



The Place Where Silverheels Danced

by
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Figure 1 - Mount Silverheels near Fairplay, CO - photo by Joyce B. Lohse, 2008.

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Silverheels was not a good girl, but she was a brave one.

-- Edward Ring, Rocky Mtn. News, 10 Dec 1941



Figure 2 - Reconstructed mining district town - photo by Joyce B. Lohse, 2009.

Few women inhabited the remote Colorado mining camp of Buckskin Joe when it was first settled. By the summer of 1861, the town consisted of five or six hundred people, including twenty or thirty hardy female souls. At its apex soon after as a boomtown, when the population briefly ballooned crazily to a couple of thousand people, according to Robert L. Brown in, *Ghost Towns of the Colorado Rockies*, the settlement was home to about fifty women, “from all walks of life”.

The arrival of an attractive young lady entertainer, her face mysteriously concealed by a veil, made a newsworthy impression on a largely male population starved for female pulchritude and companionship. Although the credibility of her story has never been proven, many elements of the tale add strength and momentum to her legend.

When the veiled beauty stepped from the stagecoach, she established her place solidly and tenderly in the heart of Western history.

Upon her arrival in Buckskin Joe, in the center of Rocky Mountain high country, the charming young performer caused quite a stir at the local saloon. Skittish about her identity, she became known only as Silver Heels, then Silverheels. When she performed for the audience, she wore a pair of slippers with heels made of silver, and an ornament of the same precious metal to hold her hair in place.

With her lovely attributes, remarkable talent, and ability to entertain, Silverheels was a welcome and popular attraction at the local dance hall. As a dancing partner, she was highly regarded, and sought by those who dared share their skills on the dance floor with her. Although her virtue was questionable, and the degree to which it was tarnished uncertain, her independent, creative spirit was a given. When it was time for her to move on, locals begged her to stay.

Buckskin Joe was first settled in 1859 after the discovery of a rich mining claim called the Phillips Lode. The town was named Laurette, by compounding the names of a couple of early female residents. The name evolved into Lauret. When a prospector named Joseph Higganbottom, who wore buckskin clothing, acquired the Phillips Lode, the community became known as Buckskin Joe, or more simply as Buckskin.

From 1859 to 1866 when the mining camp's population boomed from fifty to a couple of thousand people, \$1,600,000 in gold was mined from the earth. After the payload was exhausted from the mines in 1866, most residents left. In 1867, the county seat was moved to the nearby town of Fairplay. Life was not easy in a rough Rocky Mountain boomtown, isolated by winter snow, constantly in need of supplies and provisions, which were high priced and consistently scarce. In a town starved for diversion and good entertainment, Silverheels provided exactly what was needed.

As Norma Flynn stated from a newspaper article quoted in, *Early Mining Camps of South Park*, "Buckskin Joe's is the liveliest little 'burg' in the Southern mines – in everything except 'bummers' and fast women. There are more respectable families, nice folks, male and female, married and single, in Lauret, Buckskin Joe, than in any other mountain city, save Nevada or Central Cities."

On the other hand, she says, "About one hundred persons in Buckskin are engaged in trafficking, saloon keeping and hotel keeping, and the balance are sitting in their houses or tents, watching the weather and as a 'general business' playing 'high low jack' or 'seven-up' for the whisky. This is the chief employment of almost half of the population of Buckskin, California and indeed Georgia and other gulches, from day-light till dark, throughout the week, Sunday not excepted."

In the winter of 1861, residents of Buckskin Joe faced a terrible challenge when smallpox broke out. Possibly introduced when infected shepherders arrived selling meat, smallpox was easily transmitted through contact with infected persons. A week or two after exposure, patients developed high fever and a body rash. Although survivors developed immunity, 30% to 50% died from the dreaded disease.

Problems with illness were amplified by the difficulty of everyday life. When victims of the epidemic became gravely ill, many residents fled. Messages sent to Denver requested the aid of nurses, but too late for some dying patients. Without medical help, one of the first to die was a friend of Silverheels, possibly her lover. With the dance hall closed, as she recovered from her loss, Silverheels busied herself tending to feverish

miners and their families. She worked tirelessly, bravely moving from patient to patient, nursing many back to health with tenderness and compassion. Silverheels brought comfort and hope to the ill while they waited for the epidemic to run its terrible course. Eventually, when she, too, became infected with the disease, she retreated to her own sickbed in her cabin to await the inevitable, whether it was recovery, or an early grave.

When Spring arrived, the worst of the epidemic was past. The dead were buried in the thawing ground at Buckskin Cemetery. Those who recovered slowly regained their lives and their town. To show their gratitude for everything Silverheels had done for them, the miners collected a cash gift for her, which amounted to four thousand dollars. Colorado Senator Edward O. Wolcott added another thousand dollars to round out the amount to a whopping five thousand dollars.

When the townspeople searched for Silverheels to present the gift to her, they discovered she had vanished. Silverheels was gone. Her belongings were no longer in her cabin, and she had disappeared without a trace. No word was left behind about her plans or her destination.



Figure 3 - Buckskin Cemetery, courtesy of Christie Wright, 2007.

