



ROCKY MOUNTAIN NATURE ASSOCIATION

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VOICES FROM THE PAST, MORE ALIVE THAN EVER

by Kurtis Kelly

I am conscious of my eccentricity. But I don't let others know it. Instead, I move along the trail like anyone else on a hiking destination. Passers-by respond politely as I greet them, but their gazes reveal bewilderment and curiosity. Maybe it's my gait, as I walk along with my cane, squinting through my metal-rimmed glasses. Maybe it's my bowler hat or my long dark riding coat. On another day, maybe it's unusual to see a man in knickers traversing a path in Endovalley or in Moraine Park. I humor the attention but continue along toward my intended audience: today, a group of fourth graders who, though expecting me, will be equally intrigued by this visitor from the past. They, like other witnesses, can say they've seen a ghost today.

Since the late 1990s, I have appeared in more than a hundred historic character re-enactments. Sometimes my audience is students on a field trip inside Rocky Mountain National Park. Another time it may be families gathered for storytelling around a campfire. Or a seated group inside a museum. Whomever and

wherever, I am keenly aware of the important responsibilities and opportunities in these interactive programs. If I succeed in my task, the audience will leave with a deeper appreciation of these lands and their history: they will leave not only informed but with an emotional connection from seeing and hearing the pioneers who walked before us.

"What is it you call that thing you do?" someone once asked. Those who put on vintage costumes and assume the identity of an historic figure are re-enactors, living-history portrayalists, Chautauquans, storytellers. Whatever the job title, the goal is the same: transform a third-person history lesson into a first-person performance that brings its subject, almost literally, alive, and inspires participants to see history and their modern world in an entirely new way.

It all begins with the character. Among my summertime Rocky Mountain Nature Association performances are three historic legends. Abner Sprague (1850-1943) conjures the tenacious pioneering spirit of a Moraine Park homesteader turned lodging proprietor, as railroads he himself surveyed would awaken a burgeoning tourist industry. Sprague skirmished with agents of another of my characters,

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Windham Thomas Wyndham-Quin (1841-1926), popularly called Lord Dunraven, a wealthy hunter turned land baron who poses a tantalizing complexity of hidden motives. Enos Mills (1870-1922), revered as Father of Rocky Mountain National Park, is a third character in my “council of the conjured.”

Fortunately for me, and in turn my audiences, each of these three figures was an avid writer, leaving behind extraordinary records of their active lives and careers. In assuming these roles, my first step is to learn all I can about their lives—through what they have written, and what has been written about them. Much like a nature guide or museum interpreter who helps the public understand a wetlands or a collection of arrowheads, figures like Sprague, Dunraven and Mills are whole ecosystems and artifacts unto themselves. They are complex—their actions and accomplishments are woven into the lives of others and the aspirations of their times. When I prepare for a presentation, I “hit the books” afresh each time and always find myself learning something new.

A core component in the Abner



This portrait of the Earl of Dunraven is prominently displayed in the parlor of the Stanley Hotel (whose restaurant is named the Dunraven Grille). The image was reproduced from a painting by Sir Arthur Cope.

Sprague story has to be his first winter in a homestead cabin in Moraine Park (then Willow Park). Sprague recalls the first snows coming on September 20 and the last the following May 22. He fished, met hunters, tried to keep his cattle alive, marveled at a bear, and tells of living in a windowless cabin with a peat ceiling (which, typical of such a structure, occasionally caught fire when a spark ignited the roof). Sprague had rare insights in his own time, and for today’s audiences, he takes us down an extraordinary pathway where we relate to the pioneering spirit in a personal and profound way.

Today, visitors arriving by rapid-paced highway travel into Rocky Mountain National Park might never ponder the slow-savored journey of times past, were it not for stories. Dunraven wrote of several days spent in Denver anticipating his trip to the mountains, the acquisition of mules and wagon, the slow trek and discoveries along the way, ultimately gazing toward Longs Peak. His account gives modern



Kelly performing as Abner Sprague at the YMCA in Estes Park.

listeners a richer context for wild places, once unmapped and more mysterious, revealing the enthusiasm of the next day’s anticipated exploration, as he and his party “listened to the howling of the wind, till the noise of the tempest, confusedly mingling with our dreams, we finally hushed in deep unbroken sleep.”

What [stories] do they have to tell a modern audience that might help listeners think more clearly, deeply and critically about places and their connection to the past?

When planning for a re-enactment, be it 10 minutes, 60 minutes, or anywhere in between, I am faced with the challenge of selecting what to include among so rich an array of stories and adventures. I find myself asking: What story or approach will capture an audience’s interest right from the start? Which stories will

represent the highlights of this individual’s life—their proudest achievements? What do they have to tell a modern audience that might help listeners think more clearly, deeply and critically about places and their connection to the past? This is the second ingredient in the recipe: drawing upon the historic record, the performer’s skills of story selection are essential.

Beyond these questions, I am always on the lookout for stories that convey the passion of whomever I’m portraying. After an audience hears Enos Mills recount his years crusading for a national park, they may better understand his unabated determination when speaking at the 1915 dedication of his dream: “We should enlarge this park. Rocky Mountain National Park should extend from Wyoming on the north all the way to the Pikes Peak Highway on the south.” A modern audience knows this will never be possible, but it has the perspective to appreciate the challenges—and to learn that the Park did grow to include the Never Summer Range. Still today, the words of Enos Mills are as provocative and powerful as they were in 1915.

