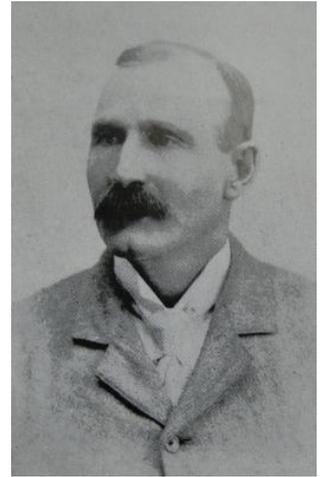


James Cairns

(by Mary Lyons Cairns, wife of James Cairns and granddaughter Jane Kemp)

When or where a man is born, or who his ancestors were, makes little difference, perhaps, to those who knew him. It is he himself that counts – what he makes of himself, what he does for others, how he is regarded by those with whom he comes in contact. Yet James Cairns' background and heritage must have molded his character to some extent, for one cannot picture him without seeing the staunch heritage of Scotch parents; the cold, snowy winters of his home in Canada; or the endless hours of boyhood work spent on his uncle's farm.



William Cairns and Robert Cairns, were farmers in Ormstown, Quebec. They were in Montreal and met two sisters who had a jewelry store there. They married the two sisters. William married Eliza Baird and Robert married Sarah Baird. James Cairns was the fourth of five children born to William James Cairns and Eliza Baird in Ormstown, in the province of Quebec Canada on August 23, 1852. His mother died when her fifth child Sarah Jane was 8 months old. The father kept the three oldest children – David, William and Eliza, while James and his baby sister were brought up by his uncle Robert Cairns and his wife Sarah who had no children.

Life for the boy meant work and more work, with short terms of school intervening as welcome interludes. There were back-breaking chores from daylight until dark. When he was twenty-one he left the farm, in answer to a longing to see a part of life that the farm had never given him.



In Montreal he found a job at once in a large dry goods store. Here he learned what English and Canadian merchants advocate above all else – that quality counts above everything. Imported woolens and china from England; plaids from the native Scotland of his parents; lovely handmade things from Switzerland; all these he learned to know and to value for their worth above price. This lesson stayed with him throughout his life – in building, in merchandising, in ranching – quality must count above all else.

It was in Montreal that he became a member of the Presbyterian Church and taught a class in Sunday school. Here, also, he became a member of Mizpah Lodge and Encampment No. 1, International Order of Odd Fellows. Isolated from such fraternal organizations as he was later on, during his long residence in Colorado, he still retained his membership.

In 1879 when he was 28 years old, he heard about the gold rush in Colorado. He booked passage on a boat going down the St. Lawrence River to New York. Being the thrifty Scotsman he was, he reasoned that if he bought two wool blankets and slept on the deck instead of booking a room, he would save some money and still have the blankets when he arrived in New York. (His granddaughter still has those blankets.) He made his way to Kansas where he spent some time with his brother, David Cairns, and his family. Then he travelled to Denver where he bought an interest in a dry goods store on Larimer Street.

At that time no one knew what Denver might become. Mines in Colorado were booming, and a metropolis far exceeding Denver might spring up anywhere in the state. Prospectors showed bits of rich ore and small sacks of gold dust which they said had come from the almost unexplored region to the northwest. Middle Park was a land of promise. Any day now the world might hear of vast riches somewhere in that vicinity.



James sold his interest in a Denver store, went by train to Georgetown, then by stagecoach to Grand Lake. As soon as he could get lumber he built a store and in June, 1881 opened it with a stock of general merchandise. His was the first building erected in the town after it was platted as a townsite. He remained in business continuously in this location for forty-three years, although the first building was replaced by a new one in 1907.

Many times, in the early years, James did his own freighting across the range from Georgetown and later from Empire. This region was without a railroad until 1905. From the top of Berthoud Pass the freighters came down through Spruce Lodge, Idlewild, the Cozens ranch, Junction Ranch (now Tabernash) and Coulter; then it branched north through Selak's, over Coffey Divide to the Lehman Post office, then on to Grand Lake. Usually three days each way were allowed for a freight trip.



“The roads were terrible,” James often said, “and those trips were hard. But people were always kind to me, wherever I stopped for meals or overnight.”



That was it – he always remembered people who were kind to him. And he was kind to wayfarers, too. People are still telling of the trips they made to Grand Lake – on buckboards, stagecoaches, horseback, or on foot, and how he let them have a camping place, or put their horses up and fed them, or took them into his own quarters and made them feel at home and comfortable.

The rise and fall of mining ventures in this region is a pathetic story. Hopes ran high; then as prospect holes yielded little of paying ore, such hopes vanished. James Cairns had put every dollar he had into his business. He had extended credit to many miners, and had grubstaked others; a large percent of these men skipped out without paying him a cent. People were leaving even more swiftly than they had come. But the store tied him and he could not have left even if he had wished to.



James Cairns purchased forty shares of stock at \$10 each in The Pioneer's Mining Company October 6, 1883. By 1890 Lulu City, Teller City and Gaskill were ghost towns.

