



Parked in the Past

Colonel Frank Mayer – buffalo hunter, civil war drummer boy, author

Met dance hall entertainer Silverheels when U.S. marshal of Buckskin

Laura Van Dusen, Correspondent

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Editor's Note

Note: The story of Mayer's life was compiled through magazine and newspapers stories written during and after his lifetime, much of it with direct quotes from Mayer, and through Mayer's book "The Buffalo Harvest." No written record was found of Mayer in the Civil War. Buffalo runners were nomadic individuals and difficult to tally in U. S. Census records, and, in fact, Frank Mayer was not found in the U.S. Census until 1900. The story of Silverheels is traditionally told as taking place in the early 1860s, when Mayer was in his early teens and, by his own account, a drummer boy in the Union Army.

Was Mayer a truly extraordinary man, a teller of tall tales, or a little of both? It's more than 50 years past his death, and the answer may never be known.

Colonel Frank Mayer was about two months short of his 104th birthday when he died of "infirmities of old age" at the old Fairplay Hospital in May 1954. The

old hospital, at 550 Castello Ave., is now an apartment house.

During his last 12 years, Mayer lived in a four-room house on Lot 2, Block D in the town of Fairplay. That home has been structurally restored, furnished with period furniture from the era of Mayer's lifetime, and is now one of seven structures on its original site in Fairplay's restored 1880s mining town, South Park City.

Mayer lived a full life, and he had so many occupations that when he was asked in 1935 at the age of 85, to name them, he replied, "Well, sir, I've never been a bartender or a ribbon clerk, but I've tried everything else at least once and had a mighty fine time."

(The circa-1935 definition of 'ribbon clerk' is one who is a small stakes gambler or one who is a clerk in a fabric store measuring and cutting lengths of ribbon.)

Buffalo runner

Mayer is best known for the six years (1872 – 1878) he spent as a full-time buffalo hunter, or runner, as they preferred to be called. He made his first buffalo kill, of an aging bull, in 1872 in Oklahoma and his last kill, another aged bull, on an elk hunting expedition in Wyoming in 1881.

In the 1870s, Mayer saw the population of buffalo – which he acknowledged are more accurately called “bison” – decline rapidly as at least 10,000, and maybe as many as 20,000, men were involved in the “buffalo-killing trade.”

There were estimates of 20 million buffalo in the western United States before the buffalo harvest began in earnest in 1870, according to an article he wrote, “The Rifles of Buffalo Days,” for the September 1934 edition of *The American Rifleman* magazine.

The men involved were “veterans of the Civil War,” said Mayer in his book, “The Buffalo Harvest,” co-written with Charles B. Roth and published in 1958 after Mayer’s death. He said they were “at loose ends, wanting adventure, feeling the discomfort of claustrophobia at being cooped up in houses and towns after adventure in war.”

By his own admission, he and others in the trade were ultimately responsible for the near annihilation of the buffalo, and because of that slaughter, responsible for the loss of Native Americans’ ability to live independently on the land.

And that annihilation and slaughter were with the full support and cooperation of the U.S. Government in the form of unlimited free ammunition, said Mayer.

Dual purpose

There were two reasons the government encouraged the buffalo slaughter, said

Mayer cautiously, almost reluctantly, in “The Buffalo Harvest.” For one, buffalo were in the way of western expansion. The animal couldn’t be controlled or domesticated. “He couldn’t be corralled behind wire fences. He was a misfit. So he had to go,” Mayer said.

Mayer said a “high ranking officer in the plains service” once told him the second reason that the government gave away free ammunition to buffalo killers. The officer said, “Either the buffalo or the Indian must go. Only when the Indian becomes absolutely dependent on us for his every need, will we be able to handle him. He’s too independent with the buffalo. But if we kill the buffalo, we will conquer the Indian. It seems a more humane thing to kill the buffalo than the Indian, so the buffalo must go.”

Mayer did not disclose the name of the “high ranking officer.”

Civil War

But long before he ever hunted buffalo, Mayer was a drummer boy with the Union Army in the American Civil War, when at 13 he lied about his age and was recruited into the 165th Artillery. He was possibly following in the footsteps of his father, who was a Union Army artillery officer, according to a story in the July-August 1986 edition of *Rifle Magazine*.

In April 1865, two years after joining the army, Mayer witnessed the surrender of General Robert E. Lee at Appomattox Court House, Va., he said in a 1953 story in *The Denver Post’s Empire Magazine*.

He said he witnessed the battles of Gainesville and Gettysburg and was with General Burnside in December 1862 when Burnside’s troops crossed the Rappahannock River before the Battle of Fredericksburg, Va. In that battle, two

Union and two Confederate generals were killed and the Union army retreated in defeat.

