



Annie and Kittie in front of Big Cabin

An Ordinary Family with an Extraordinary Life:

Tales From the Harbison Ranch

by Dave Lively

July 15th 1896 – Father came to Grand Lake.

Sept 11 1896 – Kittie and I came to Grand Lake.

Nov 1 1896 – Mother and Bobbie came to Grand Lake, Harry and I went to Denver after them. We were storm stayed from Tuesday until Friday at the Big Chief Mine. Friday Mother and I started to walk leading “Jersey” and “Lady”. The snow was 18 inches all the way over the range. We all got to the old stage stop this side of the range near the top. That night wet and cold. The next night we stayed at the Block home the other side of Coulter. The next night we got to Columbine Lake and glad to get home.

Annie Harbison wrote these words after the Panic of 1893 forced her family to start over after the loss of their previous homestead and almost all sources of income.

Andrew Harbison met and married Mary Quinlan in Missouri in 1867; it was his second marriage. Three children were born: Annie in 1868 in Brownsville, Missouri; Kittie in 1872, in Leavenworth, Kansas; and Robert in 1876, also in Leavenworth.

By 1881, Andrew’s older son by his first marriage, Harry, 26, was ready to move to the gold mines of Colorado to strike it rich. Instead of riches he

found a wife and a few jobs until he located work at the new Leadville fish hatchery in 1889. Learning that restaurants wanted to offer trout on their menus, Harry was determined to open his own commercial hatchery. He settled at Columbine Lake about one mile north from Grand Lake, Colorado and brought fish from Grand Lake to begin his hatchery.

It was at this point that Harry made a decision that would change the fate of his extended family. He decided to bring fresh running water to his lake. So, during the summers of 1891 and 1892 he dug, by hand, a free-running ditch almost two miles from the Meadows Fork stream to Columbine Lake. The trout thrived, and Harry was able to sell his trout to restaurants as far away as Georgetown.

During the time when Harry was building his hatchery business, Andrew was moving his “second” family to Denver. Within a year, he had filed for a homestead north of Denver near Greeley.

When the Panic of 1893 hit, Andrew lost his job. And by late 1894,

the family was facing the prospect of losing their land. Although they had made some improvements to the land, they had not held the filing the required five years to “prove up” for ownership, and all was lost. Instead, they decided to try the Grand Lake area to be near Harry and his family.

In 1895, the two daughters, Annie, 28, and Kittie, 24, each filed for a 160-acre homestead about one mile north of Grand Lake. The 320-acre home-

stead was approved in 1896; the family of five decided to begin a dairy ranch with their two remaining cows. One of the greatest homesteading challenges — fresh water — had been solved by choosing land bisected by the ditch Harry had dug. They had not run

a dairy operation before; however, the opportunity could not be passed up. And so, in the summer and fall of 1896, they walked over Berthoud Pass to begin life again. They built their first cabin during the winter of 1896-97.

Jan 8 1897 – We moved in our first little cabin. It was Home Sweet Home and we were so happy. – Annie Harbison

“Annie and Kittie Harbison were typical of the pioneer stock which has furnished the sinews and courage necessary in opening this new frontier which this mountain country has been.”
– Pastor Charles Hulac

A contemporary writer says the Harbison sisters “worked like men.” They cut and stacked the hay, roped the horses, fed and milked their sizable dairy herd – and then rolled young brother Rob out of bed to deliver milk and butter around Grand Lake in his horse-drawn cart. Later, the sisters started taking in summer guests at the ranch, gradually adding tourist cabins. Their Sunday dinners were legendary, the talk of Grand Lake. As they lived, so did they die. Their double funeral was held at the Grand Lake Community House on November 14, 1938: Annie was 70, Kitty was 66. – www.nps.gov/romo

“The Harbison Girls are gone, and their going was as brave and simple and poignant as their living.”
– Carolyn Rhone

Dec 30 1899 – the month of December has ended and with it has ended the year 1899 also the nineteenth century. The month has been very favorable for outdoor work, cold at night but mostly moderate in daytime. We have progressed some considerable in the year just ended – we have 4 horses 5 cows. We have bought in the year one set of harness, one sled, one pair of 4 year old mares, a sewing machine, a riding saddle and some other affairs too numerous to mention amounting in all about three hundred ninety five dollars. – Andrew Harbison

Through many years of trials and tribulations, including raising Mamie Schnoor, a neighbor’s daughter as their own, the loss of both parents, and their brother Rob’s partial blindness, the “Harbison Girls” operated the dairy ranch successfully until their deaths in 1938.



The Harbison family at the lake

Upon their deaths the ranch went to Mamie who operated the ranch with her family until selling the property to the National Park Service in 1954. The west entrance station of Rocky Mountain National Park sits on the Harbison ranch where herds of elk enjoy the grass the Harbisons planted after plowing their homestead with a horse-drawn plow.

The complete story of the Harbison family is presented as a ranger-led walk to the homestead site on Mondays at 1 p.m. during the summer months.

Dave Lively is a Grand Lake Historian and a Volunteer Historic Interpreter at Rocky Mountain National Park. He specializes in shining light on absent narratives. His stories of remarkable characters from the past engage audiences and bring deeper understanding and appreciation for where we are today.

Art’s Alive Activity Center Invites Creative Expression This Summer

Get inspired this summer by visiting the new Art’s Alive Activity Center and Centennial Art Exhibit, downstairs at the Fall River Visitor Center. All ages are invited to the park’s drop-in, self-directed studio that will be open through mid-August. Write a love letter to the park, create your own postcards, share a memory leaf on a tree or capture your park experiences through writing and sketching. Art programs for all ages also will be offered by rangers several times a week. Participants can take their artwork home or display it in the Discovery Center adjacent to the Artist-in-Residence wildlife art exhibit.