His life was so full of work that there was little time for adventure, but one experience stands out; an account of it is found in Enos A. Mills' Rocky Mountain National Park. With Mrs. Mills' permission I shall give it here, somewhat shortened:

“One of the most stirring experiences ever known on Flat Top Trail befell a party of five on an outing, who were caught above timberline one September day, 1896, in a raging blizzard. F. P. Wolaver, A. W. Locke, Mr. and Mrs. A. E. Sprague, and James Cairns started with their pack outfit from Grand Lake to Estes Park. They camped just below timberline on the west side of Flat Top one evening, intending to cross the next day. There were gusts of wind, glimpses of the moon between flying clouds, and finally a light fall of snow during the night.

“The morning was wintry, a poor one for trailing on the heights. Mr. Sprague, who had been over the trail in all kinds of weather, led the way. The storm was so thick that it was impossible to see fifty feet in any direction. Suddenly a halt was called. They were on the brink of a precipice. The party sought shelter among the rocks. They discovered a cleft in the wall of the precipice about twenty feet below the top which they decided to occupy. Such a refuge! A hole in the cold rock into which they could all barely squeeze, far above timberline, without fire, and with a blizzard raging! At five-thirty they ate a few mouthfuls of their dry lunch. Their clothing was covered with ice. At last the fires of sunrise gladdened all. Only one could move at a time, but eventually all got into frozen boots.

“They started out, working their way along the face of the cliff, with pellets of snow driven by the wind striking their faces. They headed for Moraine Park and leaving the remainder of the party climbing over logs and breaking their way through the brush, Sprague and Cairns hurried ahead and procured horses and a wagon and went back for the stragglers.”

Except for a few fishermen and hunters the summers brought no tourists. The few families remaining at Grand Lake could not support a store. He must look about for other means to keep things going. Little by little as years went by he bought a lot here and there on the townsite. He took up a homestead to raise hay for the horses he needed to bring his freight across the mountains from Georgetown or Empire. Few at a time he bought cattle or accepted a cow or a calf in lieu of money for groceries. In this way he gradually built up a modest herd of cattle. .

After he filed on his homestead but before the time came for him to prove up on it, he was called back to his boyhood home in Canada. He could ill spare the money for a trip, for times had been especially hard that year. He lived frugally, but still he could not get ahead. There was almost no business, and some of those who bought from him failed to pay. His uncle had died a few years before; his aunt (who seemed like a mother because he was scarcely more than a baby when she took him) was gravely ill and felt she must see Jim before she passed away.

He stayed with her three months. Just before her passing she called him to her. Talking was difficult, but she told him haltingly that the farm and everything she had was to go to Sarah Jane. "You were always a good boy to your uncle and me," she told him. "But you're a man now and can take care of yourself. You'll never need this and perhaps Sarah Jane will."

He had scarcely money enough left to get back to Grand Lake and his little store. He hadn't five dollars left over with which to stock up again. And two men had taken advantage of his absence to jump his claim. If that homestead were taken from him he felt that all would be lost. He loved the land – its growing freshness in spring, its promise, its fulfillment.

Firms with whom he had dealt knew his honesty and they extended him credit. He was able to begin all over again. The men who had tried to take his homestead had no valid claim, and after an anxious time, it was restored to him. During these years he worked as he had never worked before. He seldom knew when it was mealtime or when to go to bed. Gradually he regained a footing

In those days he had few comforts or pleasures. An occasional dance broke the monotony of work. His one recreation was trapping bears, and of these he got fifteen. The largest bear he ever shot was a huge Grizzly, or Silvertip. He often pointed out a pine tree about an eighth of a mile above Grand Lake on the North Inlet where this magnificent animal scratched the bark ten feet above the ground. Ten of the hides he sold to summer visitors who took them home to eastern cities.



James Cairns' bear held by John Parry – James behind him on right



In the 1890's, he boarded with the Carr family whose ranch was on the North Fork. The site is now under the waters of Shadow Mountain Reservoir. Mrs. Carr was his first cousin on his mother's side. James lived alone in two small rooms behind the store until 1899, when his niece, Rea McLaren, came out from Canada to help make a home for him. They lived in a few rooms of the old Waldron House until he built a comfortable home and furnished it in 1900. In this house Rea was married to T Clinton Smith in 1905 and here she died in 1906, leaving a two weeks' old baby girl. The little Rea was taken to Ormstown, Quebec, to be brought up by her grandmother.



James Cairns served as a Notary Public. This certificate is dated 1908. The Historical Society has his Notary Book with records from 1889 – 1922.



Christmas dinner party, 1905, given by James Cairns and his niece, Rea McLaren, to some of the lone men in the community.

Left to right – Capt S. O. Heustis, James Cairns, Rea McLaren Smith, Harry C. Langley, Harry Harbison, Capt. Maurice de Hamptinne, Mr. Guick, John Parry, Col. Alfred Arghalier. Rea's husband, T. Clinton Smith took the picture.



