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Carrie Adell Strahorn

Mother of the West

text: Florence Blanchard



So often had she listened to the tales of her elders, Carrie Adell Green vowed as a young girl that she would “never be a pioneer.” Yet, for thirty-three years, she traveled thousands of miles by stagecoach, saddle, and railroad car into remote regions of the West. With her husband, Robert A. Strahorn, a publicist for the Union Pacific Railroad, she helped establish several towns, including Caldwell, Weiser, Payette, Shoshone, and Hailey, Idaho. She was the first white woman to make a complete tour of Yellowstone Park and to describe its magnificent scenery. In 1911, she published the popular *Fifteen Thousand Miles by Stage*, a witty and observant memoir illustrated by famed Western artist Charles M. Russell.

Born in Merengo, Illinois, on New Year’s Day of 1854 to a family of “old settlers” in the Midwest, Adell Green enjoyed a comfortable life. Her father, a surgeon who had served in the Civil War under Ulysses S. Grant, encouraged his three daughters to get as much education as they wished. Adell received a degree from the University of Michigan and studied voice in both the United States and Europe.

When she announced her intention to marry Robert Strahorn, family and friends voiced concern. Strahorn, a “tramp reporter” who had left school at the age of ten, was fresh from covering the Sioux wars. He had recently come to the attention of the Union Pacific Railroad for a book he had written on the resources of the Wyoming and Dakota Territory. President Jay Gould had asked Strahorn to head up a literary bureau for the railroad that would gather

information and prepare guidebooks for prospective settlers along the UP tracks. It was a job that would require endless travel in unexplored places.

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“The multitude of friends thought it no less than a calamity in 1877 that a girl should choose as a life partner one who would carry her out into that mysterious and unsettled country,” Adell Strahorn wrote in the preface to her book.

At the bride’s request, the word “obey” was left out of the wedding ceremony; they were going to Wyoming, where there was Women’s Suffrage. Railroad officials at first balked when Strahorn asked that his wife be allowed to accompany him on all his journeys, arguing that it was not a life suitable for a young lady. When he refused to take the job under any other condition, the railroad gave in.

“The matrimonial venture did not lead me to the duties of a matron with home, children, and windows full of flowers, but our launch was pushed into the sea of adventure paralleled by none save that of my own Pard, whom I followed for thirty years wheresoe’er he blazed the trail.” Cheyenne, where they were to set up a permanent base, was a stark contrast to the verdant hills of Illinois: “a forlorn, homesick looking town . . . without a spear of grass, without a tree within the scope of the eye, without water except as it was plumbed for household use, with a soil sandy, hard, and barren and with never ceasing wind.”

Their adventures began immediately, and within weeks the couple was sent on a foray to the Rocky Mountains. Adell’s description of her first trip to Denver was typical of the humor and determination with which she faced hardship and danger. Circumstances often forced the couple to travel separately, and, in this case, Pard had gone ahead to Salt Lake City after having spent the Christmas holidays with Adell’s family in December of ‘77. Several days later, Adell set out from Chicago to meet him in Denver. A blizzard raged outside, and she was the only woman on a train composed of cars that were “miserable shells because the good cars were stalled in snowdrifts.” She had to change trains four times, once for a train wreck that forced her and other passengers to wade around in ankle-deep mud and slush. At the rough frontier town of Ogallala, Nebraska, floods delayed the train for forty-eight hours.

“The town swarmed with cowboys and renegade gangs of bandits who laid a plot to hold up our train at a station just west of Ogallala.” To Adell’s relief, the sheriff received wind of the plot and arrested the bandits before they could stop the train.

Living at the edge of the frontier was not a predictable, comfortable life, but the Strahorns were eminently compatible. While Pard wrote guidebooks filled with economic projections, mining statistics, and tillable acres, Adell kept a different kind of journal.

“The manuscript from my own pen flowed more in a humorous vein, showing a search for romantic history, social status, pastimes, and conditions of the people already in the new land, weaving together the ludicrous and amusing episodes, and describing the grandeur of the scenery.” >>>



Hailey Main Street
Photo: Courtesy The Community Library

People continued to remind her that the remote West was not a place for a lady, but Adell ignored them. Inspecting mine tunnels, canoeing down rapids, sleeping on mattresses stuffed with oat grass: nothing seemed to faze her.

In 1878, she described a tense night in a stagecoach traveling to Montana at the height of the Bannock Indian war. She reported that Indians had attacked and burned the stage ahead of them, stealing the horses and killing the driver. In Yellowstone, they barely missed being knocked over and drowned in an unexpected geyser eruption. In Hailey, she witnessed a hanging.

The couple often found themselves at isolated stage stops where as many as seventeen people might crowd together on an earthen floor with only burlap bags for blankets. Their companions were all manner of travelers including unwashed miners who snored all night, women with coughing children, and wealthy tourists in pinstriped suits. Food was unpredictable. Beans, bacon, and bread were ubiquitous, but sometimes a whole day might pass with little solid food. In many remote outposts, they slept outside under the stars, rolled in blankets on a bed of pine boughs.

Adell was sympathetic toward the lonely hermits who confided their secrets of the heart. Many had left sweethearts behind, and respectfully sought her advice. She empathized with the ceaseless hardships endured by the women who withstood the demands of keeping house on a lonely homestead. With genuine emotion, she tells of a child who drowned at Soda Springs, and of a baby killed by a rattlesnake in the lava beds. Although she carried some of the prejudices of her times about Indians, Mexicans, and Chinese, her feelings changed during later trips to Alaska and Hawaii. There she began to question the wisdom of "forcing distasteful customs and habits on native people that will destroy all that is picturesque and beautiful in their primitive existence."

