

Pioneer Families of Douglas County

The John L. Dyer Family

Tim Weber

In 1900 sixteen stained-glass portraits of “Colorado Pioneers” were placed around the rotunda of the State Capital. Only one of the pioneers had Douglas County connections—John Lewis Dyer, “the Snow-shoe Itinerant.”

Born in 1812, John Dyer grew up in Ohio and Illinois. His parents were strict Methodists; and he “got religion” in 1830. He married Harriet Foster in 1833; and they had five children. John farmed and then worked the lead mines in Wisconsin.

Harriet and their 13-month-old daughter died in 1847, which left John with Joshua (12), Elias (10), Elizabeth (“Abbie,” 7), and Samuel (4). John married a local widow but had the marriage annulled after learning she had never divorced an earlier husband who was still alive. When John’s sister Rachel moved in to take care of the children, he left the mines for a new calling. In 1850 he became a Methodist “circuit rider.” He preached in a number of far-flung Methodist congregations that sometimes kept him from home for weeks at a time.

After a decade of itinerant ministry in Wisconsin and Minnesota, John made a change. His children were grown; and he feared going blind. He decided to see the Pike’s Peak country before it was too late. In 1861 he set off for Denver. His horse foundered near Omaha, so he walked the rest of the way.

After a brief reunion with his son Elias, who had been clerking in a Denver store for over a year, John decided to visit the gold fields. He sold his watch to buy supplies and walked 100 miles to Buckskin Joe, a raucous gold mining town not far from today’s Alma, north of Fairplay.

There John found his life’s work preaching in the mining camps around South Park and along the Continental Divide. In 1862 John got his first appointment to the Blue River Circuit, which was quickly followed by an appointment to the South Park Circuit. To supplement his income, in 1864 he carried the mail between Buckskin Joe and Leadville for \$18 a month.

This route required a weekly trip over Mosquito Pass, even in the dead of winter, which nearly killed him more than once. To make winter travel possible, Dyer wore “Norwegian snow-shoes,” which were 9-11 ft skis, and used a single ski pole to maintain balance and steer. Such exploits later earned him a place in the Colorado Ski Hall of Fame.

He preached three or four times a week, which could be more dangerous than “snow-shoeing” over mountain passes. He preached wherever he could—tents, street corners, cabins, and even

saloons. As a strict Methodist, Dyer opposed the miners' after-hours activities—drinking, dancing, and gambling. Sometimes he brazenly entered saloons and gambling halls and demanded that the tables be cleared so he could preach. Patrons usually objected and often tried to prevent or disrupt his services. Thus John often included brute force as well as the Bible in his repertoire. Dyer could fight as well as he could preach, which earned him the respect of people in the camps. He soon became a popular figure in Colorado's gold country.

The Methodists kept Dyer busy for almost forty years, assigning him to various circuits in the Rockies, on the eastern plains from Greeley to Colorado City, and a large part of New Mexico. Probably few people knew the Rocky Mountain West better than he did.

Dyer had strong connections to Douglas County. In 1870 John married Lucinda Rankin from Cherry Creek and homesteaded a quarter-section near present day Crowfoot Valley Road and Lemon Gulch, northeast of Castle Rock. He was present when a small group of Methodists met in 1874 to organize a church there. Later on he served that church and others in Littleton, Sedalia, Franktown, Parker, Kiowa, Greenland, Monument, and other towns between Denver and Colorado City.

John spent little time on the ranch during the 1870s, given his preaching schedule. During the early 1880s, he and Lucinda lived in the Breckenridge area, where John prospected and built a new Methodist church, which still stands. In 1882 they moved back to their Castle Rock ranch to retire. But at age 70 John was no longer able to keep it running.

In 1884 they traded the ranch for a home in Denver. The next year John became the first chaplain of the Colorado State Senate but soon tired of city life. He accepted another brief preaching assignment in Breckenridge. In 1888 the Dyers returned to Denver; and Lucinda died. John then wrote his autobiography, *Snow-Shoe Itinerant* (1890).

John lived the last eleven years of his life in Denver's University Park with his daughter and son-in-law, Abbie and Clinton Streeter. By then John was the grand old man of Colorado Methodism and was affectionately called "Father Dyer." He lived long enough to see his stained-glass portrait in the Capitol. He died in 1901, widely revered as one of Colorado's pioneers.

