

1886 ASPEN—A LETTER HOME BY FRANK ANDERSON BLILEY

This recording is of a letter written in 1886 by my grandfather, Frank Anderson Bliley or Erie, Pennsylvania. At the time, he was 20 years old and had just completed his third year of teacher's college at Pennsylvania Normal School, in Edinboro, Pennsylvania.

I would guess he was looking for a good summer job and found one with his cousin Benjamin Bonnell (Age unknown) in the boom town of Aspen, Colorado.

This letter was read by Frank Anderson Bliley, age 75, on February 22, 1941. It relates his life and observations of the silver mining town of Aspen, Colorado for his sister (name unknown). The recording was made by his son, Frank Dawson Bliley, in his home at 965 Arlington Road, Erie, Pennsylvania. Dawson made several recordings of reminiscences of family members with a deliberate focus on family history in the first person.

Transcribed in 2013 by Frank's grandson, Charles A. Bliley of Rochester, N Y.

And now the recording:

"Here is Frank A. Bliley of Erie, Pennsylvania speaking...

In August, 1886, I departed from my father's home on the farm in Harbor Creek Township, Erie County, Pennsylvania and went to Colorado. Within a day or so after arriving at my destination in Aspen, in that state, I wrote home the following letter."

'Aspen, Colorado, August 23rd, 1886.

Dear sister:

I have finished my day's work and will now write home. I did not lie around long after arriving. Went to work Sunday noon. It hardly pays to be idle in this country when board costs \$1 per day. You may be shocked to think that I would work on the Sabbath, but out here Sunday is just like any other day. All the stores in the town are open, and just as much business done.

When I left home, I did not expect any very easy job, and so I haven't been disappointed. My work is cutting wood for the boiler and engine, and emptying buckets. I work twelve hours per day, commencing in the morning at 7 o'clock. I get \$3.50 a day. Benjamin Bonnell runs the engine during the day and gets \$4 a day.



My brother Alexander superintends the mine. He doesn't have much work to do only look after things. I don't know what wages he gets, but suppose they are pretty good. Will let you know more about it when I learn more.

The mine is called the Bay State. It does not produce any mineral yet, but expect to strike every day. The shaft now is about 250 feet deep, straight down. They call it one and one half miles from town, if it is not farther than that. It is the longest mile and a half I ever saw. Took it this morning, and it took me an hour. The road winds back and forth up the side of the mountain. The water here is delightful! I can't drink enough of it. The sun sinks behind the mountains at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. It rained today and I could see a rainbow below me.

My boarding place is no palace, just a little ways from the mine. Alex Bliley has a little house downtown, but does not go down every day. But I must tell you about my boarding place. It is built of rough boards, covered on the inside with Manila paper. In wet weather an occasional hole in the roof informs us that it is raining. All the furniture is homemade. The table has two long benches, one on each side. There are about fifteen boarders. Our cook is a Swedish lady. Although, we haven't things up here on the mountain in just New York City style, yet in Aspen there is good society, and many very nice buildings. As yet, I haven't seen anyone who looks like a dangerous character.

The weather here is nearly as warm during the day as at home. I like Aspen much better than Leadville, it isn't nearly so cold. At Leadville snow may be seen on the mountains on all sides, but here none is in sight.

If you should ride over the stage road from here to Leadville you would never more complain about the hills towards the beach woods, but would consider it a very nice level road. I had to brace myself against the seat, and hang on with both hands to keep from being thrown out. Lots of dead horses are strewn along the way, they don't hardly move them out of the track, but seemingly let them lye wherever they fall. You ought to see their stages. They are the regular old-fashioned stages with leather springs.

A jolly old fat man rode over part way with us. I laughed until my sides ached to see him roll and shake around as we rode over the stones. In one place the road leads above the line of tree grove. Part of the way they drove six horses the rest four. The fair from Leadville cost me \$12.50 and its only 67 miles. They charge 5 cents a pound for all baggage over 40 pounds.

I wish I had all your plums and apples out here. Apples sell for 15 cents per pound, berries 40 cents per quart, oats 5 cents per pound. Miss Barquin came the same night I did, but by a different route. I called on her last night, she was delighted to see me.

F.A. Bliley's 1886 Letter Home from Aspen, Colorado

I had to lie over two nights, one at Kansas City and one at Leadville. In west central Illinois I saw beautiful farming land. The soil seemed almost a jet black. I saw some very large fields of corn. Corn seems to be a large crop all through the west. Some parts of Missouri I liked, and most of east and central Kansas. In the plains of Colorado, one can ride for miles without seeing a single human habitation. I saw the old wagon trail over which they traveled in 1849 to the gold fields of California. I was surprised to see the Mississippi and the Missouri rivers as muddy as they are. The water almost seems thick with mud, and I also expected to see them wider than they are. But the grandest scenery I ever beheld was through the mountain cuts, from Denver to Leadville. I think it almost surpasses the Niagara Falls.

One can look up for hundreds of feet to the peaks and the region of the clouds. The railroad winds around and around, apparently bewildered in its attempt to cross the mountains. Sometimes a train would go a mile and then the only a few hundred feet, from a point above or below the point they had previously passed. It took them 9 hours to go a 150 miles.

This letter I do not intend you to read all in one reading, but take like hot bitters in small doses, and at regular intervals. I think I will have steady employment. I like my wages better than my work. Alex sends his regards to all.

Write real soon.

Your brother

Frank A. Bliley"

"Here I just read to you my impression just a young man of 21 of Aspen which was then a prosperous mining camp of a population of 10 or 11 thousand people. There was a great deal of business transacted in Aspen. Many stores of many kinds. Saloons and gambling was rampant and could be found anywhere. My brother Alexander remained in Aspen for a few years after 1886. When, I think 1895 perhaps, he moved to Cripple Creek, Colorado and continued there until his death by an accident, which know as I'm speaking now, did occur in 1905. So he must have been in Cripple Creek for six years prior to 1905."



End of Recording

The photo to right is of Frank later in life. (C1930)

Further information on Frank's life, and that of the Bliley family, can be found on <http://www.Bliley.net>.

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