

OUT OF A CAVE

An Early Settler's Life in the Hardscrabble Valley

By Mary Jane Heath

My name is Mary Jane Moxley. I was borned in Hannibal, Missouri, in 1851. Nobody calls me Mary Jane any more though, I'm just Grandma Heath to everybody nowadays.

I come to Colorado in the early 1870's with my husband Wash, that's George Washington Heath. We was married on December 14, 1868. I's just seventeen. Georganna was borned in December of '69. Guess while I'm piton down ages, I'd ought to say that Wash was borned on March 1st, 1844.

My but he was a fine looking young man. He'd fought in the war too, was held in Libby Prison fora spell. That's what caused his health to be so bad in his later years. Our oldest girl Annie, she was just a tiny thing when we started out for Colorado. Course I's allus fearful of Indians, all the way across country we seen wagons they'd burned. Indians was the only thing I's ever afraid of though! I guess we took all of two, three years makin that trip. We come slow, oxen only make six, seven miles a day. Then with just the two wagons, we's delayed a lot. We'd joined on with a regular train, but we left them after a couple of weeks. Us and my folks and two brothers. We left cause the only one ever on guard duty at night was my younger brother, we didn't have no horses in that remuda, so when they left, me and Wash, we just up and left too! I always said we done better on our own than if we'd stayed with that train anyways. I swear I walked every step of the way from Hannibal, didn't like riding in that jouncy old wagon. I guess we done all right. I always wore a poke bonnet, to keep off the sun, onct we met up with an ol army buddy of Wash's. I's getting in the wagon with my bonnet on, while they talked a spell. Anyway, this friend of Wash's he came up by the wagon and he said to Wash "is she purty Wash?" He come on around then, where he could see me. He spoke right up and said, "Well, by God, Wash, she shore is!" I's pleased at that, course I never let on that I was.

We come through some mighty pretty country, come through Denver too. It sure wasn't much of a town then. Just a few shacks and

some saloons. Went through Cripple Creek, there's a pretty place, and all down through Hyde Park. Come on up to the Arkansas river. Wash he said we'd swim the oxen across and float the wagons behind. I told Wash right then and there, he'd better figure some other way for me. I'd not cross that ugly river sittin in no floatin wagon! We argued some on this, then this feller come along, said he was Truman Blancett. We was proud to meet him, having heard such a lot about him. Well, do you know what he done? First off he helped Wash and my father, did mention my mother and father was along with my two brothers? Well, they, was. Anyway I's sayin, this Blancett, he helped them float the two wagons across that river, then he cut down a big ol pine tree, felled it smack across the river. He done that so's I could walk across on it just nice as you please.

We come of up to Greenwood, the old townsite, that is I was plumb tired of that ol wagon, as Wash and me and little Annie, we moved into a cave near by. I hung the wagon canvas up over the "front door" so to speak. We done just fine there too, although Annie did come home one day all scratched and tore up. She said she found two little puppy dogs. She was was a playin with them, them 'puppies' must have played rough cause they'd tore Annie's drawers clean off! She said that momma 'dog' scared her off. Wash and me, we sure did have us a laugh over that. She'd found herself a couple of little bear cubs, that's what she done!!

We lived in that cave nigh onto 2 years, then we moved on in closer to Wetmore. Had us a nice little dobe cabin there. Our two girls, and one son was borned to us there. Let's see that would [be] in August, 1873, that James Henry come. Mary Belle in November 28, 1875, and Ethel May, February 20, 1878.

While we was livin there the towns folk decided to build a church. Wash he helped skid logs down the mountain for it. My father and my two brothers helped, too. Course in them days every body pitched in and helped. Surely did build a fine little church too. Twas the second

oldest one in all of Colorado. Wash and me never was big church goers though. New Hope Church, they called it.

Later on Wash and me, we took out a home-stead, little above Wetmore. Wash he said there was oil all underneath that hill, there was a bank of oil shale there on one side. Nice little spring right on top too, course that's all dried up now. I gathered hollyhock seed from all over, and planted them all over that hillside. Wash he called the place "Hollyhock Hovel" after that. We first lived in a dug-out there. That's where Gertie my youngest was-borned. Was in March. There was a terrible storm blew in that night. We had an old Indian squaw in to help me. The roof on that ol dug-out was a leakin like there was no roof at all. The older kids was all huddled under the table, it being the only dry place in the house. I was worried that I couldn't keep little Gertie dry and warm, but that old Indian woman, she knew just what to do. She went out into that storm and come back with one of her own buffalo robes, she spread that over Gertie and me. We's just as warm and dry as could be then.

