

A COLORADO PIONEER

BY

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Foreward

This is the true story of the life of John Root as told by him to my father, H. D. Davenport. John Root was one of the true pioneers of Colorado. He lived a very colorful life. In fact much more so than I am able to make it sound.

Arthur Davenport

I was born in Massachusetts February 7, 1846. While I was still very small my father decided to move west. We came as far west as Iowa and settled there on a small farm. As money was scarce and my father could not afford to hire help, I was helping him in the fields as soon as I was large enough to drive a team of horses. I didn't care much for farm work and made up my mind that the first chance I got I would come farther west. The stories I had heard of the frontier were very exciting. I wanted to try my luck at prospecting, and I liked to hunt and fish. The greatest enjoyment I had was when my father would take me rabbit hunting. This could only be done when the work was caught up and was very seldom.

The spring I was twelve years old, I heard that a wagon-train was going west to Colorado. Gold had been discovered in the Pike's Peak region and a gold rush was on. I talked with the wagon boss of the wagon-train, and he told me that I could go with them if I would serve as a horse wrangler.

I found out when they were to leave and made up my mind that I would go with them. I didn't dare ask for my father's permission as I knew he would disapprove. He would tell me that I was too young to leave home. I made my preparations secretly and the morning that the train was to leave I was on hand early. I was very anxious for the wagon-train to get under way as I knew that as soon as my father missed me he would probably come looking for me. I didn't have long to wait before we started moving. As the traveling was good we had covered a great distance by highfall. I didn't worry much now about my father catching up with me, as it was plowing time and he would be too busy to waste time following me.

There was another boy just a little older than I who helped me with the horse wrangling. Our duties were to water the horses when camp was made if we happened to camp where there was water. We then herded the horses around where the feed was best until almost dark. Then we would bunch them for the night. We would take turns watching them during the night. When it started to turn daylight we had to take them to where the wagons were and start hitching them up. During the day we were allowed to catch up on our sleep if we cared to. We found it hard to sleep on a jolting wagon at first, but after a while we got used to it.

We arrived in Denver June 20, 1860. Here the wagon-train broke up. Part of the people stayed in Denver while a part of them went to the Pike's Peak region, myself among these.

Along the way between Denver and Pike's peak we met several covered wagons coming back. They had "Pike's Peak or Bust" painted on the canvas. Under this was printed "Busted".

When we arrived at the Pike's Peak gold camp I said good-bye to the wagon-train. I worked for some of the miners who had already struck it rich for a short time. After I had saved enough of my wages for a grub stake, I tried prospecting for myself. I didn't have any luck at this so I finally gave it up.

I went to work again, and in the meantime done a little hunting. I then moved to Leadville as there was a boom on there in the lead and silver mines, and Pike's Peak wasn't exactly to my liking. I worked in the mines here for some time.

Leadville was a very lively town, with the usual mining camp activities. Saloons and dance halls were prominent and gambling was very lively. Many were the men that went to boot-hill for speaking out of turn.

Here I became acquainted with two trappers, Colburn and Marx. In the late 60's I decided to go in partnership with them in their trapping, as there was good money to be made and the work was more desirable to me than mining. I liked the idea of being in the open better than working in a stuffy, ill ventilated mine shaft.

We got our equipment together in November so that we could get to lower altitude before the snow got too deep for our burros to travel. We had several burros for pack animals and a horse for each of us to ride. Our packs contained flour, beans, sugar, salt, ammunition, steel traps, etc. We each carried a Sharp's rifle a pistol and a large bladed knife. It was pretty slow traveling as there was just enough snow on the ground to make the footing for our horses insecure.

Several days after leaving Leadville we arrived at the mouth of Brush creek where later the town of Eagle was located. This looked like the most likely place to camp as we were intending to trap for beaver and there were a great many along the part of the creek that we had already examined. Upon further examination we found that there were a great many beaver in the creek for several miles. We also noted that there were plenty of deer upon which we were to depend for meat.

We set out to look for a place to camp and found a likely place about three miles south of the Eagle river. We would have probably made our camp lower down, but there was a party of Ute Indians camped about a half mile from the river. There were somewhere around fifty Indians in the party. We later learned that their leader was the black-guard Colorow. He was a very bad Indian and we were later to have trouble with him.

The first few days here were spent in preparing a place to live in. We excavated a sort of three sided room from the side of a south sloping hill. We then cut poles and formed a wall on the

other side, and laid more across the top. We then covered the top with sods and dirt. The cracks between the poles were chinked with sticks and mud. This made a very good shelter and with the blankets we had we were in no danger of freezing if the weather became extremely cold. In one corner a fireplace was fashioned of willows and mud. In this fireplace all our cooking was done.