If Mills was effectively provocative, sometimes the mysteries of history are starkly thought-provoking. Dunraven, while a major figure in shaping the

area's destiny in the 1870s and beyond, came to be despised by some of the earliest recorders of history. Reverend Elkanah Lamb and even Abner Sprague suggest Dunraven's complicity in the 1874 murder of "Rocky Mountain Jim" Nugent, which Dunraven refutes. The accusations and varying accounts can give us a bird's eye view perhaps unavailable during the original events. My re-enacted Dunraven is able to discuss all accounts, while ending as he would with his side of the story. In doing so, I'm able to present audiences with a fair spectrum: by articulating the arguments of his critics, Dunraven gives us a legal drama of a case never resolved by the courts. My Dunraven states, "I am grateful to you for serving as the jury I never had," leaving members of the audience, intrigued at one of history's unsolved mysteries, to form their own verdicts as they reflect later on what they've heard.

Remaining ever-conscious of one's audience is undoubtedly key to all of this: combined with the historic character and the informed performer, the audience is that third essential ingredient in the mix. This three-part concept is not an original one. William Lewis, a renowned scholar of heritage interpretation, emphasized this dynamic relationship between resource, interpreter and visitor. My own performances are always influenced by my experiences with audiences.

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Kelly personifying Lord Dunraven at Barlow Plaza in Estes Park. Sponsored by surrounding businesses, these performances gave visitors a snapshot of the area's rich history during their stroll along the Riverwalk.

Cover photo credits

Cover photos (clockwise from lower left to upper right):

“Enos Mills Remembered,” by Kurtis Kelly, Estes Park, CO; “Above Treeline,” by RMNA Member Cynthia McKee Brady, Oklahoma City, OK; “Snowface” by RMNA Member Gene Putney, Longmont, CO. Please send photos or high resolution digital files to nancy.wilson@rmna.org by March 1 for publication in the 2014 Spring *Quarterly*.

Photos are always appreciated! Scenery, wildlife and wildflowers greatly enhance this publication so take a hike and carry your camera with you! Think simple and high contrast for best reproduction results. Thank You!

Ask Nancy

[RMNA Quarterly Editor Nancy Wilson will attempt to unearth answers to any questions asked by RMNA members and park visitors. If you are curious about something in or about the park, write: Nancy Wilson, RMNA, PO Box 3100, Estes Park, CO 80517.

Or, email her at nancy.wilson@rmna.org]

What triggers bears' hibernation? Bear hibernation can last from 3-8 months and its onset likely is affected by a host of regional environmental factors, including temperature, weather, photoperiod and food availability. The environmental factors, however, are likely indirectly connected to a more significant factor of reduced quality and quantity of food available going into winter which, in addition to a bear's body condition, determines the onset of hibernation. Food quantity and quality and a bear's integral response to it might explain why, in some instances, people see bears or bear tracks when snow is all around – a bear might still be exploiting a high quality, readily available food source during winter (e.g. bears feeding on bison or elk carcasses in Yellowstone or acorns in Pennsylvania). — *RMNP Biologist John Mack*

Do any eagles live full-time in RMNP? If so, does the park reveal their nesting location? Both bald and golden eagles utilize habitat in RMNP. Golden eagles are migratory and vacate the park in the winter. During the remainder of the year, golden eagles are known to nest within park boundaries, although we do not reveal nest locations of eagles or other birds of prey for their protection. They are among the earliest nesting raptors, and each year there are sightings with increasing frequency in February, March and April. Golden eagles tend to nest on south-facing, rocky outcrops and can be spotted in these areas and seen soaring above meadows as they hunt for prey. Bald eagles will use trees to roost (rest and sleep) in the park but there has been no confirmed nesting. Bald eagles are most frequently spotted outside of the park around Lake Estes in the spring, or along the Colorado River, year-round. — *RMNP Biologist Mary Kay Watry*

I have a place where I've cut down the beetle kill trees. I now have a lot of pine trees coming back, but I want to transplant them more evenly. When is a good time of year to do that? The best time to transplant trees is during the spring months after the soil has thawed and night time temperatures consistently remain above freezing. For best success, water trees and the soil around them every-other day for about one week prior. This will moisten and loosen the soil, making it easier to dig and less prone to damaging roots during transplant. The extra hydration during the stress of relocation is also a bonus. Smaller trees (less than a few feet tall) will transplant with better success than large trees. Regarding the size of the root ball, a general "rule of thumb" is that the above-ground portion of the tree is about 1/3rd of the tree's biomass, with 2/3rds of the tree (as roots) underground. To determine how big of a soil ball you should remove, look at the diameter of the branches at the base of the tree. The root ball should be twice the width of the lowest branches and equally as deep. Dig the hole where you intend to plant the tree first, then dig out the tree, so that you are able to immediately transfer the tree into the ground. Lightly water - don't flood - the tree after transplanting. Fences around the trees will protect them from wildlife and trampling. Lastly, species diversity is worth mentioning. A mixture of pine, spruce, and fir trees will ensure that, in the event of another insect epidemic, you might lose lots of one species, but not the entire forest! — *RMNP Forester Brian Verhulst*