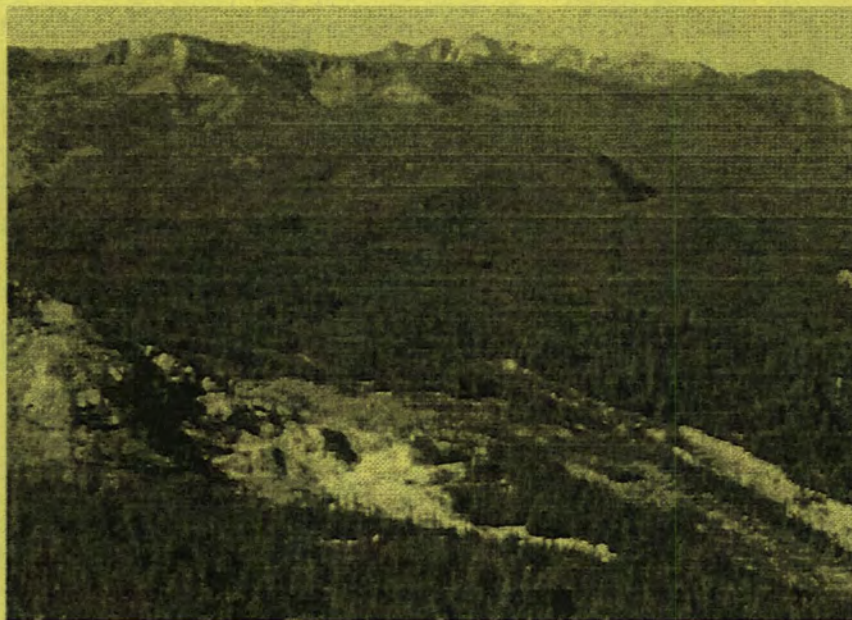


A WOMAN IN THE GOLD FIELDS OF IDAHO:
VIOLA LAMB AND THE
THUNDER MOUNTAIN GOLD RUSH, 1902

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U.S. Department of Agriculture
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Intermountain Region
Payette National Forest
January 1995

Diaries and journals written by pioneers have provided scholars and historians with some of the best information on the westward journey, on the hopes and expectations of those who set off in search of a better life beyond the Great Plains.¹ In recent years, the journals and accounts of women have received new attention and several studies on the women's experiences offer additional insight into the migration. Most of these accounts deal with the long journey across the Plains, into the Northern Rockies and onward to the west coast. Few of these accounts, however, document the experiences of the mining camps.²

The discovery of silver and gold in the Idaho Territory brought prospectors flooding into temporary camps already in the early 1860s.³ Many of the finds were short lived, and most of the miners were men. Only occasionally were women among the first into an area; most came later as the mines and community surrounding them became more established. Nevertheless, women did play an important role in the mining camps, working in a variety of capacities and becoming instrumental in the development of a stable community.⁴

Accounts of women in the Idaho mining camps are rare, but a short manuscript in the collections of the Idaho State Historical Library and Archive documents the travels of the first woman to reach the gold fields at Thunder Mountain, the last big gold rush in the lower 48 states. Viola Lamb wrote an account of her trip into the mining district during the spring of 1902, just as the boom was beginning.

Lamb traveled with three men--a mining engineer, a miner, and a lawyer--from the Cripple Creek gold fields of Colorado where each had developed expertise that would be of considerable value in a new mining area. Lamb was a woman with business skills, having worked as a notary public and stenographer at Cripple Creek she had experience in maintaining public records and recording claims. This group went to Thunder Mountain because of the business opportunities.⁵

Lamb and her colleagues learned of the finds at Thunder Mountain early in 1902, as did many others. Already in the fall of 1901, newspapers throughout the region carried accounts of the finds made by the Caswell brothers along Monumental Creek and the interest of financier Colonel Dewey in purchasing the Caswell claims. Accounts referred to "mountains of gold" located in "Idaho's Klondike," and these were eagerly picked up by newspapers in other western gold fields.⁶

A handful of prospectors soon went into the district, eager to find out for themselves if the stories were true, and they in turn fed the press more stories about the fantastic riches at Thunder Mountain. During the winter of 1901-1902, when travel to and from the Thunder Mountain district was perilous at best, some miners hiked out from the gold fields. Reporters eagerly sought them, because they were the only source of information on what was being called "the new Klondike."⁷