When Silverheels left town, residents thought she must have been disfigured by her illness, and felt she could no longer perform in the dance hall. Some folks speculated that she sought seclusion in a remote shelter in the mountains. At Buckskin Cemetery, a woman who looked like Silverheels was seen visiting graves, moving through the

shadows, wearing a black dress and a long veil. She continued to appear at the cemetery, haunting people's imaginations, for many years to come.

Eventually, the money collected for Silverheels was divided among the townspeople and the miners. Without a way to thank their heroine, locals decided to honor her by bestowing her name on a local landmark, Mount Silverheels. The mountain, often covered with silver snow, endures as a reminder and a tribute to the beauty, kindness, and giving spirit of the woman from Buckskin Joe.

Was the story of Silverheels true? Legends are often born from creative minds and wishful thinking, with evidence severely lacking. However, records and reports of the Buckskin Joe mining district substantiate many details about the town's historical existence. Interestingly, the name for Mount Silverheels first appeared on Colorado maps in the mid-1860s.

Versions of the story vary, along with details regarding Silverheels' moral virtue. An article in Denver's *Rocky Mountain News* (December 10, 1941) depicts Silverheels as a dance hall girl, and the girlfriend of Bill Buck, who owned the local dance hall. Beyond these details, the story deviates. It says that in the winter of 1861, Bill came down with pneumonia, and died in her arms. Others in town suffered the same fate, and she tended to their illness. The article says, "Silverheels was not a good girl but she was a brave one. Through the long, dark weeks she went from cabin to cabin and ministered to the suffering. She held the hand of more than one stalwart miner as he crossed the range. Her bosom was the dying pillow of more than one little child."



Figure 4 - Hand Hotel, Front Street, Fairplay, CO - photo by Joyce B. Lohse, 2008.

In another *Rocky Mountain News* article (November 6, 1983), Frances Melrose wrote, "In 1948, during an interview, Fairplay resident Col. Frank Mayer, a 98-year-old self-styled soldier of fortune who once served as U.S. marshal at Buckskin Joe, claimed

to have seen Silverheels arrive on the stage. ‘I’ve never seen a more beautiful interpretive dancer,’ he said.”

In Tara Meixsell’s award-winning novel, *Silverheels*, the author takes the high road by portraying Silverheels as a seamstress on the run after being jilted by a conniving lover in St. Louis. In the book, Silverheels finds work as a waitress at a hotel in Buckskin Joe. Her suitor, the hotel owner, presents her with silver-heeled shoes as a gift, which she wears for a musical performance, winning the collective hearts of the community.

One particularly compelling explanation of the fate of Silverheels appeared in the *Denver Post Empire* magazine, on November 3, 1963. In “Light On The Mystery of Silver Heels”, Robert W. Fenwick writes about a young prospector named Myron Skinner who rode across the prairie on a Colorado-bound wagon train with a young woman he knew as Silverheels. He said her name was Gerda Bechtel, a refugee from a stern Moravian family near Lititz, Pennsylvania. To gain her independence, she worked for a widow who was migrating West, taking care of her children. Blessed with a naturally beautiful voice, she loved to sing and dance. The young woman used the name Silber to conceal her identity, then went by the name Silver Heels while taking music lessons, then performing in dance halls.

Fortunately, this story has an uplifting ending. When she recovered from her illness, Silverheels contacted Myron Skinner to help her by discretely retrieving her mail from the postmaster in Fairplay, as she would be leaving soon to be married. When she left town, he forwarded her mail to a hotel in Denver where she was staying with her new husband. After that, Skinner lost track of her. Although this story is impossible to verify, many elements give it strength enough to bolster the legend.

For a century, a few buildings existed as a testament to the town of Buckskin Joe, until they deteriorated and collapsed, dissolved by nature, removed by landowners, or robbed by vandals. Nothing is now left of the ghost town where Silverheels danced, other than a few photographs of the buildings in ruins, a mountain meadow where the town briefly existed, and the cemetery where residents of Buckskin Joe were buried.

In nearby Fairplay, Colorado, the South Park City museum allows visitors to step back in history. About thirty area structures have been restored and renovated to create a town similar to Buckskin Joe. Guests may browse through the buildings for a glimpse of life during the days when Silverheels danced. Down the street, the historic Hand Hotel features a Silverheels room decorated in antique furnishings. Silverheels Middle School is named for the local heroine.

A replica frontier town, loosely inspired by and named after Buckskin Joe, was built in 1958 as a family-friendly tourist attraction at Royal Gorge near Canon City, Colorado. Silverheels’ story is also commemorated on the Women’s Gold Tapestry on display in the Colorado State Capitol building in Denver. At 13,835 feet, Mount Silverheels watches over Fairplay, Colorado as a shining reminder of her legacy.

A group of miners said it best. In the *History and Legal Proceedings of Buckskin Joe*, Nolie Mumey states that one of the miners pointed to the peak that would soon bear her name and said, “That mountain is like Silverheels – beautiful to look at and containing a heart of gold.”



Figure 5 - Summer on Mount Silverheels - photo by Joyce B. Lohse, 2008.

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