

The Little White Church in Virginia Dale

By Dennis Knight

A frontier cemetery rambles at her side with crude gravestones, some with initials scratched in to identify the resident, others so old they can't be read, amid a few finely engraved markers.

It's a tidy sanctuary with five pews on the left, and four and a half on the right. The short one makes space for a wood stove near the middle, but keeps the center aisle clear for a proper wedding procession. The white pulpit fronts an altar slightly elevated, just a little closer to heaven. An organ, chair, and two flags occupy the rest of the stage in front of the cross on the wall. A vestibule provides transition to and from the weather. You'll not find a temple or cathedral more important to a community and a single young visitor than the little white church in Virginia Dale, Colorado.

She was built in 1880, a few miles up the valley, and, in 1884, in the middle of the night during a feud of the congregation, she was hauled to a creek downhill from the Virginia Dale stage stop. In the early days she was Methodist, Presbyterian for awhile, but since then she has been a simple community church. Regular services are monthly, and people often choose her for weddings, baptisms and funerals.

Her doors are never locked, and for a century and a quarter she has provided shelter to stranded travelers by horseback, wagon and automobile. She asks no questions, seeks no alms, keeps firewood in the stove, provides a clean place to sit or sleep and wait out the storm, and even has an outhouse in the back.

She is a phoenix. In 2003 her life was interrupted by an arsonist, a young volunteer fireman with a fascination for flame. She burned to the ground, but her life did not end. Money came from far and near, an architect created construction drawings *pro bono*, tradesmen volunteered skills, and others gave their time and energy. Just two months after the blaze, her shiny new doors opened again for worship, community meetings, and always respite for the weary. There was enough money left to create a trust for her upkeep.

The little white church in the dale took on a new meaning to my family recently. My brother Jim helps out every year with a music festival in Laramie. He sometimes takes artists to and from various locations, and on the week of the festival, he drove a young performer from Oakland who told him she had just recently broken a marriage engagement. Her fiancé had often spoken about getting married in a special little white church he knew in Colorado.

Jim, knowing it would be open, took her there. Miss Cleome Bova sat quietly by the stove with her guitar, finally asking with her eyes if it would be alright, and with Jim's nod, she sang an old blues standard, *Trouble in Mind*. She finished, reflected a bit, and then stepped as a phoenix from that little white church in the vale, greeted by a bright rainbow of hope on the ridge ahead.