them. They ate a good breakfast, donned their warmest ski clothes, and strapped their packs to their backs. Following the telephone line, they started out on their skis for Engineer Mountain. Finally they reached the high pass and breathlessly viewed the majestic beauty of the valleys below.

They crossed over the Continental Divide and skied to a vacant boarding house — a haven for miners in days past. While eating lunch at the old Frank Huff place, Martha noticed a huge coal-burning stove with a fire box in the center and an oven on each end. Marvelling at the sight of such a unique device in that out-of-the-way place, she exclaimed: "Fred, I've never seen such a stove in all my life!"

As the pair started down the steep slope from the mine and skied into an open valley full of snow, suddenly one of Fred's skis caught in the loop of a willow — obscured by the snow — causing him to trip and turn three complete somersaults in the air before landing head first into fifteen feet of snow. Martha laughed hilariously while Fred worked his way out of the deep snow and back onto his skis. When Fred had regained his composure, and his magnificent sense of humor had returned, he laughed as heartily as Martha at the unforeseen incident.

As the two followed the telephone line farther down the mountain through heavy timber, the snow began to stick to their skis — piling on thicker and thicker and making their journey more difficult. Then suddenly, without warning, the packed snow turned loose from their skis and they headed toward the trees like a streak of lightning. Now it was Fred's turn to laugh, for Martha flew past him — passing one tree after another before finally reaching out and grabbing a large tree stump, and hanging on until a grinning Fred came to her rescue.

It was dusk when they arrived at Rose's Cabin — 16 miles up Henson Creek from Lake City. Fred built a fire out in the open and the two ate their evening meal near the stage coach relay station. Then they candled their skis with hot candle wax and prepared for the remainder of their journey. "We're really in luck to have a beautiful moonlight night like this for our journey down the canyon," said Fred, as he fastened his skis. Martha agreed as the two skied off toward Capitol City — ten miles southwest of Lake City.

It was about 11:00 p. m. when the weary pair noticed a light in the only cabin in Capitol City. An elderly couple named Clark were the sole residents of the desolate place — once intended to become the capital of the state of Colorado. It was a thriving mining town in 1877.



Buck Martha shot in 1968.



Martha and Fred Gray going fishing.



Fred and Martha with a days catch of trout.



Fred and Martha in 1958.



Martha — feeding Plymouth Rock Hens.



Martha on her horse, "Sadie".



Martha and Fred with big buck.



Martha's saddle horse, "Ruby".

When the Grays appeared at the cabin door and introduced themselves, the elderly woman almost fainted when she saw them. The shock of seeing a young couple in that lonely, snow covered country was almost more than she could bear. She looked at them in disbelief when they told her where they came from. For she could hardly believe that a woman had skied over Engineer! "It's incredible!" she exclaimed. "Won't you come in and warm yourselves by the fire?"

Mr. and Mrs. Clark invited the Grays to spend the night in their warm log cabin and the young couple graciously accepted. The next morning they rode into Lake City on a sled with the mail carrier, Arthur (Brick) Griffith.

From Lake City the pair rode with John Thompson in his sleigh — pulled by a team of two horses — as far north as John Steele's place, located above the old, high railroad bridge that spanned the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River. They stayed over night with the Steeles and the next day they skied the last few miles of their journey to their new home site on the Arrington land — 20 miles north of Lake City. The Grays had leased the site, known as Gate View, near the beautiful Lake Fork River. The swift, churning river flowed between jagged mountainous cliffs a few miles to the south, and the view from the Arrington place looked like an open gate in the distance.

When Martha and Fred decided to ski over Engineer Mountain to their new home in the Lake Fork Valley in the early spring of 1918, they sent their furniture ahead by train. The narrow gauge train carried their precious cargo over winding mountain tracks from Silverton to Montrose and down to Sapinero. From there the locomotive followed the Lake Fork River for many miles through a steep, narrow canyon and on to Gate View. There the furniture was unloaded in an open field and the train continued its journey on to Lake City.

A year later, in the spring of 1919, the Gray couple moved a few miles further south — to a site on the opposite side of the river, which they rented from Per Olson. It was there that Martha raised a crop of barley and potatoes, while her husband built a cabin near Powderhorn — 14 miles away. He lived in a tent in the willows while constructing the 18 x 20 foot log cabin.

When the new dwelling was partially completed in the fall of 1920, Martha joined her husband at the scenic home site, which they named "Little Gray Home in the West." They homesteaded there for three years before receiving the final proof and deed from the United States Government. The deed was signed by President Calvin Coolidge himself.

For eight years the Grays lived in their incompleated cabin without a ceiling and with rough boards for a floor. Then they built an enclosed back porch. Through the years they added a large barn, chicken house, pig pens and sheds — each constructed entirely from logs. In time the sheds were converted into four cabins, which they rented to tourists.

Martha and Fred Gray worked long, hard hours during those first

years of their married life and there was very little time for recreation of any kind. They bought thirty-six milk cows and made a living making and selling butter. They also raised pigs, chickens, sheep and horses.

The pair built a small log cabin west of their home during the years of 1922-1923. It was often rented to hunters. Between 1935-1936 they added a bedroom and a large, oblong living room to their original log cabin.