Not long after Gertie came we had a bad fire, near cleaned out all we owned. But the neighbors come in from all over, they pitched right in and had a house raising for us! Put up the nicest little hand hewn log cabin ever. Two story it was, course we added some more on later.

Wash he dug us a well next, he was down pretty deep when we had some trouble. I'd helped Wash lower hisself down in the bucket. He was diggin and sending the dirt up for me to dump. He'd worked all fore-noon and when he started backdown, I knew he was in trouble somehow. Then he plum fell out of the bucket! I went down to him, quick as I could. The black damp had got to him, there he was passed out cold! I managed to get him up and bring him around. Sure scared me fora time, there. I recollect one time after the well was done, we'd hang the milk bucket down there to keep it cooled off. I went out and got a glass of it for Wash's supper. I seen him lookin at it funny like, so I asked him "do you see something in that milk, Wash?" He says to me "Yes, I do! And he sees me!" Was a little ol green frog in it, just his eyes a showing over the top of the milk.

Them days we had spelling bee's too. I

always went, and I could always spell everybody down. That and a dance now and again was all the entertainment we had. We done some at home though, all my kids was musical, any one of em could pick up a harmonica, accordian, or any such like and play it by ear, all of em played the piano too. Not one of em had a lesson either. It wasn't all playing though, I taught my girls to cook and sew and keep house. They done all of that when they was old enough, I kept the garden then.

That ol Hardscrabble creek could sure come up of a sudden too. Many's the time we took out to the top of that hill, thinkin it was going to flood the house. We was lucky there though, it never did reach the house. I seen it get high enough in Wetmore to take buildings that had stood for nigh onto sixty years. I suspicion it could again too! Flooded onct and took out every one of the bridges. Every body they took out for the old school house up on the hill above Wetmore. One old widow woman, can't bring her name to my mind just now, she was crippled up some, arthritis I'd spect. Anyway, folks was helping her, and danged if they didn't just get her half-way up the hill, when she turned right back to shut her gate! She did have a nice little white picket fence, water didn't harm it none though.

Wash, he tried to get the job of postmaster there in Wetmore, Fred Walters he got up a petition for Wash, but he wasn't appointed, just cause he wasn't a Democrat too! He'd of been good at it though. Later on he did get the job of carrin the mail tween Greenwood and Florence. His health was so poor by then though, that Ethel May she done most of that. She done a good job of it too. Driving them green-broke horses, and all kinds of weather. She could handle that mail hack good as Wash. Annie she was substitute teaching then, she was a artist too, done some of the prettiest pictures ever. She didn't have none of that fine canvas though, made her own she did. She was married to Calvin Sweetin then, they's married on June 17, 1892. They had six youngsters, Clifford, Jim, Ethel, George, Teddy and Louise. Little Teddy he died of the measels when he was just three years old.

Mary Belle was married to Charlie Valentine, a short time too. But Charlie he got appendicitis and the doctor that come to operate on him, he was drunk as a lord. They say that the

doctor, he squeezed that appendix till it busted! Course poor ol Charlie didn't last the night out. I wasn't there, this was all done over to the Ga Marr Ranch. Mary Belle she was married again to a fellow name of Arthur Griswold. This was years after Charlie died. Was on October 13, 1901. Her and Arthur they had ten younguns, all told. Let's see, they was Gertrude, she died at two, Russel, he died real soon too, then there was Irene, Russel, Faye, Helen, Bob, Jack, Jim and a twin girl stillborn with Jim.

James Henry he married a nice little girl name of Cora. Cora Lucas it was. They married on June 29, 1908. As I recollect they had five kids, Loyd, Erma, Edith, Paul, and Earl.