Other members of the Dyer family had connections to Douglas County. Samuel M. Dyer, John's youngest son, fought in the Civil War and lost a foot in the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863. After his discharge from the army, he returned to Wisconsin and got married. In 1871 Samuel moved his wife Jerusha and 3 year-old daughter Fannie to homestead the quarter section next to his father's ranch. Soon John's daughter and son-in-law, the Streeters, arrived from Minnesota and laid claim to another quarter-section adjoining Father Dyer's.

Not long after starting the ranch, Samuel moved his family into the newly-platted town of Castle Rock, where he purchased a few city lots and opened a drug store. He and "Rusha" had a second child, a son they named after his grandfather John.

Samuel became an important figure in early Castle Rock. He was elected county clerk and recorder in 1873 and signed the town's Articles of Incorporation in 1881. In 1885 Samuel was elected county assessor on the Republican ticket.

Rusha died in 1877. Four years later Samuel married Esther, the widow of Dr. W.J. Alexander, one of Castle Rock's first physicians. They moved into 208 Cantril Street, which still stands.

In the late 1880s, Samuel's family went to Pueblo. In 1891 he followed the gold rush to Cripple Creek where, in addition to running a drug store, he and his son John sold real estate and became undertakers. In 1902 Samuel died after falling down a flight of stairs.

John's middle son Elias never lived in Douglas County but was buried there. He came to Denver in 1860 and followed his father to the mountains where he prospected, invested in gold mines, and became an advocate for miners' rights. His neighbors elected him a Justice of the Peace and Lake County Probate Judge, which required him to settle hotly-contested property disputes.

In 1874 one dispute turned violent. George Harrington was murdered and his neighbor Elijah Gibbs was tried in Denver (an unbiased venue?) but acquitted of the crime. Harrington's friends were furious. When they tried to burn down Gibbs' cabin with his family inside, Gibbs shot and killed two of the assailants. Another Justice of the Peace ruled Gibbs' action self-defense, but the Gibbs family decided it was not safe to stay.

In early 1875 a pro-Harrington faction formed the Committee of Safety and sought revenge against Gibbs' supporters. The vigilantes ordered Judge Dyer to resign his office and leave the county. While Judge Dyer refused to resign, he did make a strategic retreat to Denver and Douglas County where he failed to get any assistance from the territorial government.

Judge Elias returned to Lake County a few months later to resume his duties and found that the Committee of Safety had intimidated and murdered some of their neighbors. Judge Dyer issued sixteen arrest warrants and scheduled court proceedings for early July, 1875 in Granite, which is now in Chafee County. When the witnesses were too afraid to testify, Elias postponed the trial until the next morning. The Committee of Safety then took him prisoner.

Elias was not optimistic about his chances. While in custody, he wrote a last letter to his father: "I don't know that the sun will ever rise and set for me again." The next morning, on July 4, 1875, he was murdered in his own courtroom. The killers were never brought to justice.

John Dyer was devastated by Elias' assassination. In the summer of 1877, he sent his son Samuel and son-in-law Clifton to move Elias' body from Granite to the Dyer family plot in Castle Rock. John put part of Elias' final letter on his tombstone: "I trust in God and his mercy; at 8 o'clock I sit in court, the mob have me under guard; I die for law, order and principle."

John Dyer's oldest son Joshua was also memorialized in the Castle Rock cemetery. In 1861 he enlisted in the Union army. In June, 1864 Joshua was captured at the Battle of Petersburg in Virginia. He spent the next year in three Confederate prison camps, including the infamous Andersonville. Thanks to a negotiated prisoner exchange in 1865, Joshua and about 600 other Union soldiers boarded the steamship *General Lyon* in Wilmington, NC, and sailed north to freedom. On March 17, off Cape Hatteras, the ship caught fire and almost everyone on board drowned. Though Joshua was lost at sea, his father erected a tombstone to remember him.

John Dyer has two mountain peaks named after him: Father Dyer Peak (13,615 ft) in the Ten Mile Range and Dyer Mountain (13,855 ft) in the Mosquito Range, just south of Mount Evans.

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