



Parked in the Past

Gottlieb Fluhmann disappeared from Lake George-area in 1892

Remains, including valuable possessions, discovered in remote cave in 1944

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In life, Gottlieb Fluhmann passed through Park County history a forgotten man.

But that changed with the discovery of Fluhmann's remains and worldly possessions in a secret hideaway in the hills northwest of Lake George 52 years after he went missing.

Fluhmann disappeared from his Lake George-area ranch sometime in the fall of 1892. His remains and that of an animal, possibly a pet dog, along with some valuable worldly possessions, were found by chance when two Army Air Corps GIs from Peterson Field (now Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado Springs) went hiking in the area northwest of Lake George in late October or early November 1944.

One of the men, Master Sergeant Francis Brahler, climbed to the top of a large granite formation to get his bearings. Window glass reflecting from the sun caught Brahler's eye. He discovered that the window glass could slide to one side.

And when he slid the glass, Brahler discovered Fluhmann's Cave.

Fluhmann

Fluhmann's last venture was ranching, but he was a land surveyor and a miner earlier in life. He was of German descent and immigrated to the United States from Switzerland sometime after his 1866 passport was issued at age 21. He was born in 1845, was 5 feet 4 inches tall, and arrived in Park County as early as 1881. He was 47 when he disappeared in 1892.

According to the Nov. 2, 1944, Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph, Fluhmann "was of a 'flighty' temperament and troubled by the thought that someone was stealing his cattle periodically."

The Fairplay Flume of that date said Fluhmann "was quick to pick up imaginary insult or attempt to cheat him," and that he had frequent altercations with "some of the old timers."

However, in considering the personality traits attributed to Fluhmann, one must

remember that they were written 52 years after Fluhmann's death by those whose memories may have clouded or by those who didn't know Fluhmann at all.

The Gazette said Fluhmann had angry words with several cattlemen, including Benjamin Ratcliff, who ranched near Jefferson in the Tarryall Valley. Ratcliff murdered three school board members in 1895 and was hung at the state penitentiary in Cañon City for his crime.

(See Sesquicentennial Special Edition to The Flume, September 2011, for the Ratcliff story.)

Ratcliff connection

In the months and years following the Fluhmann Cave discovery, legends reported as truth circulated in newspapers and magazines of the day. Those stories, first surfacing within days after Ratcliff was charged with the school board murders, pin the death of Fluhmann on Ratcliff.

But the stories included several inaccurate details that should have been simple to confirm, such as Ratcliff's physical appearance, and the names, ages, and genders of his children.

With the simplest details incorrect, one tends to question the accuracy of any part of the story.

One of the publications was the May 15, 1895, Buena Vista-based Colorado Democrat. In that article, Fluhmann was described as a "well-to-do ranchman" who left behind a "fine ranch and a thousand head of cattle."

The 1,000-head figure may be another inaccuracy; the administrator of Fluhmann's estate, Henry Krebill, sold 150 head on April 6, 1893, to a Kansas

City party and another 16 head in the final estate sale on May 11, 1893.

Reasons given for naming Ratcliff as Fluhmann's murderer were that the two could not agree on a cattle deal and soon after that Fluhmann disappeared and Ratcliff "appeared to be uneasy and has always been heavily armed," according to the Colorado Democrat story.

Ratcliff was not considered a suspect when Fluhmann disappeared, and he was never charged with Fluhmann's murder.

There was speculation in 1944 that other possibilities of Fluhmann's fate could be death from natural causes, suffocation from a warming or cooking fire without adequate ventilation, or suicide.

The cave

The cave is more a crevice in the rock than an actual cave. The entrance is not visible from ground level; a second entryway, on the roof of the cave, is visible only from the top of the rocky outcropping, according to newspaper stories published in 1944 in The Flume, the Gazette and the Greeley Daily Tribune.

Michael Anthony, who works at the M Lazy C Ranch near Lake George and has been to the cave, said that, "(today) there is no evidence of a door, but the opening is configured to look like a door could easily be built to fit."

He said the cave is small, about 15 feet deep, five feet high and five feet wide. "It has a flat floor and the sides are straight up and down. It's just made up of native rock; there is an opening in the ceiling next to the wall where it looked like he could put his stove pipe," said Anthony.

Home

Fluhmann had fashioned the one-room cave into a home.

The Nov. 2, 1944, Gazette said that a huge dishpan hung from beams in the rocky ceiling. In the pan were two loaded, gold-inlaid, double-barreled flintlock rifles, a .45-caliber pistol, and “expensive smoking pipes.” Also in the dishpan was a surveyor’s transit, which included a telescope that was “perfectly preserved and operable,” according to the Gazette.

There were letters Fluhmann had received a few years earlier from his nephew, John Fluhmann of Crested Butte, Colo., and his niece, Alice Fluhmann of Missouri. There were legal papers and his Swiss passport.

