

Mary Ross Lyons Cairns

Biographical Sketch written by Mary Lyons Cairns (in quotes)

“I was born December 20, 1885, the youngest of three daughters of Mary Elizabeth and Robert Ross Lyons, an attorney in Ellsworth, Kansas.



I graduated from the Ellsworth High school in 1903. Since that time I have taken numerous courses by extension from the University of Kansas and the University of Colorado.”



Photo taken in Keosauqua, Iowa where she was recovering from scarlet fever at her grandparent's home

In 1905 Mary Lyons left her family and home in Ellsworth, Kansas and set out for her new teaching position in Grand Lake, Colorado. It was a cold, dreary winter afternoon when she arrived at the hotel in Granby. She spent an uneasy night in her hotel “room” whose walls were merely curtains separating hers from the next “room”. The next morning the proprietress gave her one parting bit of advice before she boarded the stagecoach to Grand Lake. She said, “buy yourself some galoshes, dear.”

“I taught at Grand Lake, Colorado during the winter of 1905-06.” In addition to a small salary, her teacher's compensation included room and board with the students' families. She boarded at Josephine Young Langley's Rustic Inn, which stood near present-day Point Park. Her five lively pupils were Charlie Eslick, Bessie Eslick, Jenny Young, Jake Young, and Chris Young. The school was a rented building on Grand Avenue, which today is the Mine Design jewelry store.



“On New Year’s Day, January 1, 1907, I was married to James Cairns, a Grand Lake merchant and rancher at my mother’s home in Ellsworth, Kansas.” James was 56 years old and Mary was 22. James presented Mary with three wedding gifts – a piano, a gold, pearl and diamond brooch, and a dashing dark green cutter (sleigh) with gold pin-striping.



Mary Lyons Cairns, about 1908, Grand Lake, Colorado

They set up housekeeping in the large two-story home that James had built in 1903 on Grand Avenue across the street from his store. The Grand Lake Art Gallery (Studio 8369) sits on this location today.



“We had one daughter, Patience Maureen, now Mrs. Marshall Colvin Kemp of Denver. I have two granddaughters, Mary Leilani, (now Mrs. Robert J. Williams) and Jane, a high school student in Denver.”



A chimney fire in the summer of 1916 resulted in the complete destruction of the Cairns' home. The “temporary” move to the little house behind the present-day Humphrey's Cabin Fever lasted until 1937, when Mary Lyons Cairns and her daughter, Patience, had their new stone house built on the lakeshore site that James had bought in 1889.



“In September, 1912, my mother and I invited the women of the little Grand Lake village and the surrounding ranches to form a Woman’s Club. The real need was to promote a friendly social relationship, and with the forming of this club the need began to be fulfilled. Those first members were: Mrs. Mary E. Lyons, Mrs. Amelia Lehman, Mrs. Mary Husted, Mrs. Belle Kauffman, Mrs. Betty Harbison, Mrs. Georgia Eslick, Mrs. Josephine Langley, Mrs. Ethel Curry, Mrs. Lulu Mackey, Miss Genevieve Smith, and myself. Perhaps the most important accomplishment of that early club was the work done at the cemetery. The club women had it surveyed and fenced; and since it lay within the boundaries of the Rocky Mountain National Park, they sought and obtained a protective lease for its use. Later in the 1920’s, in visiting the Boulder Woman’s Club, I became quite interested in having the Grand Lake Club become federated. From Mrs. Valentine B. Fischer (a prominent member of the Boulder Club and later President of the State Federation) I obtained all the necessary information in regard to joining the Federation. From this information the Grand Lake woman’s Club proceeded to join the Federation in 1928. I have been a member of the Grand Lake Woman’s Club continuously since its founding. I am very proud of my long affiliation with the Grand Lake Woman’s Club. I am also a member of the following organizations: A charter member of the Boulder Writers’ Club; a member of Colorado Authors’ League; a member of Arapahoe Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution; an inactive member of the Order of Eastern Star; and a member of the Episcopal Church”



Mary Lyons Cairns (left) with Estes Park Woman’s Club 1926



“In the summer of 1938 I received an award for the Grand Lake Woman’s Club in a state contest entitled “Pioneer Women of Colorado.” My entry was a story on the life of Susan Miner Johnston, a Grand County pioneer who will long be remembered as an outstanding and lovely person.”

Mary Lyons Cairns spent the winters in Boulder, Colorado with her sister Mrs. John M. Fogg (Florence).

