

John Prowse - When he passed

The wind whispers through the trees as I walk in the cemetery. The leaves of the Quaking Aspens softly flutter and fall to the ground around me. Their golden color is a sharp contrast with the dark greens of the pines. The sound reminds me of soft murmuring in a hall full of people, anxiously waiting for an event to start.

Fall in Bald Mountain Cemetery is a time for quiet contemplation. The dark loam muffles the sound of footsteps. The nearest town is a ghost, so my reverie is seldom disturbed when walking among the stones.

I have come back again to the same monument. The design is artistic. A large rectangular block of marble balancing on two stone hinges over another larger slab with engraving on the front.

John Prowse

Born in Cornwall, Engl. 1847.

Died Nov. 8, 1904.

God's Hand Touched Him and He Slept

The monument would seem to indicate someone much loved by family and friends. The years on the marker tell us of someone who left this world in the middle of life. What had John Prowse been to those around him? What had he left the world when he passed?

John Prowse was born in St. Buryan parish, Cornwall. His baptismal is also recorded there.

On 16 Jan 1848 John and Constance Maddern Prouse had their first son John baptized. In 1851 he is recorded residing with his parents and sister, Elizabeth Ann Prouse, in Chapel Place Village in Sancreed.

At age 14 John and the family are found in St. Just, Pendeen and his occupation is listed as “tin dresser,” one who sits at the surface of the mine and breaks up the oar with a hammer before it goes to the stamp mill. Children as young as seven years were employed at the tin mines. Boys climbed up and down the tunnel ladders to bring their father’s, uncles’ and cousins’ articles; powder, tools, water and food.

The Cornish economy was predominantly farming, fishing, and mining. Families made enough to get by, but there was very little left over to get ahead. And one disabling accident could bring the household into dire straits. John’s father avoided an early death by becoming a shoemaker, rather than a miner. But the whole family often had to work to avoid the poorhouse during the nineteenth century in Cornwall, and John went from being a tin dresser to a tin miner.

Humans are ever hopeful, and they continue to live the lives they see around them, so when John was a young man of 20 he successfully courted and married Mary Jane Gendall, the daughter of Francis and Jane Cock Gendall on 4 July 1868 in Gulval. Mary Jane’s father worked in the mines at Gulval. She went from being a miner’s daughter to a miner’s wife.

John and Mary Jane’s first daughter Jane “Janie” Prowse was born in December of 1868. Her baptism was registered in Pendeen in

March 1868. Sister Elizabeth Ann Prowse came along three years later in May. Elizabeth died in August of 1871. By this time John had moved the family to Bojewyan, Penzance in Cornwall. Son John Prowse was born March 1872 and died four months later in nearby Pendeen. Along with the loss of his two youngest children, John had the worry of income stagnation. The tin was playing out and the Cornish economy approached crisis. Idle miners were a common site in the villages of Cornwall. John was forced to think of working abroad, as had many of his cousins.

As I wander among the graves in the Bald Mountain Cemetery, I wonder if he knew how his decision would change his and his family's fates, and that he would be buried in soil so far from home.

It was not unheard of for a Cornish miner to leave for work in another land. The Cornish pulled tin and copper from under land and sea for centuries and were known worldwide for their mine engineering and ability. Many of John's siblings and extended family were off working in the mines of Australia or bringing up the gold, silver, and lead in North and South America. What treasure lured him across the sea to the United States? Perhaps, one day, John saw an advertisement from America touting the mining opportunities. Mining companies, and often the railroads connected to them, advertised overseas for experienced labor from western Europe, and later, cheap labor from Eastern Europe. Perhaps he saw financial rescue, potential for moving up in employment and a better life for himself and his family.

So, it was decided; 25-year-old John Prowse and his little family became part of the “Diaspora” leaving Cornwall for work abroad.

