

A SHORT TRIP TO ALASKA
 IN 1914
 THE JOURNEY AND LIFE OF GRACE CARTER



"I think he (J D) sort of feels that it would be mighty good for Raymond to have you along, for he knows Raymond enjoys you as much as any fellow, or more, and he would be showing you around when he might otherwise be hanging around gambling halls or grizzly gulches."

Letter J B to G C
 spring 1914

It wasn't that their Jerry was a bad young man, just handsome and full of mischief, a little wild. Raymond liked his father's idea, and so did Jean. They threw themselves into their plans with enthusiasm. Raymond began breaking in a new saddle for Grace, riding around with his long legs folded up to his chin to get the stirrup leathers settled at her length.

"Raymond has been able to talk of little else, and tells me that today he nearly ran the car in the ditch three times, trying to think of an irresistible light in which to present this to you"

Letter J B to G C
 spring 1914



In the spring of 1914 Grace received a pair of riding boots in the mail. At the time she was mildly surprised by their arrival -- some whim of her friend Jean's she guessed -- and put them aside for the summer. She and Jean loved to ride -- they were all over the mountains of the Minam country every summer, there was nothing they liked better than camping beside high lakes, watching for birds and animals and wild flowers. They left the hot, crowded city with its wide, dusty streets and trains and motor cars and all their racket, and took to the springy squaw-brushed trails, winding up among the trees and boulders to some silent mountain peak. They ate mushrooms and berries and biscuits and bacon, had their coffee from tin cups in meadows of Indian paintbrush and lupine when they awoke in the damp mornings with the hobbled horses grazing around them.

Looking back, Grace always saw that the portentous arrival of her riding boots marked the beginning of that most remarkable summer; later she saw that while she had been waiting in Hood River for the warm months, her friend Jean up in La Grande was thinking of her, and helping to plan a most wonderful excursion.

At the time, the whole scheme depended upon the presence of a large, loud, pessimistic woman, Mrs. Sharkey, who would be accompanying her husband on the trip. Women along on cattle drives were fairly uncommon; only Mrs. Sharkey's presence let it be "proper" for Grace to join the expedition. Even so, her rushing off to cow-girl around Alaska was considered a little daring.

From the start her friend Jean recognized the opportunity for what it was.

"I can't see how you can possibly miss this, even though it is hard for me to think of the summer without you. But it is a chance most people would wait a lifetime and not get. Now it is all fixed, but for you with a few old clothes and a suit of flannel underwear in your suitcase, and your fare to Seattle in your pocket. That is all that is necessary to an Alaskan trip for Gage Carter such as few females are privileged to take"

Letter J B to G C
 spring 1914

"We are conspirators of deepest dye. A plot is brewing, etc. If only you knew the effort, mental effort that has gone into the formation of this scheme, in its every detail, you would be quite sure that somebody has your happiness at heart. That is the reason we have been so long in writing, waiting for everything to dove-tail correctly."

Letter Jean Birnie (J B) to Grace Carter (G C)
 spring 1914

Grace never had a qualm. She started packing as soon as she got Jean's letter, and cleaned and oiled her riding boots.

Jean and her husband George Birnie had a friend, a young man named Raymond McKennon. He and his family also lived in La Grande. His father was a grocer who traded horses, and also ran a few cattle out in the valley. Raymond had been on a few pack trips with Grace and the Birnies up in the Eagle Cap Wilderness the summer before, and he had been impressed with the two girls' horsemanship. He liked to ride too, and showed off a little with his circus stunts on horseback. He had never known girls who so loved the mountains and the wild places. They scouted up on the sagebrush flats along the ruts of the Oregon Trail, marking it with caerns. Sometimes, too impatient to wait, they even snowshoed up into the Minam country in the dead of winter. In the summer they were everywhere on their big, fine brown horses in their wide hats and riding skirts, reining one-handed and leading a packhorse, conversant equally well in diamond hitches and Dutch oven biscuits.



Jean MacDonald and Grace Carter were born four months apart in 1885, in Island City, Oregon. They were lucky enough to be born to mothers who were also dear friends. The babies were raised together, nursed by both mothers, and grew up together. Theirs was the rarest of friendships, beginning as it did before they were born and lasting their whole lives. Even living in separate towns, as they did later, did not effect their closeness. By the time Jean married George S. Birnie, around 1910, Grace was coming up every summer from Hood River to stay with them and go camping. In 1913 Jean arranged the first pack trip that brought the four of them together-- Jean and George and Grace and Raymond.

"Raymond was up the other night and course we talked of little else. He said 'I'll bet Grace would come if she had to walk', and I added 'Yes, I can just see how fresh and starched she'd look when she ambled down the track from Hood River'. And George put in 'And she'd look just as fresh and unruffled the morning she would get here'. So you can see what heroics are expected of you. Raymond said 'If this just works out I'll be happy and contented for years'."

Letter J B to G C
 May, 1913

Raymond's father, J. D. McKennon, had a big grocery store in La Grande. He was arranging to send some cattle up to Fairbanks, Alaska when he first had an interesting idea. It was the first time he'd tried this particular business endeavor, but beef was worth a lot up in that chilly territory, where cattle were rare, and he thought he would include some horses and sheep to sell. He planned to send Raymond along to oversee the trip, and he was a little worried about his son behaving himself. "Jerry", as everyone called his boy, often spoke of his friend Grace Carter, who was such a pleasant girl, and good with horses. J. D. thought about inviting her to join the trip; he talked it over with his wife, Louie, who was very fond of Grace, although she'd only met her a few times. They decided that if Grace wanted to go she would be a fine asset to the cattle drive; she could ride one of the horses being driven along to sell, she could help with the cooking, and her presence would almost certainly keep Raymond on his best behavior, and out of the pool halls.



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It ended up as a ten-day pack trip, complete with seven horses and Bummer the sheepdog.

"The party made the entire trip on horseback, and except for the few articles that were carried by the packhorses, they were without the conveniences of civilization. They were caught in a hard rain but were fortunate enough to be near a ranger's station where they camped for the night. On top of the highest peak of the Eagle Cap Mountains the party deposited their names in the bottle that holds the names of all who have ascended that peak for the past many years. The ladies in the party are nearly the first who ever climbed this mountain."



-- newspaper clipping
 1913

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