Those coming out from Thunder Mountain brought accounts of vast riches waiting to be tapped. Idaho newspapers featured these stories, and Boise's Idaho Daily Statesman, for example, published reports of new finds almost daily throughout early 1902. Articles from these newspapers were then picked up by other regional newspapers which spread the news well beyond Idaho. Newspapers from as far away as Pittsburgh and professional mining journals sent reporters and correspondents to cover the fast breaking news, each publication eager to provide its readers with up-to-date and reliable information. Mining Reporter, one of the most influential and widely read journals, offered news of Thunder Mountain almost weekly. "Everyone expects a rush into the district next spring," it wrote in the January 16, 1902, issue. "There seems every probability of the rush materializing into a permanent district." Within a month, reader interest had risen so much that Mining Reporter sent a special correspondent to the district, and he provided a detailed account of the finds, the assay values of the ore, and more important the routes into the district.⁸

During these months, a vigorous campaign was underway by the Union Pacific Railroad which printed maps and pamphlets identifying the fastest and best routes to Thunder Mountain. The Boise Chamber of Commerce co-sponsored a map, of which some 50,000 copies were distributed in early 1902. The map actually offered a great deal of practical information, such as railway lines into Idaho, pack routes to the gold fields, the nearest railroad junctions, and even the claims already staked in the district.⁹

Shortly before leaving Colorado, Lamb and her colleagues had in all likelihood read the available material on the routes to Thunder Mountain, including an extensive account in the Mining Reporter's April 10, 1902, issue. The article described each of the five major routes, the first of which, and the trail followed by Lamb and her colleagues, was the Boise Trail. It began in Idaho's capital, went north to Idaho City, then to Banner, reaching the mouth of Clear Creek at the Payette River. This route followed Clear Creek to its head, down Bar Valley to the Forks of Valley Creek and Elk Creek. Mining Reporter noted that a stage line would soon be using this route, and that at Elk Creek the Thunder Mountain prospector had to transfer to a pack train for the last and toughest part of the 170 mile journey.¹⁰

Viola Lamb and her colleagues followed these accounts and decided to bring their skills and experiences to the "new eldorado," as she referred to the Thunder Mountain gold rush. From Cripple Creek, they went to Denver, departing there on April 23, 1902. They traveled next to Salt Lake City, probably by train, and then to Boise, seeking more (and reliable) information on the best way into the gold fields.

Much of Lamb's account deals with the journey into Thunder Mountain, the hardships of travel, the patience it required, and the unflinching confidence she held. She is matter of fact and

objective in recording the difficulties of travel in the high Rockies. Lamb describes individuals encountered along the trail, although there is hardly any mention of the three men traveling with her. Lamb gives the most attention to another woman, a Mrs. Smith, who with her husband were packing in the items needed to establish a grocery store at Thunder Mountain. Lamb tells the reader of the Smiths's success and the fortune they made supplying the miners.

As is clear in the manuscript, Lamb had important skills--her abilities as a stenographer, experience as a notary public, and a clear, straight-forward writing style. She seemed intent upon taking advantage of the opportunities at Thunder Mountain and did file several claims. Her account, which follows, offers another perspective of the gold rush to Thunder Mountain.

* * *

There were four in our party - a lawyer - mining engineer - prospector and stenographer. Robert Harper had long ago made his fortune in the Elk Mountain District, Gunnison County, but when the papers commenced telling of the new eldorado, he could not resist the temptation and decided he must go.

We left Denver April 23rd [1902]. I purchased my outfit for "roughing it" in Denver, it consisted of a very heavy divided skirt - corduroy waist - rough rider hat - heavy veils and lastly a pair of elk hide boots guaranteed water proof - they were until we struck the first water and after that my feet were never dry, except at the camp first, and I usually managed to dry them enough so that I could pull them on in the morning. We stayed in Salt Lake for twenty four hours and arrived in Boise on the 27th.

At Boise we heard all kinds of discouraging reports, and people who came out of Thunder [Mountain] on snow shoes informed us that it would be folly to try to get in there before July 1st with pack trains. We purchased our blankets and tents here - my tent was in the shape of an indian tepee and was 9X9 feet with a canvas floor - I ordered the floor put in because I had heard all kinds of stories about the rattle snakes and a large black snake but they seemed just as anxious to avoid us as we were them. I did not hear of any one being bitten by a snake but several imaginary bites, seemed to make it necessary to call on the medicine chest for drinks of whiskey. The tent occupied by the men was 16X22 ft and was used as kitchen dining room etc. and after we got in Camp we held religious services in it and it was well attended, and our song service was really fine.

We purchased our horses eight of them at Council, where we bade adieu to the railroad - also all of our supplies. I rode a pretty bay horse while my typewriter and supplies were carried by a white horse - Mr. Harper also rode, but

the lawyer and engineer after hearing the reports about the condition of the roads came to the conclusion that they would prefer to walk. It took me some little time to learn to cook camp fashion, but I soon learned to cook good baking power biscuits without shortening, and while I said when we started out that I never could learn to drink black coffee - I was glad to drink it before starting out in the morning.

