

Way We Were

August 1, 2018

Local mining men in far-off lands

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When Park City mining men Colonel William M. Ferry and James Kescel, along with other prominent experts left Utah bound for Peru in October 1888, Parkites watched excitedly for updates.

Ferry, Kescel, and their expedition had been tasked by East Coast investors with overseeing the development of mining interests in the Peruvian Andes. Their journey began on October 24, when the group left for San Francisco.

Kescel added an entertaining touch of humor in his letters back home, which were published in the local paper. On San Francisco, he commented that while the city is initially satisfying, at some point “you are alive to the fact that there is something which is not measles but just exactly as pleasant that will almost bring grey hairs to your head.”

Luckily for Kescel, their stay was short. The group boarded the Pacific Mail Steamer *Colima* and departed for Panama on October 28, 1888. The ocean journey kept close to land, making stops along the Mexican coast en route.

In Panama, the expedition was scheduled to transfer to a new ship which would take them the rest of the way to Peru. While there, the voyagers were witness to the initial effort to construct the Panama Canal, a channel which would allow ships to bypass the much longer dangerous voyage around South America’s tip, Cape Horn.

Construction was managed by the French, who were having an abysmal time. Though work was still progressing in November 1888 when the Ferry expedition arrived, engineering difficulties and extremely high mortality rates bankrupted the project just six months later. The Canal was not completed until 1914.

Kescel addressed the region’s difficulties with a touch of morbid wit. “Panama is rather cosmopolitan, though not very large on account of the great mortality,” he wrote. “If an appointment is made a few hours ahead, when one goes to meet it he is generally met with, ‘I am very sorry but Mr. Blank has just left for New York, embalmed. Is there anything I can do for you?’”

In their letters, both Ferry and Kescel related many of their experiences using references Parkites would understand. Ferry likened the Peruvian mining districts to Park City’s great Ontario vein. In his descriptions of their overland voyage, Kescel noted that “the second day we commenced to go up [a] hill about like the one west of town.” In doing so, the letters connected readers to the far-away landscape in a personally significant way.

Because of the nature of travel in the 1880s, correspondence from the expedition took months to show up back home. Letters written in November often arrived in February, or sometimes even later. But the length of time that had passed seemed not to matter for many Parkites. The Park Record and various Salt Lake newspapers published the letters and the public read them eagerly.

The Ferry expedition returned to the United States in late April 1889. They traveled directly to Washington to deliver their reports to their investors. They had all made it back to Utah safely by May.



Image ID: digi.6.11

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Caption: James Kescel, left, was part of a mining expedition to Peru in the 1880s. He entertained Parkites with humorous, insightful, and exciting letters home about the journey.