Only had Gertie at home when Ethel May got married. Married a man by the name of John Peter Vernier, he was a frenichman. Said his folks had changed their family name of De Verria. They had two children, John Paul and Madge Clara. I always called her Callie. Madge she was just near four weeks old when her daddy died of arsenic poisoning. Ethel May she said he, by accident got into arsenic water from the mines. They was livin at Victor at the time. I always wondered about that cause John was workin as a railroad detective then. Some say he's murdered, see this bunch of miners had started up a company of their own, and then one of em lit out with all the money. Well, John, they say, was sent after him. He'd located him in Boston, and he came back to report. They say that some scoundrel put that arsenic in his lunch pail! It could have happened that way too, that gold field country was rough in them days. Heard too that Ethel May had got threats of harm to her children, if she didn't keep mum about it. She never said, and I never ask her, she'd had enough sorrow. Ethel May she come back with Wash and me not long after, that was just about a year before Wash died. I had me a little widow's pension, and with Ethel May workin out at washin, cleanin, cookin, and such like, we managed. Gertie she looked after the kids, Madge and Johnny that is. Them kids was into everything, just like wild Indians, they was! Along with my Annie's George, Louise and little Ethel, and then Belles' Irene, Helen, Faye, Russel and Jim. What one kid didn't think of, the others was already into! Annie lived down in Wetmore, and Belle lived up the Hardscrabble from us. I suspicion that Gertie was pretty rough on them kids, but that's neither here nore

there. I recollect one time seeing all of them piled into the old buckborad, plumb to the top of that hill, they was! They'd tied up the tongue and started er down! I near swallowed my teeth! That old buck board come off there like it's shot out of a cannon, bout half ways down the tongue come untied and burned itself up in the ground, shore stopped er! Them kids was a fly-ing ever which way! Weren't a one of the little devils hurt though. Now Wash he could sure quieten down our kids, he'd just say quiet like "hark". They wasn't another word out of them!

Callie, I mean Madge, and Johnny they did chores too though, twas their job to look after my cows, run them if they's bloated. Had to get them in at night, them cows, they allus, would go plumb round the far side of the hill. Was a long trek to go fetch em, back. Kids carried water up from the creek to my little trees too. I had apple, peach, mulberry and cherry trees. Had a good stand of wild plum and choke-cherry too. Lots of wild grapes down by the creek. I always had me a big garden too. Winter time we'd dig a big pit in the ground, put rutabagas, turnips, parsnips, apples and all such down in it. Covered it up good and long as a body didn't touch them when they's hard froze, we had fresh fruit and vegetables all winter. Best garden was after they put in the reservoir. On our place it was too. Course we sold the eleven acres for it. Other than that our 160 acres, that we home-steaded is still just the same.

Went off to town once, me and Ethel and Gertie. When we come back, them kids had Trusty, our old mongrel dog, all dressed up in my good corset, and Ethel's new bonnet, had Genie's shimmey on him too. I went off behind the barn to laugh, sure wish Wash could a seen that, they had of Trusty a dancin on his hind legs too. Sure was a sight! Ethel, she sure did give them kids a whomping though, wasn't funny to her! Them kids was a caution all right, twasn't all so funny though, some of their pranks was pretty bad. Like the time little Madge was playin Indian. Gertie she come a boiling around the milk house, Madge she was hun-kered down in the tall grass there, with her little bow and arrow. Well she let fly maybe Gertie scared her, anyhow she plugged Gertie smack tween the eyes! Knocked Gertie plumb silly it did! When she come to though, she sure was on the fight!

Well then Ethel she got herself a job at the Ga Marr Ranch, cook she was. Mr. Ga Marr, he wore a veil all the time, never did know why, course he was gone by then, dead that is. Ga Marr he had a string of race horses he did. Had all them cement barns built for them, thousand feet of them. Two big silos too, neither one of em's ever been full though. Place belongs to Louis Draper now, he married my Annie's oldest girl, Ethel. Louis he sure is one fine fellow, we'd of lost this place if it wasn't for him. My widow's pension just wasn't enough to care for us and keep up the taxes and such too.

Ethel May, she worked there on the Ga Mar place bout a year, then Louis helped her get on as cook at the Hatchett Ranch down by Pueblo. That's where she met Tom and they was married, that's Thomas Jefferson Fast. He was workin there as irrigator. Hard worker he was too. Young Johnny he left home a year or so later, he surely done a heap of traveling. He was a forest ranger later on. He sent pictures back home, they was really something! Had a big ol mule they had tied up there by their station house. Come night, a big ol elk came in there and picked hisself a fight with that ol jack. The elk he got that ol jack plumb dead center, ran a horn right through his heart. That big jack, though, when he fell over dead, he fell on that elk and broke the elk's neck. John he sent us pictures of it. Sent pictures of all the country he'd seen too, he'd been in every state in the country, save two of them. Johnny he had pet bears and deer and all such like. Animals always did take to him. Johnny he died with what they called leukemia, he was awful young to be took.