On 16 February 1873, a 25-year-old John Prowse arrived at New York harbor on the “SS Celtic.” The White Star Line ship was a year old, four masted, one funneled, 3888-ton ocean liner. Mary Jane and daughter Janie are not listed on the same passenger inventory with him. It is possible they followed on a later ship. We do know they eventually arrived because daughter Elizabeth Ann Prowse was born in Hibernia, Morris County, New Jersey on 27 August 1873.

John and his family probably lived in Lower Hibernia where the Hibernia Methodist Episcopal Church was located. This village was at the southwest end of the Hibernia Mine. The village at the northeast end was Oreland or Upper Hibernia. Lower Hibernia was enough of a going concern to have a school, hotel, general store, and brewery. Inside the hotel was a tavern where John may have gone to share conviviality with other Cousin Jacks.

The Hibernia Underground tract dates to 1772 and the iron pulled from the ground was used to produce ammunition and ordnance for the Continental Army. The Hibernia mine was one of the largest in New Jersey. Today there remains only woodlands and crumbling foundations along a hiking trail to the mine. The nearest town is Rockaway to the south.

Somewhere between Hibernia, New Jersey 1873 and Pennsylvania 1875, Mary Jane Gendall Prowse disappeared. Did she die with the birth of her daughter Elizabeth Ann, and is buried in an unmarked grave in Hibernia, New Jersey? It may be

that something happened to her in Pennsylvania, because this is where John Prouse married another Mary Jane in 1875.

Mary Jane Thomas was about 27 years old when she met John Prouse and his two young daughters. They may have met in New Jersey since many of her maternal Curtis relatives can be found living in Morris County, New Jersey during the early to mid-1870s.

According to the 1900 US Census, Mary Jane arrived in the US in 1874, along with sister Elizabeth Ann Thomas Semmons and Nannie Thomas Nobel Trezise. Sister Margaret Thomas Oats has an 1873 arrival date. Brothers Nicholas, and Charles, along with her mother Elizabeth Curtis Thomas, died before 1900 in Colorado. It is probable that they arrived in the United States around 1873-1874, at the same time as their nuclear family members.

Since documents or memoirs have not yet surfaced to reveal where and how John Prouse and Mary Jane Thomas met, we can go by the “married 25 years...” statements made to the 1900 US Census taker, and some information given in the Colorado Transcript, Number 26, April 29, 1937 obituary, “Mary Jane Thomas was born in Cornwall, England, August 13, 1848 and came to the United States when a young lady. She first lived in Pennsylvania and after her marriage there to John Prouse, they moved to Bald Mountain in Gilpin County where they resided for a number of years. Mr. Prouse passed away about thirty-seven years ago.”

Mining is dirty work, twelve-hour days spent underground, never seeing the sun. Unless they were lucky enough to be located in a town next to a bigger city, many times miners and their families lived in company towns, buying goods at the local company store, living at the behest of the mine owners. Cornish miners are independent in their thinking and used to negotiating their own contracts. They were compensated, not with an hourly wage, but on their ability to bring up paying ore. Maybe the terms of employment in the mines or the lure of gold in the Nevada Gulch brought John and his new family to Gilpin County Colorado.

The 1870 Colorado Business Directory describes a town waiting to reward those willing to come and work the mines there, “Nevada is one of the mountain mining camps of Gilpin County and adjoins Central on the west. Traversing the surrounding mountains are some of the richest and best developed gold mines in the Territory. Many of these reach the borders of the town, and shaft houses inclosing hoisting machinery, form a part of the structures that make up this important mining center. Like its neighbors, Central and Black Hawk, it was first settled in 1859, by miners and prospectors, who, with mill-men, still form the largest portion of its inhabitants. Nevada is in a small valley nearly surrounded by mountains. The chief of these, Bald Mountain, is among the highest of the foot-hill range. The valley, like those adjoining, was formerly gulch diggings, and has yielded largely in gold. Mills for the reduction of ores are numerous. Nevada is next to Black Hawk in importance as a milling town . . .