Well, it rained every day after leaving Council and the mud was above our horses knees, and very often I had to raise my feet to keep them out of the mud. The melting snows and continuous snows combined made what would be at most seasons of the year - rippling mountain streams, raging torrents, indeed the force of the water was so great that many dead horses were carried down stream as if they were as light as feather. The horse that carried my supplies went down Fisher Creek and finally lodged between two boulders, when the men waded in and untied the pack, or rather cut the pack off - we saved most of the pack but my supplies were a sight - the envelopes were all sealed, but I managed to dry the paper and legal forms so that they could be used. The horse was finally pulled out, but it was a sorry sight - all cut and bleeding - I covered it up with blankets and the next day we led him without a pack, he recovered but was stolen before we reached Thunder Mountain.

Yes, the trail was simply dreadful we had to swim the horses across the Payette River. After crossing the Payette the next terror to be encountered was Sesesh Pass, covered ten feet deep with snow. We started out at two o'clock in the morning, hoping that the snow would have a crust heavy enough to hold up the horses - we proceeded one and a half miles when two of our horses went down and had to be shoveled out, we met several trains that had just gone a few feet farther and they too had given up, and said it was impossible to go on and that we would all have to take the horses back to feed. One of the most pitiful sights was a pack train of twelve horses that had gone into Sesesh Pass about six miles and had been there four days waiting for a frosty night, and their animals had not had a bit to eat except what they had given them in the shape of flour and oatmeal from their own supplies, they looked starved, but as they passed us they were going like lightning in the direction of grass, of course they were unpacked and the supplies cased by the way side. Two of our party went with the horses and it was a dreadful trip back over those muddy roads - thirty five miles to feed. The rest of the travelers including Mrs. Smith - the first woman that I had seen on the trail - she is a matronly looking woman of about forty years of age - she had on a short skirt soft hat a shawl crossed over her shoulders and in her hand she carried a shepherds crook, she looked like an Alpine tourist. Her home is in Canon City and she and her husband were taking in a grocery store - they hired the supplies carried in and they walked every foot of the way - after getting in Thunder

she started up a bakery and made quite a fortune furnishing the mining men with pies and bread. Colorado has beautiful scenery but it has nothing that will compare with the view that we had from the hill where we camped - we were surrounded on all sides with rough rugged mountains on one side of us was the raging Payette river, while just in front of us lay the two lakes the Big and Little Payette Lakes - clear as crystal like a great chalice of silver, sparkling in the sunlight, and the snow capped mountains cast their reflections in the water making it seem more like a beautiful dream than a reality. Wild game was everywhere and trout could be seen jumping up all over the lake.

We camped here some days when a train consisting of ten men and thirty mules - Diamond and Youngs outfit from Telluride, Colorado, and drew a sigh of relief, because we felt that these hardy mountaineers, who had climbed the snowy ranges of Colorado would surely go through and then too they had bet with people on the outside a \$1000 that they would go through the dreadful Sesesh. They unloaded their mules and ran them over the twelve miles free of incumbrance, this packed the snow, then they came back and took half a load, then returned again and took the remainder of their load, this of course made a good trail, so we sent word by the mail carrier to bring the horses back (mail is carried to Warren in the winter time with two dogs and a man as guide, the latter on snow shoes or skies). We crossed the Sesesh in safety but we had to unpack our horses many times so that they could get out of the mud. We reached the town of Warren and had a very good dinner, but here we were warned that the worst part of the trip was before us Elk Summit - it was while going up Elk Summit that Barney McGill of Victor died, he sat down on his toboggan and died from sheer exhaustion, and three men were killed in a snow slide just three days before we went over, I saw their supplies beside the trail. I had become used to all sorts of sights by this time, the first time I saw a dead horse beside the trail I felt like weeping but when I had counted two hundred it ceased to cause heartaches - two dead burros lay on Elk Summit and old prospectors told me that it was the first time that they had ever seen these hardy beasts of burden give up and die.

The White Pass in Alaska was not to be compared with the trail into Thunder Mountain when it comes to hardships suffered. After we came down off of Elk Summit we found that a new terror awaited us in the shape of slide rock - a sort of slate - which keeps shifting all of the time, and we had forty miles of this to go over - the trail could only be followed by the blood left by the dumb beasts gone ahead, and our horses feet were dreadfully lacerated and there were deep cuts clear up to their knees.

