



The Colorado History Gazette

Volume 7

Denver City, Colorado, 1859

BIG PHIL THE CANNIBAL

ALTHOUGH ALFERD PACKER IS COLORADO'S MOST NOTORIOUS CANNIBAL, HE IS NOT ITS ONLY HUMAN FLESH-EATER. A MOUNTAIN MAN KNOWN AS BIG PHIL OR CANNIBAL PHIL IS SAID TO HAVE FREQUENTED DENVER CITY'S SALOONS ACCOMPANIED BY HIS HUGE DOG. HE IS DESCRIBED AS "GIGANTIC IN STATURE AND REPULSIVE IN ASPECT", BUT IT IS SAID FOR A FREE DRINK, HE WOULD TELL STORIES ABOUT DEVOURING HIS TWO INDIAN WIVES, AN INDIAN GUIDE, AND A FRENCHMAN.

CANNIBAL PHIL'S REAL NAME WAS CHARLES GARDNER. IN 1844 HE KILLED A CATHOLIC PRIEST IN HIS HOMETOWN OF PHILADELPHIA BUT ESCAPED FROM PRISON AND HEADED WEST. IN THE COLORADO TERRITORY, BECAUSE OF HIS SIZE AND STRENGTH, HE OFTEN LIVED WITH THE ARAPAHOE INDIANS WHO CALLED HIM "BIG MOUTH" BECAUSE OF THE AMOUNT OF RAW MEAT HE COULD EAT AT A SINGLE SITTING. BECAUSE OF HIS FRIENDLY RELATIONS WITH INDIANS, BIG PHIL WAS ALSO CONTRACTED BY THE US GOVERNMENT TO TRANSPORT DISPATCHES.

ONE WINTER, BIG PHIL AND HIS INDIAN GUIDE WERE SENT WITH DISPATCHES TO FORT LARAMIE, WYOMING. WHEN A BLIZZARD STRUCK, THE TWO GOT LOST AND THEIR PROVISIONS GAVE OUT. LATER, BIG PHIL TOLD THE FOLLOWING STORY:

AIN'T HAD A BITE TO EAT AS OUR GRUB GIVES OUT, AND WITH SNOW A FOOT DEEP ON THE GROUND, CAN'T EVEN SEE ANY GAME. I BEGINS TO FEEL HOLLER IN THE FLANKS. SO AFTER LIVIN' FOR 'BOUT FIVE DAYS ON NOTHIN' BUT WISHES, I STARTS A-GETTING' MAD AND WATCHIN' THE OLD INJUN. I NOTE HIM SIZIN' ME UP LIKE I DOES HIM. I TASTED MAN MEAT AFORE, SO I FIGURES TO MYSELF, 'INJUN GRUB.' ... SO AFTER WE GETS LIMPIN' ALONG FOR THE DAY, I SLIPS UP BEHIND HIM WITH MY GUN ALREADY COCKED JUST AS HE'S GETTIN' HIS ROLL FROM HIS HOSS. BANG. HE KICKS

FOR A MINUTE OR TWO. IT'S ALREADY DARK AND I HACKS OFF ONE ARM AND FILLS UP ON RAW MEAT AS THERE AIN'T NO WOOD FOR FIRE. I KNOWS I CAIN'T TRAVEL FAR WITHOUT GRUB, SO I HACKS OFF THE OTHER ARM AND THE TWO LEGS OFF AT THE HIP BONE, WHICH I PACKS ON THE EXTRA PONY THAT I TAKES FROM THE DEAD INJUN, AND STARTS OUT ONCE AGIN' THE NEXT MORNIN'.¹

WHEN BIG PHIL REACHED THE FORT AND WAS QUESTIONED ABOUT HIS GUIDE, HE PULLED OUT A BLACK AND SHRIVELED FOOT FROM HIS PACK AND SAID, "THERE, DAMN YE, I NEEDN'T HAVE TO GNAW ON YOU ANYMORE."

ONE WINTER, WHILE LIVING WITH HIS SQUAW, KLOCK, BIG PHIL DID SOME TRAPPING FOR KIT CARSON. IN THE SPRING, CHARLIE JONES, ONE OF CARSON'S MEN, STOPPED TO SEE IF BIG PHIL NEEDED SUPPLIES. JONES REPORTED BACK TO CARSON'S CAMP BY SAYING, "BOYS, IF I SHOULD TELL YOU WHAT I KNOW ABOUT MOUNTAIN PHIL, YOU WOULD NEVER BELIEVE IT, BUT AS SURE AS YOU LIVE, HE HAD KILLED HIS SQUAW AND EATEN MOST OF HER."

CANNIBAL PHIL WAS ALSO A MINER AND GEORGE JACKSON'S DIARY INCLUDES A SECTION THAT LISTS MOUNTAIN PHIL AS PART OF HIS PARTY THAT MINED HIS CHICAGO CREEK FIND ON JAN. 25, 1859.

1. *COLORADO'S STRANGEST: A LEGACY OF BAZARRE EVENTS AND ECCENTRIC PEOPLE*, KENNETH JESSEN, 2005.
2. *A WILD WEST HISTORY OF FRONTIER COLORADO: PIONEERS, GUNSLINGERS AND CATTLE KINGS ON THE EASTERN PLAINS*, JOLIE GALLAGHER, 2011.
3. *DEMONS IN OUR MIDST*, KELLEN, DENVER PUBLIC LIBRARY, 2013
4. *D. C. OAKES: FAMILY, FRIENDS, & FOE*, LAVONNE J. PERKINS, 2009