Perhaps no town in the mountains or the Territory produces so largely in gold in proportion to its population, and still the great mineral wealth of its mines is not fully realized, nor will it be until reduction works for the treatment of low-grade ores, become a

success in Colorado. The society of Nevada is like that of all mining camps in the Territory, and the usual attention is paid to religious and moral observances. Altogether, this mountain town is prosperous, and its inhabitants rank among the first in the Territory in wealth and social position, and its surroundings are unusually beautiful and grand.”

Siblings William Prowse, Elizabeth Ann Prowse Angwin Curnow and James Thomas Prowse arrived a year or two after John and Mary Jane’s daughter, Mary Jane, was born. She arrived in Feb 1879. These siblings were a part of the larger population that left Cornwall and moved somewhere in North America. Did John write back to extended family in Cornwall and convince them that Nevadaville and Gilpin County was a good place to make their mark and establish a life for themselves?

Because of their abilities and experience, Cornish miners and mine engineers were hired to run the British owned mines in the Nevada Gulch area, and these Cornish managers actively recruited Cornish friends and relatives (Cousin Jack’s) to work for or with them. The Irish, and others, at times complained of preferential hiring on the part of Cornish mine management.

John Prowse is recorded on the 15 June 1880 US Federal Census as a miner, white, male, 32 years old, born in England, parents born in England. Wife Mary J., is keeping house, she is a white, female, 30 years old who cares for children; Jane, Elizabeth A., John, Louisa and Mary J. Daughter Elizabeth Maude Prowse was born in September of that year. Son Nicholas Thomas “Nick” Prowse was born a year later in October.

In April 1883 son William C. Prouse arrived, then Mable in Oct 1884, the same year the railroad came to Georgetown, Colorado. Clear Creek and Gilpin Counties are the center of commerce and culture for the young state. Nevadaville, or Nevada City, as it was called in its earlier years, was a full-service community, with over 200 residences and commercial buildings. John was a member of the Foresters, a fraternal organization. Saloons that served the Irish half of the population on one side of town balanced the Cornish pubs on the other. Butchers and clothiers along with attorneys, engineers and many other services made Nevadaville an attractive place to locate. Neighbor, Central City, was high on the social register because successful miners and mine owners built great homes and businesses there. People living and working in Nevadaville didn't have far to go for entertainment, as the Central City Opera House was the site of singing, plays and orations in those years. Oftentimes, it was the Cousin Jacks and Welsh who, having built the Opera House, could be found singing on the stage!

By 1 June 1885, John Prouse and his growing family were recorded on the Colorado State Census. White, male, 37 years old, miner, born in England from parents also born there. Mary Jane is now responsible for nine children. Having such a large Cornish population meant that the culture and foodways of Cornwall were transplanted to the Nevada Gulch area. Most Cornish were Methodist and attended the local Methodist Church. Mary Jane likely made pasties, the Cornish miner's meal with locally available meat and vegetables in replacement of or along with the traditional beef, potato, Swede (rutabaga), onion, salt and pepper. Wrestling and horse racing were some of the sports transplanted from Cornwall.

Nevada Gulch is a valley at the 9000-foot elevation. The geology of the area is what promotes the formation of gold, silver and other precious metals. The mountains are made of granite that uplifted limestone. They were once part of an inland sea before the age of the dinosaur. Children, and some inquisitive adults, found entertainment in hunting for fossils or ancient sea creatures, like crinoids and bi-valve clams. Most of the buildings in Nevadaville were made of local granite. The finely cut stone attesting to the abilities of the Cornish Masons that settled there. It is a land of Aspens and Lodgepole pines, short summers and cold winters bordered by the “shoulder seasons” of mud from the melting and refreezing snow and sleet.

The Colorado Rockies are rugged territory, but the Cornish are tough people, able to survive in some of the most inhospitable places, as evidenced by their worldwide establishment.

