

Squeaky Bob from Lulu City

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

Lulu City sprung up when as many as 500 gold and silver prospectors appeared in the Kawuneeche Valley of eastern Grand County, Colorado. Named for the daughter of one of its founders, Benjamin Burnett, it boasted some ten saloons drawing customers from mines like the Rustic, Friday Nite, Tiger, Carbonate and Southern Cross.

While they extracted some silver, it was of low grade and cost too much to process with the closest smelters well over 100 'wagon miles' away. So, four years later, the population departed in haste for more promising gold and silver fields.

But Squeaky Bob Wheeler stayed. Nicknamed for his high-pitched voice, he was subject to bouts of drinking, but was known as a likeable and well-behaved citizen of Lulu. He had saved enough money working in the mines to purchase a ranch south of Lulu, where he established a guest house, and became famous for his cooking skills and colorful hospitality. He called it the Phantom Valley Ranch.

The ranch and townsite were purchased in 1949 and added into Rocky Mountain National Park and placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977. They are accessible by the Lulu City Trail, a family-friendly hike of about four miles north of the Colorado River Trailhead.

Squeaky Bob died in Denver at age 79 in February of 1945, and his passing was noted by Carolyn H. Rhone in the Middle Park Times and the Steamboat Pilot on February 15<sup>th</sup> of that month picked up the story.

'And I saw Squeaky Bob at the stock show, as spry as a cricket,' said Johnnie Holzwarth the other day. 'Who'd think that the very next week he'd check out of this world?'

'Squeaky Bob's place is one of Grand County's legends. A homestead cabin 13 miles up the North Fork just at the right spot to catch the horsebackers as they came down off the old Indian Trail leading from Estes Park...that was Squeaky Bob's place. And tent houses, as clean as your grandmother's kitchen. Blankets washed after every occupancy; oilcloth on the tables as white as a snow meadow, skillets and kettles scrubbed even on the bottom...no wonder that Squeaky was famous.'

'How'd Squeaky ever get that voice?'

'Well, it was this way. He was out after the reward on the head of an outlaw. Followed him to a railroad crossing and when he came to the railroad bridge, the outlaw disappeared. Squeaky peeked under the culvert, gun in hand.

'Lookin for me?' warned the outlaw?

'Hell, no,' said Squeaky. 'I'm looking after rabbits.' And from that time on, Wheeler's voice squeaked.'

According to the Pilot, Robert Lincoln Wheeler, Squeaky Bob had a military funeral as a veteran of the Spanish-American War. The report noted, 'Too bad he couldn't have witnessed it—

perhaps he did—he would have chuckled over the importance of salutes and lowers and high-sounding words. No funeral could equal in impressiveness Squeaky's own descriptive powers.'