After we had all our camp ready it was getting cold so we decided to catch a beaver and examine the hide to see if it was prime. We caught one and found that the fur was in good shape, so we started to trap in earnest.

Marx and Colburn said they would set out the trap line and that I was to spend my time hunting. We wanted to kill our winters meat now as it would be easier now, than later when the snow was deep. I killed several deer and while hunting for more I discovered a band of mountain sheep. I decided to kill some of these as a change in meat would be a treat. After a couple hours stalking I got close enough to the sheep to shoot. I picked a young one and fired. The one I shot at dropped in his tracks. The rest started running wildly up a steep slope. I killed three more of them before they could reach the top of the slope.

After dressing the four I hung three of them in trees that were standing at the bottom of the ascent. The other I took back to camp along with all the hearts and livers.

My partners decided that I had enough meat and after I had it all cached near the camp I could start going over the trap line with them. I soon had this accomplished.

We had several dozen traps out and already had a nice bunch of beaver hides on stretchers to dry. We also had two other hides that had ^{been} caught the first day the traps were out.

We kept adding to our collection and soon had nearly all the furs that we wanted. We had never had any visits from the Indians who were camped below us. We were very surprised one evening as we come into camp after being out on the trap line. As we walked into camp an Indian stepped from behind a tree, covering us with a rifle. Two others stepped from behind other trees in the same manner.

Colburn said, "What do you want? "

The first Indian replied, in broken English, "You come with us. Big chief Colorow wants to have pow wow with you paleface."

There was nothing we could do but oblige him, as we were covered by three rifles and probably there were more of the red devils watching us.

The Indian who had spoken turned and motioned for us to follow him. The other two fell in behind us as we started to move, still keeping their rifles trained on our backs.

When we got to their camp Colorow was waiting to talk to us. He sat down on a blanket and told us to sit down.

All the rest of the Indians except the three who had brought us in went on about their business. Most of them were moving their tepees. We had noticed on several occasion that every tepee was moved every day. They would only be moved about two feet at a time. They would be moved in the same direction for several days, then they would move them at right angles to this direction for the same number of days. Then they would switch back the other way. Every tepee was moved the same direction each day following this zig-zag course. What their idea was we never learned.

It is the Indian's habit of not talking much so when Colorow started talking he came right to the point. He said, "You must move from here, back toward the sun from where you came. Do not stop until you are one sun away. This is the Indians home and hunting ground. You white men have no right coming in here to trap. The white men will someday pay for the furs and animals they have taken from us. I will give you until sundown tomorrow to be gone from here. You must give me the two otter hides you have at your camp for payment on your debt to us. Go now."

We left his camp as soon as possible and went to our camp. Colorow sent the three Indians who brought us, back with us to get the otter hides. Evidently they had visited our camp when we were away or they would not have known of the otter hides.

We were packed and ready to leave soon after sunup the next morning. All we had left to do was take up our traps. By hurrying we had these all at camp by noon, so after we had eaten some lunch and loaded our animals we were ready to leave. We had to use our horses to pack the meat on so we were forced to walk.

As we passed the Indian camp several Indians fell in behind us and followed us for a few miles to be sure we went the way we had been told to go. We traveled till nearly dark before we made camp for the night. The next morning we pushed on to the still water of the Eagle river where Lake creek empties into it. As the snow was getting too deep for the burros to travel we decided to camp here the rest of the winter. There were some beaver so we set out our trap line again.

Every once in a while we would see some of the Indians who had been in the camp. One of them was pretty freindly and often he would stop in at our camp when he happened to be in this neighborhood. One day he told us that Colorow's two daughters were very sick. From what he told us about how they acted we were pretty positive that they had consumption. They were getting worse every day and the treatment they were getting was part of the cause.

The medicine man would have them sit across a fire from him. Then he would go through a lot of chanting and motioning in hopes of getting the evil spirits that were in them to come out into the fire.

One day early in the spring we saw the whole band of Indians coming up the river. At the head of the band was Colorow. When they reached our camp they stopped. Colorow called us over and said, "You can go back where you were if you want to. We are moving away from there. The Indian will never go back to that place."

We later learned that one of his daughters had died. They were on their way to Denver with the other one in hopes that the white man's medicine could cure her. Colorow never came back to the place where he had been camped. He was probably afraid of the evil spirits that he thought were there.

We didn't go back down as the trapping season was nearly over and we were doing alright where we were. We knew that it would be only a short time until we could get to Leadville and dispose of our furs.

When the snow was gone we went to Leadville and sold our furs. We then got some more supplies and went back to the wilderness. We spent the summer in the open, looking for new places to trap. I had decided that I would never spend any more time in town except when it was necessary to go in for supplies etc.

The second winter we went farther west. We went to the head of Brush creek, then down the Frying Pan river. Here we made a camp similar to the one we had the year before on Brush creek.