The air is thin and dry, and I feel it in my breathing as I walk along. What must the change have been like for those coming from sea level to these high mountains? People living in those times and places had to be resilient to survive the hardship and heartache that came along.

As I walk in the quiet of the cemetery, listening to the soft murmur of the Quaking Aspen leaves, I note the area surrounding the grave of John Prowse. I can see children’s graves with the last name Prouse. The spelling of the surname seems to shift between the spelling back in Cornwall - Prouse, and the spelling in North America - Prowse. Do these children belong to John and Mary Jane?

A closer inspection of one monument reveals the names of the younger children born to the Prowse household in the late 1890s. Lilly Prowse, born Oct 1890, died 27 November 1890. On another side of the spire is Mable Prowse who died 4 Oct 1891, and on the third side, William C. Prowse death 9 Oct 1891. So many children lost in such a short time! What had happened to bring such sadness to the family?

A look through Colorado Historic Newspapers reveals the answer.

Weekly Register Call 16 Oct 1891, Central City, Gilpin, Colorado - "The residence of Mr. John Prowse in Nevadaville has been quarantined on account of diphtheria, several of his children being sick with the disease. His little son died last Friday, making two children who died within a week."

Malnutrition, exposure and diseases were all something that could plague families living in mining towns in the late Nineteenth Century and early twentieth.

Mary Jane Thomas Prowse knew the hardship and loss. Her father, a Cornwall tin miner, died at 47 years old, when Mary Jane was a young girl of 16. This left the family in a desperate, but common, situation. Men who worked mining for a living knew they would rarely live past their 50's. "Miner's Complaint," or silicosis incapacitated most and finally left them at a point where they could no longer breathe. In Cornwall, if the head of household died early, wives and children were forced to work in the mines themselves to avoid ending their days in the local poorhouse. In the frontier west, losing a husband and breadwinner could mean menial labor for the widow and children, or a quick marriage to a widowed miner who needed a

caregiver for his motherless family. Having extended family as part of the local community benefited the bereaved, keeping them from starvation.

The 4 June 1900 US Federal Census reveals that John Prouse was a mine foreman. Directing the efforts of other men working the depths of the mountain may have made work a little easier for John, but, as the years went on, the labored breathing and loss of energy had to be a constant reminder of his situation. His lungs were shredding from the silicates dug out of the walls of the mines he worked.

The 1900 census entry for John reads, “John Prouse, head, white, male, born Dec 1847, 52 yrs old, married 25 yrs, born England, parents born England, immigrated to US in 1873, living in US for 27 yrs, naturalized, mine foreman, reads, writes & speaks English.” In Oct 1894, John, along with brothers William and James, became citizens. Apparently, John decided that his and his family’s fortune resided with the burgeoning United States. Now, he had to be aware that his life would end in this place.

The sad day came on 18 November 1904. The Denver Post announced, “Died of ‘Miner's Consumption.’ Foreman at the Gold Coin and the Hubert property.”

And the obituary from The Gilpin Observer, Volume 18, Number 34, November 24, 1904, showed that the man buried under the large monument in that quiet cemetery had a positive impact on those around him and left a void with his passing. “...He had resided in this section the major portion of his life, coming here about thirty years ago and remaining until he died, at the age of 56 years. He had always been connected with the

mining industry of the camp, during his career in this section he had served as superintendent of the famous California and Hubert properties. He was regarded as a very efficient mining man and about five years ago was employed as superintendent on the celebrated Camp Bird in Telluride while Arthur Collins was manager. John Prouse was one of the men who helped to make Gilpin County and Central City, being always identified with any movement that tended to better the conditions of this locality. He was not only popular with those he was associated with in mining but was well liked and highly esteemed by all who knew him, and his acquaintance was unbounded. A large family, consisting of wife, five girls and two boys, is left to mourn his loss. The death of John Prouse will be widely regretted...”