Mary Lyons came from Ellsworth Kansas to teach in Grand Lake. As the teacher in Grand Lake, twenty-year-old Mary Lyons boarded at the Rustic Inn. Josephine Langley, the proprietress, was known as something of a match-maker. She introduced James Cairns and Mary Lyons.



On January 1, 1907 James Cairns and Mary Ross Lyons were married in Ellsworth, Kansas. They had one daughter Patience Maureen. He was 56 and she was 21.



Patience helps her father, James Cairns, plow for oats on their Grand Lake ranch. Courtesy Patience Kemp.

The loss of this home by fire June 4, 1916 was a terrible blow. To James it was not just a house. When a man goes out to the timber with a sleigh and a team in deep snow, fells the trees, hauls them to the sawmill, then to town, piles the lumber to dry for two years and watches every board and nail go into the building, it becomes part of him. Flames reduced it to ashes in less than an hour, along with most of the furnishings and personal possessions.



Around 1922, when Preston Smith and his family decided to spend the winter in Santa Barbara, Mary Cairns decided that she and Patience would go, too. James stayed in Grand Lake and ran the store. At some point, James wrote to say that he thought she should come back to Grand Lake. My grandmother said she was not ready to come back. It was still winter in Grand Lake and she had grown tired of some of the petty jealousies in a small town. She got a job as a secretary in Santa Barbara and she and Patience returned in the summer.

By 1923, James' health was declining due to prostate cancer. The next winter, he went with Mary and Patience to San Diego. While there he taught his daughter Patience to drive.



In 1925, he sold his store to Matilda Humphrey and spent the winter in Boulder, Colorado, where he died May 2, 1925. That is where he is buried.





James Cairns built the first water works system for the town, investing his own money in it and asking for no outside help. During his lifetime it was extended as far as the B. F. C. Morris home.



North Inlet pipe for Cairns' water ditch

During the World War James Cairns did more than his bit in working with Mrs. Henry Schnoor in putting over Red Cross drives, sales of Liberty Bonds, etc. After the war he again worked with Mrs. Schnoor for the erection of the Grand Lake Community House, donating and soliciting funds and seeing the work at last come to the fulfillment of a long felt need. He worked tirelessly toward better roads, first for horse teams and later for automobile travel.

Early in the twentieth century, he conceived a plan for a hydroelectric system. An engineer designed a system of a dam on the North Inlet Creek just above the bridge on what is now known as Tunnel Road/North Portal Road with a large reservoir behind it. He incorporated the Grand Lake Power and Light Company. Ultimately, the plan was abandoned due to the expense. There is still evidence of part of a concrete flume on the North side of the bridge on Tunnel Road.

Additionally, he conceived of a trolley which would have run from the town all the way around the lake. That would have allowed access to the summer homes on the north, east, and south sides of the lake. At that time there was no road access to those homes. Those homes had been built in the winter when materials could be transported over the frozen lake. They were only accessible by foot or boat and had been built in the winter. North Portal Road was built at the time of the construction of the Big Thompson Project in the 1930-40's.

Grand Lake and the surrounding country always meant a great deal to James Cairns. “Things are always getting better here,” he would say. “I have never lost faith in this place.”



Perhaps in recognition of this faith and the tenacity that inspired it, a mountain to the north of Mt. Craig was given the name of Mount Cairns by officials of Rocky Mountain National Park.

And when he died Fred Maker spoke for many others when he said: “He was my very good friend.”

Oswald F. Benwell of Denver said: “We haven’t forgotten that Mr. Cairns held this town together throughout the lean years; people want to read about him.”

J. CAIRNS, The Pioneer Merchant of Grand Lake.

The largest and oldest mercantile establishment in Grand Lake is conducted by J. Cairns, who located here in 1881, a native of Montreal, Canada. A stock of general merchandise is carried which inventories about \$10,000. The assortment contains all high grade goods. Mr. Cairns owns considerable property here and some of the best lots on the lake front, known as Cairns' addition. He is president of the Grand Lake Lighting and Power company, and the Grand Lake Water company. Mr. Cairns' store is headquarters for the Colorado Telephone company, which connects with every town in Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico. He occupies a very handsome residence, which is beautifully furnished and contains many choice rugs made from skins of his own capture, which he exhibits with much pride to the visitors to Grand Lake. The Cairns baby is one of the few natives of Grand Lake and is proud of this distinction. It is one of the hits with lady visitors to Grand Lake.

Article from the Denver Post 1910

Cairn's Addition to Grand Lake.

Many of the choice building sites on the lake front are situated in this addition. It covers an acre of ground on the northwest end of the lake front. Some of the finest cottages have been built on this ground. Among those who bought and built cottages in this addition are well known Denver people, viz: Henry Gebhart, Jacob Filius, A. W. Clark, Dr. Stilwell, F. I. Caruthers, A. Snider, Governor Smith. Mr. Cairns has several good locations still on the market and several prospective buyers who will shortly build here. This is one of the ideal locations on the Lake Shore.