

Haiku for Lake Marie, A Resting Place

By Dennis Payton Knight

*Mother glacier sends
Crystalline droplets to fill
Her child, Lake Marie*

Medicine Bow Peak, at over twelve thousand feet is the highest point in the Snowy Range west of Laramie, Wyoming. At her base sits Lake Marie, the crowning glory of a place where Arapaho, Sioux, Cheyenne, Shoshone and White River Utes once congregated to find mountain mahogany wood for bows, and powwow for rituals in the valley to make good medicine to cure their ills in the warm mineral springs along the river.

I grew up with my family enjoying the Snowy Range with drives, picnics, hiking and fishing in the summer months when the road was open. Beautiful vistas would emerge at every turn and crest as we wound our way to where the scattered granite making up Medicine Bow Peak hovers above shimmering, crystal Lake Marie below.

If ever there was a place in nature that represents the simple purity of peace, it is Lake Marie, and yet six decades ago she was the witness and site of what was to that time the worst commercial air disaster in our country's history. At 6:33 the morning of October 6, 1955, United Airlines Flight 409 from Denver to Salt Lake City crashed into Medicine Bow Peak, killing all 66 people aboard, including military personnel and five women members of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir.

The flight had departed 83 minutes late, planning to follow a flyway in a northern arc above Laramie and Rock River, a flight path that avoided the mountain ranges of Colorado that extended into southern Wyoming. Not pressurized, it was assigned a cruising altitude of 10,000 feet to keep the passengers and crew from the discomfort of flying any higher.

The region did not yet have tracking radar, and so it was the lack of an expected position report from the flight crew that alerted authorities to trouble and sparked the ground search. *The New York Times* reported, "First rescuers to reach the scene said they had found about 50 bodies strewn along a 300-foot course down the face of the mountain. Only a tail piece, part of the fuselage and a wing of the plane had been located at mid-afternoon by rescuers who fought snowdrifts and a howling wind on the 12,005-foot Medicine Bow Peak."

Although the flight had been slightly off course, the cause of its demise has never been established. It may have been a faulty altimeter, turbulence, or clouds obscuring the peak with the pilot operating by visual flight rules. The crash was memorialized by visible patches of burned oil where the plane's engines apparently struck about 50-75 feet from the peak.

It has been left to nature to dispose of fragments of airframe still remaining from Flight 409, unseen to visitors from all over the world who come to rest momentarily in the peace and beauty of Mother Glacier sending crystalline droplets to fill her child, Lake Marie.