The cave had a wooden floor, and shelving was attached to the wall to hold Fluhmann’s possessions. Among those were shoes, a Dutch oven, several wine bottles, a brown jug, a two-gallon crock and “expensive wood working tools,” said the Gazette. A kerosene lamp, with fuel that still burned after 52 years, was also found.

Another gun

Fluhmann had one other gun in the cave. It was an 1886 Marlin repeater .38-.55-caliber rifle. That rifle, in good shape, would sell for approximately \$1,500 to \$2,600 today, according to research at www.collectorebooks.com.

But Fluhmann’s rifle was not in good shape.

Its stock was bullet-damaged, and the barrel was rusted. It was found in the middle of the cave next to Fluhmann’s skull. Reported in the Gazette story was that then-Park County Sheriff Sylvester Law said if a right-handed person was holding the gun and preparing to shoot

when the bullet from another gun hit the rifle stock, that person would be killed.

Fluhmann was right-handed.

Speculation at the time was that Fluhmann could have been shot from the hole in the top of his cave. But newspaper reports from 1944 did not mention bullet holes on Fluhmann’s skull or on the rest of his skeleton. Reports did, however, mention that no stray bullet was found.

And Dan Denney (or Denny) from Fairplay, who was a 12-year-old child when Fluhmann disappeared and who knew Fluhmann in the 1890s, was among those who investigated the cave in 1944. He said that he “talked to men who had seen Fluhmann carrying the rifle with the damaged stock sometime before he disappeared.”

Left home

Fluhmann didn’t always live in the cave. He could view his homestead, with its two cabins, assortment of sheds and corrals and herd of cattle from the cave entrance. His home was in a narrow valley with a good supply of water and plenty of grazing land.

Speculation is that he used the surveyor’s transit to get a better view of the homestead and of anyone who might be looking for him. It was the disappearance of the surveying instrument from the homestead that led Fluhmann’s neighbors to consider that he may have left the area.

A few short paragraphs in the Jan. 12, 1893, Flume said that Tim Borden – Fluhmann’s neighbor and a resident of Bordenville northwest of the cave on present-day Tarryall Road – thought that with the surveying instrument missing, “there is a bare possibility that he has

gone off to some of the new camps with it.”

But the article continued, “The neighbors incline to the belief that he is dead, and that his death was accidental or suicide. He was a peculiar character and has been know(n) to talk of making away with himself.”

Another story, in the April 20, 1893, Flume, said that Fluhmann had “remarked to different parties that he would kill himself” and that “when he did disappear they would never be able to find him.”

But search parties did try to find him. Representatives from the Sheriff’s Office and others scoured the area of Fluhmann’s ranch in the months between February and April 1893, not knowing if they would find the missing man or his remains. Fluhmann’s nephew, John Fluhmann, traveled to Park County from his home in Crested Butte, Colo., to join in the search.

No trace of Fluhmann was found during the 1893 searches.

Possessions

And what became of Fluhmann’s possessions that were found in the cave?

After all the passing years, it is unknown what happened to most of Fluhmann’s possessions. The Nov. 2, 1944, Flume said, “The debris has been well sorted and gleaned (gathered) by the Sheriff and his helpers.”

But it is known what happened to one of Fluhmann’s guns.

One of the 1850-era gold-inlaid flintlock rifles was bought in 1973 by the wife of Bill Blunt, a forester with the Pike National Forest stationed in Fairplay. After extensive research on its historic

and monetary value, she bought the rifle from an unidentified private individual in Fairplay as a birthday gift for her husband, according to the Feb. 25, 1973, Gazette.

The gun is rare; a current value could not be determined before press time.

Unknown

In 1976, an Inventory Data Form, filed in the Park County Local History Archives, was completed for the Gottlieb Fluhmann Cave. The form gives a short description of Fluhmann and lists articles that were found in the cave in 1944. The report, signed by the late Park County historian Harold Warren, said, “He could have died of natural causes or from a bullet which plowed through the stock of his 1886 Model .38 caliber Marlin rifle.

“To this day, no one really knows what happened to him.”

Images on the following page.



Lake George, early 1900s

This photo of Lake George's Main Street from the early 1900s was similar to the Lake George that Gottlieb Fluhmann would have known. It was the closest town to the Fluhmann ranch and cave. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, source: Steve Plutt)



Tarryall, early 1900s

This photo, from the early 1900s, is looking upstream on Tarryall Creek toward the Tim Borden Ranch. Borden was a neighbor of Gottlieb Fluhmann and an ex-county commissioner. In January 1893, Borden rode into Fairplay and talked to authorities in the Fluhmann investigation. The Flume reported on Jan. 12, 1893, that "nothing has as yet developed to throw light upon the mysterious disappearance of (Borden's) neighbor, Mr. Fluhmann." (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, source: Wilkin Collection)