Then in '23 Gertie she married Tom Raybell, they had one girl, Clyda. I's glad to have Raybell there on the place. I was getting deaf then, my eyes was bad too.

Went out one day, and there's an ol gunny sack laying in the chicken yard, weren't no place fora gunny sack. Raybell he said later, he was a hollerin at me that it was a big ol rattler! Guess my eyes was bad. Had an ol yeller dog though, and he jumped in ahead of me, he grabbed that rattler and snapped his head clean off! Rattlers aren't so fearsome though. I killed a plenty of em in my day. Even had a dog go mad once. Rabies they calls it now. Hummph! Still mad dog to me! I got all the kids in the house and then I went out there and I caught him up

and tied him to a tree. Had to send fora neighbor to come and shoot him. I could doctor up and cure most any other sickness that bothered man or beast though. Sheffield he used to bring me his doggie and sick calves. I could allus bring em out of it. Sheffield he'd market them of mine along with his. Said them of mine always weighed in heavier than his.

Made my own hand cream too, out of the powdered middles of them puffball mushrooms and mutton tallow, worked real good too. I know all kinds of medicine and such too. Cobwebs or soot for stopping bleeding, sassafrass tea for spring tonic. Made all my younguns chew leaves of poison oak and ivy too after that, they'd never get poisoned by it! Sewed my Annie's head back up too, when that horse drug her, near scalped her, it did. Never could see the scars neither, all under her hair they was. I's always telling her to watch out that her long skirts would tangle up in a side-saddle. I used to ride a lot, always took my knitting along, of horse he allus knew the way as good as me, I'd just set him at a good steady lope and pickup my knitting.

Them times is all gone now though, they was rough all right, but I raised me up a fine family, and it was all worth it.



South of Weimore is Heath Hill, the location of the Heath homestead. (Courtesy of P.O. Abbott)

Afterword¹ A Present Day View of the Life of Mary Jane Heath

By P. O. Abbott

A pioneer family, a young man and his younger wife with very young child, after a long journey across the plains to settle in Colorado, are immediately faced with two needs: a roof over their heads and food for the table. Of the two the second is the more pressing, so takes precedent. This calls for planting a crop or finding a paying occupation. A cave, better described as a rock shelter, furnished the roof for the young Heath homesteaders.

Sometime before her death in January of 1934 Mary Jane Heath, the pioneer wife and matriarch of the Heath family on the Hardscrabble Valley dictated an oral history of her family's life and time in the area. The person who transcribed the tape record was careful to preserve Grandma Heath's talk with all the idiomatic expressions and accents. Heath, as you will see, relied heavily on the apostrophe: "I's" for "I was," "he'd" for "he would," and many others. Her pronunciation was also followed: "allus" for "always" sometimes both pronunciations in the same sentence, undoubtedly as the transcriber heard it. This practice gives the reader a good idea how a conversation in the Hardscrabble Valley in the late nineteenth century might have sounded.

There are a few more things the reader might wish to know as he or she reads Mary Jane Heath's account. The cave in which the family set up housekeeping is located on the Episcopal Diocese Trinity Ranch. It is on the southern end of a flatiron ridge facing almost south so the winter north winds are to its back. Tennant Creek flows just down hill from the rock shelter opening and in the creek's bed is a live spring. As caves go it was an ideal place for an abode. Indeed the Heaths were not the first family to so use it. Indians, Native Americans, had long ago dwelled under its protection.

In the 1970s the Colorado Archaeological Society conducted a dig in and around the cave, known to them as Draper Cave as Louis Draper brought the site to their attention. The society published in the September 1978 issue of their official publication *The Southwestern Lore*, four papers on the results of that dig. Though no date for the occupancy of the cave was given in these papers, but in his paper



Draper Cave. (Courtesy of P. O. Abbott)

on the burial found in the floor of the shelter, Michael Finnegan cites C14 dates of 1570 ± 70 BC and 1250 ± 80 BC as being in the general time frame.

Ask any long-time resident of the area around Wetmore to point out Heath Hill and you will be shown the high ground to the east of Hardscrabble Creek and south of Wetmore. This was the location of the Heath Homestead. The land is still in the family and is at present in the possession of Buddy Draper, a great great grandson of Wash and Mary Jane through Georgana and Calvin Sweetin, Ethel and Louis Draper, George and Leona Draper. Buddy and his sister, Peggy Dyane Davis, now residing near Tucson, Arizona, had inherited the acreage. Sometime in the past Buddy bought his sister's interest.