Just after crossing Monumental Creek (so named on account of the many beautiful monuments of granite along its

banks) we encountered a new danger - places where the monuments arose hundreds of feet above the trail and a narrow ledge in some places not over eight inches wide on which the horses had to cross, and then a sharp decline of several hundred feet to the river. Many horses went down these places and were drowned and carried down stream. Our engineer and several men built a trail over these places by putting heavy trees along the dangerous spots and bracing them so as to keep the horses from slipping, while they were fixing these places I climbed up some boulders, so that I could get a good view back and I counted 135 horses back of us.

We arrived in Thunder and Mrs. Smith and I being the first women in Camp were given a hearty welcome, and I being the first unmarried woman was presented by Mr. Moyer, the townsite man, with a corner lot on Colorado Avenue, and the boys soon saved enough logs to make me a comfortable place to live in. Some of the men made me a willow chair - the only chair in camp.

Miss Rice, who claims to be the first woman in Camp was about the twelfth, because the trail over which she came "the Boise route" was not open until weeks after the "Warren trail". (I was made Registrar for the Thunder Mountain District by the County Commissioners of Idaho County, but I could not accept it on account of duties demanding my attention on the outside.)

The first typewritten letter was dictated by a Mr. Ryan of Victor and sent to Congressman F.E. Brooks, Colorado Springs, Colo.

I had only one serious accident and that was just after we passed Elk Summit - my horse slipped and threw me off and then stepped on me - I was stunned and very much bruised but I had to walk and lead my horse twelve miles the next day over slide rock, so I was forced to be a Christian Scientist that day.

I came out of Camp the 26th of August and the second day out came across a bear - a large cinnamon - he was devouring the carcass of a dead horse, which lay beside a roaring stream and did not hear me until I was quite upon him - well, it was hard to tell which was the most frightened the bear or me - but I was pretty busy trying to control my horse - one of the party shot at him but he escaped into the woods.

No, I did not make my fortune with my typewriter but I secured five good claims and hope to make my fortune out of them. I have great confidence in that country and feel that it will be one of the greatest mineral bearing areas ever discovered. And as for the scenery if they are ever able to get a railroad in there, it will be the Switzerland of

America."¹¹

* * *

Viola Lamb shared the widespread optimism and excitement about the riches to be found at Thunder Mountain. The 1901 report from the Idaho inspector of mines stated that the vein inspected at the Caswell claims, the first claims filed there, contained "one million five hundred thousand tons at a conservative estimate of ten million dollars."¹² Such conclusions attracted further attention. The respected publication Mines and Minerals sent a special correspondent to Thunder Mountain who was excited about what he found there. "The fact that a pan of gravel can scarcely be picked up along this stream without getting the 'color' suggests to the intelligent prospector that somewhere above must be extensive belts of auriferous material awaiting the hand of enterprise," he concluded. Furthermore, Thunder Mountain is "a veritable mountain of ore, whose estimated wealth throws the treasures of the Incas into the shade."¹³

Although many prospectors had made the arduous trip along snow-covered trails to Thunder Mountain in the spring of 1902, the bulk of the ore extraction was done at one of a handful of large mining operations funded by big investors, and not at the claims of hopeful individuals. Prospectors with only a few claims continued to work them, and as the big strike eluded them, they took jobs at one of the larger mines--the Dewey, Sunnyside, the H-Y, Venable, and later the 20th Century Mine.

Many of the prospectors who rushed to Thunder Mountain, the merchants and businessmen who followed, including Viola Lamb, planned to remain until they struck it rich, or until they went broke as the gold veins were exhausted. As the number of prospectors grew, towns were established. Already in 1902, sites for five towns were platted in the district. The first of these towns was Roosevelt, a community organized by the Monumental Creek Mining Company west of Thunder Mountain. It also became the largest town, growing to more than 7,000 residents by 1903. Roosevelt would eventually have 14 saloons, two hotels, numerous restaurants, and a variety of professionals, including undertakers, doctors, dentists, lawyers, and assayers. In October 1904, the town's newspaper, the Prospector and Thunder Mountain News began publication.¹⁴ Not long after the founding of Roosevelt, four other communities were organized, all close to the claims at Thunder Mountain.

