

THE PRESS TOLD MORE OF THE MAN EATER

Forrest Whitman

When this newspaper (Colorado's oldest) began publishing, the news accounts were very different. A big story in the 1870s and 80s was about Alfred Packer accused of cannibalism. The newspaper accounts varied a great deal. They also printed language we'd not be able to run today.

Steamy language

Some press accounts reported: "Packer!" "You Republican Son of a bitch!" "There were only seven Democrats in Hinsdale County and you've eaten five of them!" That's what judge Melville Gerry had to say when Alfred E. Packer appeared before him.

I've read widely the accounts of Alfred E. Packer eating Democrats. The stories vary somewhat. A lot of colorful quotes were printed in those days. Newspapers carried "the full story" before they were "cleaned up."

Packer was snowed in during a blizzard in February of 1874. He was there about ninety days or about four and a half months depending on which version you like. Packer was with the party he was guiding over the San Juan mountains. When another party reached the site they saw human bodies neatly cut up like a butcher would cut up beef. They also found human remains scattered by animals.

This year I've been digging into the story. It's emblazoned on the wall in the CU grill. The grill is, after all, named after the "man eating" Packer. That's why the big mural fits in. We can hope it brings on some laughs. Tales about the food there vary. Enough about that.

College grills are famous for witty put downs of the food. The Divinity school grill at the University of Chicago posted a scriptural reference including book and number, with the advice to look it up. It turns out the citation says: "Jesus, the same yesterday today and tomorrow." Most do laugh. While all of Colorado laughs at the story of Alfred Packer depicted on the CU grill wall, it was serious in the day.

Not just any snow storm

The blizzard of 1874 was memorable. The trails over the San Juan Mountains to the gold fields were always sketchy. Even a light snow tended to disorient the traveler. It was best to hire a local guide and start early in the fall.

That was guiding work Packer had done a bit before. He did have a couple of trips under his belt. On the other hand, no one knew much about the trails over the San Juans. Few had ever experienced a true blizzard there. Twenty foot high snow fields were common. Blowing snow closed passes till summer. It was such a blizzard that entrapped Packer and his clients. There was no way out of their camp for a long time. They probably ran out of food after a month or so. The most likely accounts have them there for nine plus weeks.

Packer: A strange man

Packer himself was not likable, but he still attracted some followers. The most unusual of those was Polly Pry who wrote the gossip column for the Denver Post. His voice was sometimes called “spectral” or “eerie and deep” or “sexy.” He had a huge head and forehead. Others did not mention that. He probably inflated his experience as a guide, but that was common. Uncommon was his seeming lack of feeling for the five who had “slipped away due to lack of food and freezing cold.”

Early meetings with the cannibal

When Packer wandered in to a gold seekers camp at the end of the ordeal he carried a coffee pot of live coals and seemed to be in good shape. He showed no signs of starvation. No hollow cheeks, no loose clothes did he have. He was still well shod and dressed. He even seemed to have a little money.

Packer was charged with cannibalism. It seemed the perfect legal charge to fit his story. He had been hiding out but returned to a quick murder trial. He was acquitted on a technicality. In 1886 he was finally tried a second time after he was free for nine years. Found guilty of manslaughter, he served jail time until an early parole came in 1901.

An early parole

The jail in Saguache was not very strong. It had been hastily constructed and had only a padlock on the door. Several accounts say everyone knew Parker was wandering free. Packer may have been living in Wyoming and only faced the slim Federal charges of an illegal camp fire.

At least one writer was sure Packer was left alone because they had no facilities to hold any long termers. Found innocent on a technicality, he was retried in 1883. Packer was found guilty and sent to Canyon City.

Even the story of his parole is an odd one. Polly Pry, well known gossip columnist, came to his defense and got him a job as a security man at The Denver Post. Her letter writing campaign to the parole board turned the tide.

The press was different then

When we read early additions of the papers we are surprised by what was run. Not only the language, but the accounts seem unedited. Still the press brought us the story of Alfred Packer, Colorado's famous cannibal. I'm left wondering what really happened.