Today, George and Leona Draper own the ranch once known as Sevens Ranch, now called Draper Ranch. Their comfortable home is near the "cement barns" that Ga Marr had built for his horses. With the financial backing of the wealthy rancher, Mahlon T. Everhart, for whom he had worked, Louis Draper had purchased this ranch from an English corporation.

(The cave and other locations mentioned in this story are on private property and permission should be obtained to visit them.)

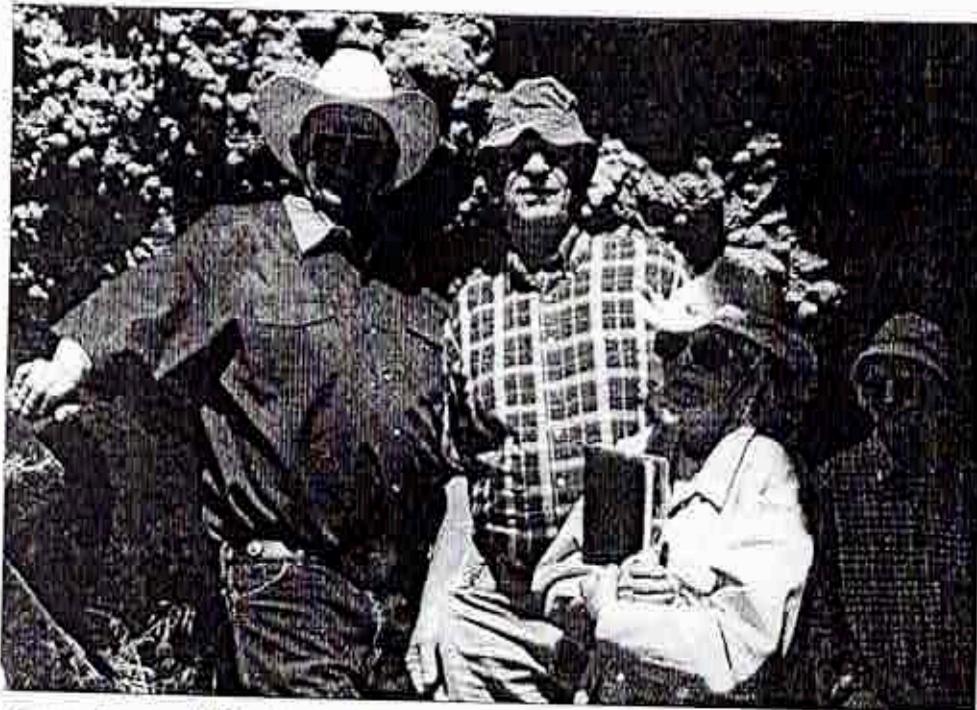
Jeanne Sweetin Culpin, another great granddaughter of Wash and Mary Jane Heath's, lives on the east side of an extension of the ridge north of the cave. She has a beautiful view across the valley of Hardscrabble Creek toward Pikes Peak and the Arkansas River.

Bil Heath, another great grandson of the homesteading Heaths through James Henry and Earl Heath, lives in Pueblo. His father, Earl, was a well-known pharmacist in that city and Bil is retired after a career as a linotype operator for *The Pueblo Chieftain*. Bil and Jacqui are members of the Pueblo County Historical Society.

Bil informed me that his brother, James Henry Heath, is alive and living in San Miguel, California.

Barbara Ritter of Pueblo and Ralph J. Ritter of Denver are great grandchildren of Wash and Mary Jane's through James Henry Heath Sr. and his daughter Emma.

Mary Jane Heath is buried beside her husband George Washington Heath on the grounds of New Hope Church, the second oldest Baptist church in Colorado and the church Wash Heath helped to build.



George Draper, Bil Heath and Jeanie Culpin, great grandchildren of George Washington and Mary Jane Heath, at Draper Cave. (Courtesy of P. O. Abbott)

I seem to have managed to pester a number of people in the process of putting this piece together. Some, just in answering the phone and directing the call to the person from whom I was seeking to gain information. In this respect I would like to thank Bil Heath and Jacqui Sumption, George and Leona Draper, Jennie Culpin, Buddy and Jerry Draper, Michael Theis, Joanne Dodds, and David Alexander. David furnished photographs. It was from a volume of reference back-up for Joanne Dobb's book, *Custer County: Mountains, Mines and Ranches* that the transcription of Mary Jane Heath's story was taken.