Everything went fine for awhile and we were having good luck trapping. One evening when we come into camp we found our dugout burned out. This was the worst luck we had had so far. The snow was too deep to get back over the passes that we would have to cross on the way back to Leadville. Most of our provisions were ruined. All that we could salvage from the fire was some scorched flour.

We built another dugout in the same place as the other had been. Luckily our furs hadn't been in the dugout or we would have had nothing to use for bedding.

By using the burned flour and meat without salt we were able to survive the winter. We were three glad men when the snow left and we could get back to Leadville for supplies. We had a good catch of beaver, so after we had our stomachs full of good food we felt much better about everything.

The next several winters I also spent trapping. One winter we could be in one place and the next somewhere else. A few were spent on the south fork of the White river.

Trapping was getting to be a poor occupation compared with what it had been in years past as the country was being settled and the beaver were nearly all gone. I began to look for something else to do.

In 1887 the Denver and Rio Grande railroad Co. decided to come farther west with their railroad that then ended in Red Cliff. Here was a job. Not working on the grade gang, but something that was right in our line. We had heard of hunters killing buffalo for the workers who had brought the Union Pacific across the plains so why couldn't we kill deer for the men who were working on this railroad.

We looked into the matter and found that we could sell them deer. We got an outfit together and went out as soon as the work was started. There were plenty of deer and we made good money. The work was pretty hard though as a lot of the deer had to be packed long distances.

The last winter that we hunted deer for the railroad workers we were hunting in the range of mountains that lay north west of Dotsero. We killed and sold over three hundred deer during that one winter.

In the spring of that year I dissolved partnership with my two partners. I wanted to stay here as it was the only place that I had ever seen where I would care to live permanently, and my partners decided that they didn't want to stay here any longer.

I went up to Sweetwater Lake and camped for awhile. Then I started running a summer resort for awhile in the summers and trapped in the winter.

Many people were taking up the ground in the lower valleys. Business at the summer resort was increasing. I quit the summer resort and turned cow puncher. I started riding for one of the cattlemen who had a large ranch in Gypsum valley and ranged his cattle in the country south of Sweetwater. This job suited me better than running the summer resort, as I could be out in the open more. The riding job lasted from early spring until late in the fall. During the winters I trapped yet. When I wasn't busy I would help the people at the Sweetwater lake resort.

I am not as young as I used to be and I have to take it easy. I am living in Sheep canyon this winter. I am alone in my little cabin and it gets pretty lonesome. I have a neighbor a few miles from my cabin. I am visiting him today. It got so lonesome for me that I put on my snow shoes and walked over to see him as I don't have anything to do until tomorrow when I will go over my trap line. It has been a nice day today. Probably too nice. I notice there are a bunch of clouds coming up. I don't feel so lonesome now after having had someone to talk to today.

Look at that clock! I should have started home long ago. It's starting to snow too. I'm sure going to have a lot of fun going home as it will be dark in a few minutes.

Luther wants me to stay with him tonight, but I can't do that. I left a bucket with water in it at home and it will freeze and break the bucket if I don't get home to empty it. Buckets are too hard to get up here in the winter and I can't get along without one.

I'm on my way now. About an hour and I'll be home. Boy! I'll be glad when I get there and get a fire started. If I had known this wind would be this cold I might have stayed with Luther and let the bucket go hang.

I'm getting tired, but I'm not cold anymore. In fact I feel warm. I don't believe I can go another step. I can't give up now, only a little farther. I'm sleepy. It's only a little way now. That's it, only a little---way. Only---a--- little---way.

The next morning a man came up Sheep Canyon. When he got in sight of John Root's cabin he said to himself, "That's strange, no smoke coming from John's cabin. There must be something wrong, he always gets up early. He must be sick or else he isn't here."

The man walked to the door and knocked. No answer.

"I guess I'll just walk in, the door isn't locked. His bed hasn't been slept in. Oh! There is a note on the table. That will probably explain where he is."

To Whom It May Concern:

"My house is yours whether I'm here or not. The only thing I ask is to put things back as you find them. I'm up to Luther's today. In case you want to see me I will be back tonight for sure. Make yourself to home."

John Root

The man read the note over again.

"This must have been written yesterday, as there hasn't been a fire in that stove this morning. The water pail is frozen and split. That's a sure sign he wasn't here last night. I think I'll go see if he is alright. I know he would do the same for me. I better hurry too, as I've got to get home before dark."

The man went out the door and started up the trail. He had only gone a little way when he saw what looked like a log laying under the snow.

"That's funny a log right in the middle of the trail. Someone might fall over that in the dark. That's no log, its a man, why it's John. We must have started home in that storm last night. The poor old man, he was almost home."