The survival of these towns and the district as a whole depended upon the mines, and when the yields finally dropped sharply in 1905 a number of mines shut down. Viola Lamb had long since left the district. Even after 1905, however, some mining continued. The demise of Roosevelt, the district's major town came on May 31, 1909. A rock slide, "a river of mud," as a miner described it, blocked Monumental Creek. Over the next several hours, its waters backed up, eventually flooding the town. Soon,

most of the buildings had disappeared from sight, all submerged under water. In the face of the rising creek, residents had abandoned their homes and businesses, taking those few possessions they could carry. The boom at Thunder Mountain had ended.¹⁵

Despite the large amount of ore extracted in the years between 1901 and 1909, most of the claims at Thunder Mountain never produced a great deal of ore of value. Even the large mines never lived up to the expectations of the investors. In fact, only the Dewey Mine turned out to be a reliable producer of ore, even though its value proved to be less than early estimates. Thunder Mountain was another of the West's booms that all too quickly went bust. Over the next several decades, some mining did take place at Thunder Mountain, as a handful of prospectors continued to extract enough ore to live on. The last of the big gold rushes, Thunder Mountain continued to attract attention. In 1931, Zane Grey, the renowned novelist, packed into the area while researching his novel Thunder Mountain, which was published in 1935, and a few women were prominent in his account.¹⁶

Viola Lamb's account of the journey to Thunder Mountain documents not only the hardship that those who tried to get to the "new eldorado" experienced. Her account also demonstrates that the gold booms of the West attracted women with professional experience and business skills needed in the rapidly growing communities.

NOTES

1. John D. Unruh, Jr., The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-60 (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1979), remains the best study and Unruh relied heavily on journals and diaries of the pioneers. Isabella L. Bird, A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains, 3rd edition (London: John Murray, 1880).

2. Lillian Schliessel, editor, Western Women: Their Land, Their Lives (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1988). Lillian Schliessel, Byrd Gibbins, Elizabeth Hampsten, Far From Home: Families of the Westward Journey (New York: Schocken Books, 1989). Ruth Kedzie Wood, The Tourist's Northwest (Toronto: McClelland, Goodchild & Stewart Limited, 1916). Mary McDougall Gordon, editor, Overland to California with the Pioneer Line: The Gold Rush Diary of Bernard J. Reid (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1983), pp. 89, 94, 100, and 141.

3. Merle W. Wells, Gold Camps & Silver Cities: Nineteenth Century Mining in Central and Southern Idaho (Moscow, Idaho: Idaho Department of Lands, Bureau of Mines and Geology, 2nd edition, 1983). On life in the mining camps, see Duane A. Smith, Rocky Mountain Mining Camps: The Urban Frontier (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967).

4. Smith, Rocky Mountain Mining Camps, pp. 187-189.

5. Viola Lamb identifies the other members of her party as Harry B. Tedrow (attorney-at-law), Henry Weber (mining engineer), and Robert Hackee (miner and prospector). These names are handwritten at the top of her typed manuscript. On the Thunder Mountain gold rush, see Robert G. Waite, "To Idaho's Klondike: The Thunder Mountain Gold Rush," (Payette National Forest, Heritage Resources Program, Mc Call, Idaho, 1995).

6. Doris Madden, "First Packer at Thunder Mountain Rush," Idaho Daily Statesman (July 10, 1938). "In Idaho County," Lewiston Tribune (January 8, 1902).

7. "In Idaho County."

8. "Idaho Thunder Mountain," Mining Reporter 45 (January 16, 1902), p. 105. "The Thunder Mountain District," Mining Reporter 45 (February 27, 1902), pp. 225-226.

9. See, "Idaho's Gold Camp. W.M. Wantland Issues 50,000 Maps for Distribution," Idaho Daily Statesman (January 8, 1902); "The Northern Pacific Active," Lewiston Tribune (March 1, 1902); and "Will Boom Thunder Mountain and Boise As Outfitting Point," Evening Capital News (January 22, 1902).

10. "Routes to the Thunder Mountain District," Mining Reporter 45(April 10, 1902), pp. 358-362. See also the brochure, "Thunder Mountain, Idaho's New Gold Camp Reached Only Via Oregon ShortLine R.R. Through Boise City, Ketchum, Mackay, Red Rock or Weiser, 'All Good Outfitting Points'," Idaho Historical Library.

11. At the bottom of the typewritten manuscript Viola Lamb signed her name and wrote "Thunder Mountain, June 1902." The date, however, cannot be correct. The rush began only in the spring of 1902 and she writes of leaving the district on August 26th.

12. Martin H. Jacobs, Report of the Mining Districts, 1901 (Boise, 1901), pp. 33, 39.

13. William E. L'Hame, "Thunder Mountain," Mines and Minerals (July 1901), p. 558.

14. "Roosevelt Sure to Boom" Evening Capital News (December 28, 1901). "Roosevelt Business Lots," Idaho Daily Statesman (March 22, 1902).

15. Karl Baumgarten, "Thunder Mountain Landslide," Mining and Scientific Press 101(November 26, 1910), p. 698.

16. Zane Grey, Thunder Mountain (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Publishers, 1935).