In the battle of Gainesville (Fla.) on Aug. 17, 1864, Union forces marched into the town square in a move to occupy the city. They suffered severe losses and were defeated.

The Battle of Gettysburg (Pa.), July 1-3, 1863, saw more casualties – as many as 51,000 combined in Confederate and Union forces – than any other battle in the Civil War.

Confederate forces were defeated and the battle “is considered the turning point of the Civil War,” according to the Library of Congress website at www.loc.gov.

In November 1863 President Abraham Lincoln, in dedicating the Gettysburg National Cemetery, gave the now-famous Gettysburg Address.

Mayer ultimately served in the U. S. Army 35 years. After the Civil War, he fought in the Indian Wars on the American frontier and in the 1898 Spanish-American War, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel, according to the Empire Magazine story.

Silverheels

But Mayer wasn’t always involved in killing and warfare.

In the Aug. 26, 1948, edition of The Park County Republican and Fairplay Flume, Mayer said that as a young man he was appointed U.S. Marshal in the town of Buckskin Joe, a former mining town in Buckskin Gulch west of Alma.

And in his tenure there, he met the legendary dance hall entertainer Silverheels, he told the reporter.

He said that the stories about her being a beautiful blond were false and in fact, she was a “gorgeous brunette.”

“She arrived one day on a stagecoach” and had a contract to dance in one of the halls in the town, he said.

In his lifetime, Mayer visited every country except Siberia and Tibet as a mining engineer, he told the Empire Magazine reporter, so when he said he had “never seen a more beautiful interpretive dancer in the world,” as he said about Silverheels, it seemed likely that she was quite a dancer.

He mentioned in The Flume story some of her dances that were his favorites: “The Birth of Love,” “Coming of Spring,” and “Opening of the Lotus.”

“When she danced, she wore a mask, sometimes a blue one, sometimes a white one, but she never showed her face,” he said.

“As for her name, she had three pairs of dancing slippers, black, white and red, but they all had silver heels.

“Her audiences were prospectors and trappers, and every last man of them was infatuated with her. When she finished her dance, they’d throw their pokes of gold (small leather pouches for carrying gold flakes) on the stage, and I’ve seen as many as 54 pokes there.

“When the terrible smallpox epidemic broke out in Buckskin Joe, Silverheels worked tirelessly nursing the victims. She used her money to bring doctors from Colorado Springs and Denver.”

Mayer said that when the smallpox epidemic was over in Buckskin Joe, many people left town, including Silverheels. She was never seen again, and, he said, “The best we could do was to name the mountain after her.”

After the buffalo

Mayer was married for less than half of his life. He and Marjorie Monroe married in 1877. They were married for 44 years, until her death in 1921. He outlived her by 33 years, but tears came to his eyes even at age 103 when talking about her. "I buried my heart with her," he told a reporter in 1953.

He was a published author of three books: "The Buffalo Harvest," "The Song of the Wolf," published in 1910; and "The Unmuzzled Ox," published after 1910 but with an unknown exact date. He also wrote several magazine articles, most of those about hunting or guns. He was also a poet.

"The Unmuzzled Ox" is out of print, but "Buffalo Harvest" had a second printing in 1995, and "The Song of the Wolf" was reprinted most recently in 2010.

Mayer was satisfied with the life he led. In 1953 at age 103, as he was being interviewed for Empire, he said, "I have lived a full life. I haven't a single regret."

Images on the following page.



Frank Mayer at 100

Colonel Frank Mayer, shown here as he looked in the early 1950s, at about 100 years of age, figured his life had been bountiful. "I have lived a full life. I haven't a single regret," he said in the year before he died. (Photo courtesy of the South Park City Museum)



Fairplay's front street, 1940s

This was Mayer's view when he walked up Front Street toward his home in what is now South Park City, visiting the restaurants, bars and shops of Fairplay's "main" street in the final years of his life. Note the Prunes Monument, a bit newer but much the same as today, on the side of the Hand Hotel in the left foreground. (Photo courtesy of the Park County Local History Archives, source: Sanborn, Ltd.)



Final Stop

The headstone of Colonel Frank H. Mayer sits at a midpoint in the Fairplay Cemetery overlooking the town where he spent his last dozen years. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)



Mayer home 1958

Frank Mayer lived the last 12 years of his life in this small home that is now part of South Park City, the restored 1880s mining town museum in Fairplay. This photo is from an advertisement requesting donations to begin South Park City in 1958, four years after Mayer's death. (Photo courtesy of the South Park City Museum)



Mayer home 2012

As an exhibit in South Park City, the former Mayer home has been structurally restored and furnished with period furniture from the era of Mayer's lifetime. The exterior of the home was restored following Mayer's death, but it was not owned by South Park City until 1986. After considerable interior restoration, it was open for daily public access in the 1990s. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)