

That Much Closer to the Moon

By Dennis Payton Knight

The moon is a place to sing about. We talk to the man in the moon and ask to be flown to it. Kids learn before kindergarten that a cow jumped over it, and we are ourselves moonstruck, east of the sun and west of the moon. We dance in the moonlight on a marvelous night for a moon dance. We spoon by the light of the silvery moon, cry under a blue moon, and warn of a bad moon rising.

With a mean elevation of 6,800 feet, the highest of any state in the union, Colorado is that much closer to the moon. The prescient Jules Verne recognized that, and in 1865, several years before writing *Around the World in 80 Days*, he wrote *From the Earth to the Moon*, about a spacecraft fired off to the moon from a giant cannon. He imagined in the novel a 200 inch reflecting telescope following the voyage from atop Colorado's Longs Peak, rising 14,259 feet above Estes Park.

Around the same time, Jim Nugent arrived in Estes where a close encounter with a bear left him scar-faced and one-eyed. He soon fell in with Isabella Bird who, with him as her guide, was the fourth woman in history to climb Longs Peak, and she eventually became one of the most famous travel writers of all time. The one-eyed desperado nicknamed "Rocky Mountain Jim," Nugent traveled with her as her guide (some say more) all over the Rockies. She wrote of him that he was "a man any woman might love but no sane woman would marry." Bird went on to travel and write about all corners of the globe, becoming the first woman to be elected a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

In 1903 arrived F.O. Stanley, the wealthy inventor and producer of the Stanley Steamer automobile, who, stricken with tuberculosis, came to Estes Park seeking a cure. His health improved dramatically, and in 1907 he constructed there the world-class summer resort known as the Stanley Hotel. It offered every modern service, except heat.

Seventy years later a novelist, Stephen King and his wife Tabitha came to Estes to drive the Trail Ridge Road in nearby Rocky Mountain National Park. But it had just closed for the winter due to snow, so they checked into the Stanley Hotel which was itself in the process of closing for the winter. As the only guest in the unheated place, he stayed up late with the sole remaining bartender, walked the empty corridors, and finally settled into room 217, where he had one of the worst nightmares of his life.

By morning, Stephen King had the outline of his best-seller, *The Shining*. It was made into one of the most popular and terrifying movies of all time, became a TV mini-series, and has made the Stanley even more famous. So maybe lunacy is Colorado's reward for being that much closer to the moon.