

THE SNOWSHOE ITINERANT PREACHER

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THE GAZETTE

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THE SNOWSHOE ITINERANT

PREACHER

BY DAVE HUGHES

YOUR HUB CONTRIBUTOR

Those of us who live comfortable lives in Colorado, zip through the mountains on paved roads to go ?shing, hiking, or sightseeing, complain about the price of gas, trot up Pikes Peak on Barr Trail just for weekend kicks, expect helicopters will rescue us if we so much as sprain an ankle, and use cell - phones and satellite corrected compasses so we can't get lost and die of exposure. We can't imagine how really tough life was in those same mountains in the 1860s around the site of Father Dyer's Mountain home in Buckskin Joe. How about leaving your modern down parkas and insulated thermos bottles, thermal underwear and cleated waterproof boots behind? Then step off in February through ?ve feet of snow covering the trail over Mosquito Pass wearing a cotton cap and a threadbare wool coat, no socks, leather boots, and you just might appreciate how middle aged Father Dyer, the Snowshoe Itinerant, lived and came close to dying from exposure many times just to deliver the word of God and the Mail to

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discouraged, broke, isolated and armed men thousands of miles from their homes and families back in "the States."

Now I grew up with the romanticized tales of Father Dyer the Itinerant Methodist Preacher, who travelled the Rockies wearing snow shoes — modified Norwegian skis actually — which of course we knew lay lightly atop the pretty powder snow, and was warmly welcomed into the mountain cabins and tiny mining camps after hours of trekking utterly alone, and then preached to those eager to listen. Right? How about being robbed by thugs while he slept, falling through the ice from log bridges on the invisible trail at 2 o'clock in the morning getting soaked to the hips with the temperature plummeting, stepping out of the skis to adjust them and sinking 7 feet through the snow that was 10 feet deep in places, getting caught in a blizzard with ferocious winds whipping his exposed flesh, trying to help a helpless self—pitying tenderfoot with hypothermia lying down in the snow to die six miles from any possible shelter, then resisting being forced to move, endangering both of them, ducking the rampaging Espinoza murderers who just killed anyone they met on the trail.

Finally having unsociable men turn him away from shelter in their cabins during night blizzards even knowing he was a man of the cloth. And, while the Civil War was reaching into the Rockies, he had to evade the Southern—sympathy Reynolds gang members around Hamilton who never could decide whether they should behave more as Confederate soldiers or just robbing thugs. Who, after killing and robbing and allegedly burying their loot, were rounded up, marched toward Denver — but managed to all be killed or murdered as prisoners — because they "tried to escape."

Very rough frontier "justice" among depraved and covetous social outcasts who came west as much to escape everything as to build their bleak lives. And finally what about his learning about the mob of reckless armed men who took rumor as fact, came after his 39-year-old son, Judge Elias Dyer, storming into his Lake County Court- room in Granite, seizing him and debating while he barely had time to scribble a last letter to his father before they shot him to death in the courtroom for daring to preside - his sworn duty - over a trial trying men for murder, disagreeing with their vigilante opinion on who killed George Harrington.

Until I had a chance to buy and read an original rare 1889 yellowed copy of Father Dyer's 382-page autobiography, I never realized just how tough a prolonged life he lived in the Rockies and just how unforgiving, wild and lawless was frontier Colorado from 1861 when he arrived and for a long time into the 1880s afterward. I was mildly interested in the fact he knew and preached beside Reverend William Howbert who came out of the mountains in 1861 to start a church in Colorado City, which Dyer visited numerous times.

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I had almost forgotten when my own father was turned away in a blizzard out on the Colorado plains by a mean man in 1916.

While Dyer was born in Ohio in 1812, he became a Methodist minister in midlife, preaching in Minnesota until his wife, who bore him three sons and two daughters in 14 years of marriage, died in 1847. So he came further west just "to see Pikes Peak" when he was already 50 years old. And only then, and for 29 more years he went through incredible experiences, crossing 13,185 foot Mosquito Pass between Fairplay and Leadville several times a week in all kinds of weather and year round. Not only to preach the gospel and save souls whenever and wherever he could, but, as a means of support by carrying the US mail over as rugged a mailman route as any in the world. Having climbed a few 14ers, I know how unforgiving those mountains can be.

He even walked New Mexico, and saw up close and personal the puzzling self-agellating and cross-bearing excommunicated Penitenties and the very different way the devout Hispanics and even Indians worshipped in places and in ways where there had been very few priests since the 1600s. Dyer was not a particularly good writer, only doing his autobiography in his last 10 years of life when he became so ill he was told in 1889 he only had a short time to live. Well he made it to 1901, and was buried in Castle Rock, where both his father and his son Judge Elias F Dyer were also interred below one of the most verbose carved gravestone inscriptions I have ever encountered: Lines as they read on the tall, narrow, gravestone:

"Elias F Dyer Born Oct 8, 1836 Died July 3, 1875 A victim of the murderous mob ruling in Lake County. I trust in God and his mercy. At 8 oclock I sit in court. The mob have me under guard. I die for law, order and principle.

But Father Dyer, through all the vicissitudes of life, continued his mission. His oldest son died in Andersonville Confederate Prison, and the other had a foot shot off in the war. While Father Dyer during those times in the mountains never knew when an angry southern secessionist might simply kill him for his views on the evils of slavery. To my surprise he seldom encountered dangerous wildlife, which, given the sheer number of trips alone through the mountains, and over 100-mile treks to and from. Denver and Colorado City, was amazing. He trusted in God. The real threat were those dangerous two-legged animals called "men." He was no pansy. He thrashed more than one drunken rancher who got in his face. He preached against drunkenness, gambling, and dancing! And married runaway teens. Even going back from Denver City to "the States" to settle his son's estate was so dangerous that he wrote "The Indians were hostile on the Plains. No company with a less number than forty armed men were allowed to start." And so Father Dyer lived and died, a man of peace and God who helped

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civilize the raw and dangerous mountain frontier of Colorado.