As manager of the Idaho-Oregon Land Improvement Company, Robert Strahorn made several fortunes in real estate and utilities investments. When the company was notified of intended railroad paths, they laid out townsites with land reserved for stations, and promoted and built the towns.

The Strahorns were instrumental in founding towns in Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. "Our children," as Adell called them, "of which we are justly proud."

On a treeless alkali flat fifteen miles from Boise, the Strahorns built the first home in Caldwell, a town the Land Company located in December 1883. "There were many a night when our house was surrounded by coyotes howling as only a coyote can howl, every one making more noise than three or four dogs." One year Adell used a large sagebrush for a Christmas tree.

The Strahorns' home was a place where townspeople gathered for Sunday dinner and where "young men could find good coffee, doughnuts, and sandwiches, and perhaps ice-cream and cake." Visitors were always dropping by.

“That meant chickens in the pot, cakes in the oven, bread in the pan, to an unlimited degree. In season there was fruit to preserve, pickles to make, jellies to be boiled, conserves to be mixed and cooked, bottled, labeled, and stored on call. I had to be ready all hours of the day to take friends and strangers for a drive.” >>>



Wood River Times offices with view of Della Mountain:
Photo: Courtesy The Community Library

Adell was active in church affairs, and attended concerts, socials, and fairs. She was involved in founding the Presbyterian Church of Caldwell, and in raising money to build the first church. Fifty years later, Margaret Boone, the pastor’s daughter, recalled: “Mrs. Strahorn was a lady. . .quite an elegant lady, large, imposing, well-groomed, and always with an impressive array of diamonds. She was the social arbiter of the town. . .”

Caldwell was but one of the children in their nursery.

The original second-home owners, the Strahorns established homes in Hailey and Denver, as well as an apartment in the rough railroad town of Shoshone. One night in Shoshone, Adell missed the stage to Hailey and was forced to wait until morning for another. "Shots were singing through the air, drunken brawlers were yelling and swearing . . . There was no respectable hotel in the place, and what rude shacks there were about the town were given up to saloons and dance halls. Hardened, weather-beaten countenances glowered from under every hat."

In the early 1880s, the Strahorns began coming to the Wood River Valley. On their first visit, Pard got a shave in a roofless, log tonsorial parlor in Bellevue. "It was snowing so hard that he was soon covered with sleet and snow."

In 1881, the Idaho and Oregon Land Company established the town of Hailey at the confluence of the Big Wood River and Croy and Quigley creeks. After buying out John Hailey, they proceeded to promote the town as "the Denver of Idaho."

When the town of Hailey was laid out, Della Mountain was named for Adell Strahorn, probably by her husband. "The mountain. . . reared its head high above all the surrounding hills, and was named Della Mountain when the town was first started. I felt that I would have to grow some to meet the dignity of such a namesake."

Adell also wrote, "Hailey was at first the most orderly mining town imaginable, and its citizens were largely a class superior to those of frontier settlements." The land company invested in rebuilding the Merchant's Hotel, which had burned twice already, and was involved in the county seat contest that threatened the prominence of Hailey over Bellevue. In 1885 the Strahorns personally selected all the furnishings for another one of their investments, the Alturas Hotel. On the dark side, living across from the courthouse, Adell witnessed a "repulsive" hanging that followed an attempt at lot jumping.

In 1888, retired from his official job with the railroad, Pard purchased the Hailey Hot Springs and built a hotel. Although the hotel was a financial and social success, the Hailey Hot Springs Company partnership soured in less than a year.

During the year they owned the resort, the company also bought the Hailey electric light plant. In addition, they planted thousands of orchard trees and bought 150 head of Kentucky cattle for the hot springs property.

After closing the hotel for the Christmas holidays, Pard traveled to Caldwell on business. Two days later, a winter storm deposited five feet of snow around Hailey. Accompanied by a few local miners coming out of the hills on horseback, it took Adell three hours to get from the springs to the main road

and several more hours of floundering at eight degrees below zero to travel the remaining two miles to town and the Alturas Hotel. "There I had to wait until the 7th of January before a train could get out of Hailey."

After 1890 the Strahorns turned their attention to the state of Washington, living around the Bellingham area. Pard suffered significant financial losses on investments there, so they moved to Boston for awhile, and Adell took up her music studies again. But the West had staked its claim on them, and they later returned to Washington, settling for awhile in Spokane before eventually moving to San Francisco.

Despite her childhood vow, Adell Strahorn would be called a pioneer.

"Here I was at the threshold of a new land . . . and the title of 'old settler' was to be forever attached to me and mine."

When she died in San Francisco at the age of 71, newspapers praised her pioneering role, referring to her as "the mother of the West" and "queen of the pioneers." She was more than a pioneer, though. She was an explorer, one who lived up to the dignity of her mountain namesake in Hailey.

An editorial in the *Portland Oregonian*, published March 17, 1925, compared her with the wives of explorers Wilfrid Grenfell and Sir Richard Burton, who accompanied their husbands on arduous journeys to difficult lands. "But as a traveler in out-of-the-way places in our own country," the editorial concluded, "Mrs. Strahorn in all probability deserved the palm."

Florence Blanchard is a local freelance writer. She has edited commemorative centennial publications for both Hailey and Bellevue, and is currently a grant writer, publicist, and program coordinator for the Sawtooth Botanical Garden near Ketchum.

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