After Fred Gray was stricken with a heart ailment in 1946, the pair — who had known no other way of life, except hard, steady work — began to take time out to relax and do a little fishing and enjoy the natural beauties surrounding them. "Occasionally Fred had a little spell with his heart, but nothing serious," said Martha.

One day in 1961 Martha and Fred went fishing on the Cebolla Creek with Neva and Robert Watson from Gunnison. The two women drove in one car to the fishing site, twenty miles up the Cebolla, and the fellows followed in the other car. After fishing for a while, the four—some enjoyed a picnic lunch beside the gurgling stream. Fred ate a hearty meal, and Martha had noticed how good he seemed to feel and how much he was enjoying the outing.

The two couples decided to take a scenic drive through the mountains on their way home. Their plans were to drive over Slumgullion Pass and down into Lake City — following the picturesque Lake Fork of the Gunnison River back toward the "Little Gray Home in the West."

The two women started up the hill in the lead car after leaving their lovely picnic site. They had driven only a short distance when they decided it would be best to pull over to the side of the road and wait for the men to catch up. Little did they realize the tragedy awaiting them! For they had no way of knowing why their husbands were delayed. Neither were they prepared for the shock awaiting them when the second car finally pulled up beside them. Martha's beloved husband was dead! He had passed away quite suddenly in the other car as the two men started up the hill to join their wives. Not even Robert realized that Fred was gone when they started out; he thought Fred was only napping.

However, Martha took one look at her husband and cried, "My God, Neva, he's gone!" They hurriedly drove to Dave Howard's ranch and called the doctor. Then they drove back to the Gray's home and awaited the ambulance from Gunnison. Martha's companion for forty-five years was gone! "One of the best men ever born!" she exclaimed.

However, the vivacious Martha Gray was not destined to live out her life all alone in her comfortable, but isolated, home. On June 6, 1962, the lovely pioneer woman was blessed with another fine companion to walk life's pathway. Loel Carr, a neighboring rancher, had been a long-time friend of the Grays. He was a widower whose wife had died twenty years before. She too had suffered a heart attack.

Martha and Loel have much in common and they enjoy a full and happy life together. He is also a kind and considerate man. The two enjoy home life to the fullest, but they are extremely fond of outdoor life too.

Winters are often severe in the Colorado Rockies, so Martha and Loel find themselves confined to the "Little Gray Home in the West" when the snow is deep. Their lovely log home — nestled among the tall spruce trees with jagged red cliffs in the background — has been the ideal place for the couple to spend their long winter evenings. The magnificent woodburning fireplace — made from tons of multi-colored rocks — in the spacious living room provides warmth and a cozy atmosphere. Martha sits near the fire in her favorite rocker and knits, tats, or crochets. She makes many beautiful things throughout the year, as well as her own clothes.

Loel's favorite chair is close to hers and he spends many hours reading, when not doing chores in and around the house. At times the snow is so heavy on the roof that he has to shovel it off to keep the roof from caving in.

Deer often come down out of the higher mountains and wander into their front yard when the snow is high. "It is interesting to watch them through the living room window," said Martha.

Blue Mesa Reservoir is not far away and the Carrs often go there and fish through a hole in the ice when they are able to get out and travel. They almost always bring back a string of fish for the freezer. On Sundays they attend the Community Presbyterian Church in Lake City — the oldest protestant church on the western slope.

When spring comes and the snow melts, Martha and Loel are once again quite active. They enjoy trout fishing at nearby lakes and streams. A garden, a spacious yard surrounded by flower beds, and spring house cleaning await them back at the "Little Gray Home in the West." There are a couple of huge, playful cats, "Ike" and "Mike," and a big, black shaggy dog called "Tip" that follow them around.

Martha cans vegetables from their garden and puts up fruit during the summer months. However, she always finds time for fishing with her husband or traveling to interesting places throughout the mountain states. "Loel takes such gorgeous pictures of our travels," she said. "We have quite a collection of interesting and colorful slides."

When big game season opens, once again she is at her husband's side — hunting deer and elk, and anything else he pursues. She is quite a hunter too, and she has the pictures to prove it.

Martha Gray Carr is as dainty and feminine as a woman should be and as active in outdoor life as any man can be. She is the first and only woman known to ever ski over rugged Engineer Mountain in southwestern Colorado. In fact, she has also traveled over it on horseback and in a buggy. Although the gracious, white haired lady no longer skies over the high pass, she does accompany her husband there frequently on jeep trips from Lake City to Silverton and back. "There is now a very good jeep road, but rather steep in places and requiring a good four-wheel-drive vehicle to make the grade," she says.

Martha is truly a remarkable, all-around woman — a living legend of the Old West — and a credit to the proud Colorado Rockies.



Martha and White Rocks — sold eggs by the case.



Gray's registered Hampshire Sheep.



Fish caught at Blue Mesa Reservoir through hole in ice.



Hungry deer in front yard.



Martha (holding "Mike") and Loel.



Martha and Loel Carr — a cozy winter evening.



Friend with Martha holding her cat.



Mike — The Cat.



Martha and Loel at Cinnamon Pass in Colorado.



Martha pointing to Engineer Mountain in the distance.



Martha on top of Engineer.