“In addition to my many duties I have taken time to study and write throughout the years. I have sold articles, poems, and stories to many publications. In 1946 I published a book on the early settlement of Grand Lake entitled “Grand Lake: The Pioneers.”



Mary Lyons Cairns spent 1945-46 in Hawaii with her daughter Patience and husband Marshall Colvin Kemp. Her book “The Pioneers” was published in May while she was on the Big Island. While in Hawaii, she worked in Hilo at the ships’ service Naval Air Station and stayed with Mrs. John Crane.

1 April 1946

To : Whom It May Concern.

Subj: Mrs. Mary L. Cairns - Recommendation of.

1. It is a special privilege to recommend Mrs. Cairns to any of her future employers or to anyone, for that matter, with whom she may associate. Mrs. Cairns was with the Ship's Service Department from November 1945 to April 1946, during which time she capably held the position of assistant bookkeeper and stenographer. In addition to her regular bookkeeping and stenographic duties, she handled all correspondence in regard to incoming mail orders and kept a complete and accurate filing system on them.

2. Mrs. Cairns has been efficient, dependable and trustworthy in the performance of her work, and would indeed be an asset to any organization or business firm. Her character is of the highest type. Her associates respect and admire her.

R. E. Johnson
R. E. Johnson
Lieutenant (jg), USNR
Ship's Service Officer

“In 1947 my first book received a “Top-hand Award” from the Colorado Authors’ League for the best non-fiction book by a Colorado writer for that year.” Mrs. Cairns was unable to attend the award ceremony as she was at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota with her sister. Mrs. Henry (Carolyn) Rhone accepted the award for Mary Lyons Cairns.

“In 1954 I published a companion book entitled “The Olden Days.”



Mary Lyons Cairns and daughter
Patience Cairns Kemp 1967



Mary Lyons Cairns at age 85

Mary Lyons Cairns died on September 13, 1972.



Mary Lyons Cairns

BY D. RIGGS

Her sudden death, devastating to so many of us who cherished her friendship and her stern standards for herself, prompted someone to say, "But now she is at peace," as if that were something new to her. But it was not new to the Mary Lyons Cairns whom I have known and admired and depended on for encouragement in my meager writings.

Peace she achieved many years ago, as evidenced in my favorite poem of hers among the countless poems and stories she has written in addition to her three books on Grand Lake history. The poem is

Compensation

Long years have past; the mining camps are gone
Where hopes of men ran high, with meager yields
At Lulu, Teller, Gaskill, Dutchtown, Pearl . . .
All were deserted for brighter fields.
But many a man who failed to strike it rich
Found joy enough in seeking, it is said;
For compensation lies in THOUGHTS, not THINGS,
And richest lodes are always just ahead.

In all her writings was evident her strict reverence for TRUTH, which refused to allow fictional excitement to put the truth of facts off-balance. I still cherish the letter she wrote me after I had reviewed her second book, THE OLDEN DAYS.

She wrote: "Most pleasing to me are your words, 'historically accurate and authentic account', for I spent many years in gathering material - pictures and text - for my books, often traveling many miles for interviews, then checking and re-checking, so that everything would be as accurate and authentic as I could make."

And this reverence for factual truth as well as her writing skills and talent won her the Top Hand award by the Colorado Authors League in 1946 for her first book, GRAND LAKE: THE PIONEERS. The award was a strikingly well done wood carving of a buffalo, which still adorns her fireplace mantel, a memento of work well done and happily rewarded.

Her last book was a combination of the two and is titled, GRAND LAKE IN THE OLDEN DAYS. It is in its second binding now, and copies may still be had, luckily, at the Grand County Book and Rock Store in Grand Lake and at the Trading Post in Granby. The first two books have been long out of print, and are indeed collectors' items by now.

She wrote, years ago, a lovely poem about having patience with your child when he has erred. Appropriately enough she must have so dealt with her only child, Patience Cairns Kemp, whose dedication over many years to husband, aunt and mother bears tribute to the loving hand of her mother.

The influence of her life on others cannot but be limitless, for she lived the philosophy she wrote in this sturdy statement of Life and Love:

The Twisted Tree

Battered by many a blast of cold
Twisted and gnarled of limb
A pine tree stands on the barren edge
Of a canyon's windswept rim.
Never have warm rains freshen
Peace has been all unknown;
But the roots hold firm in rocks below,
As it weathers the storm alone.
Souls that are lonely, twisted, sore,
Battling a world of care
Find peace in the love of fellowmen
If roots were planted there.

May her new life continue to enrich her fellowmen.