



The Helen Dings cabin, where Katherine Garetson began her adventure in 1914. *Dings Family collection.*

## **Chapter One:**

### ***A dollar to the Land Office – New companions – Food for a family of eight***

One midsummer afternoon I stood on the porch of a mountain cabin and felt myself whipped and tossed and spattered by a violent storm of wind, rain, thunder, and lightning. I wish that everyone could put into his life one storm of the high mountains. My sublime mood was interrupted by the onrush of two drenched human beings who, bent double, came running through wind and rain to the shelter of my porch. One of them was an old man who was terrified by the storm and cheerfully admitted, when I had taken him indoors, that thunder and lightning were horrible to him. As he dried out by the fire, he told me he was a road mender. Road mending seemed to be the only way my old man could earn a living while holding down his

“claim.” As he steamed in front of the red fire, I listened to his husky voice as to one who brought an answer to prayer. He told me how he had chosen his homestead, what he hoped to do with his land, what he considered a Rocky Mountain quarter section to be worth, and many other matters that interested me intensely. I know now that every American with a spark of romance in his makeup has at some time of his life cherished this idea of taking up a claim. What the old man said would have caught the attention of anybody, I believe. The words fell on peculiarly fertile ground because I was seeking escape from the return to St. Louis. Before he went away, he tugged at some old papers in his pocket and finally produced two pamphlets for me. They had been published at Washington; issued by the General Land Office of the Department of Interior. One was “Vacant Public Lands of the United States,” but the other pleased me most; it was entitled, “Suggestions to Homesteaders and Persons Desiring to Make Homestead Entries.”

Was it not incredible that a whole estate could be had at no cost, save living in the land where you loved to be! More than once I had discovered a deserted, one-room log hut that had been the claim cabin of some settler. These hovels, set in wild flower gardens alongside mountain brooks, had impressed me with the romance of the simple life as pioneers know it. Later, my road mender and I had several arguments while he filled in ruts and I sat on the embankment and prodded him. At his suggestion I sent a dollar to the nearest land office (it was in Denver) and received a plat of the township in which I was visiting. This showed which quarter sections had been homesteaded. There were plenty of little squares still not crossed out. By hunting up Government section corners (grass-covered heaps of stones built up like monuments), and learning to tell approximately how certain lines would be run by a surveyor, I soon located the one hundred and sixty acres that became my heart's desire. It was over two miles south of Long's Peak Inn and the summer cottage where I was staying.

Filing a three-year residence claim is the most serious thing you can do, aside from marrying, I think. The more I thought, the more I feared. At last I deliberately took the leap as one who shuts his eyes and jumps. It took less than twenty minutes after

I reached the land office in Denver to make out papers, swear an oath, pay sixteen dollars in fees and hear the register say, "The land is yours. All you have to do is live up to the requirements of the law."

The trouble that lay heavy on my heart the day the road mender gave me the tip about claim staking was nothing more nor less than how to earn a living. A financial upheaval had interrupted my life, made safe by a prosperous father. Like all good American girls, I could sew and cook and read and write and think. I was average. My home was in St. Louis and I had observed other lives carefully enough to be overwhelmed with the knowledge: "The city is so hard a place for people who are poor and sensitive that many choose to die by their own hands." I went back to St. Louis for the month of September and acquired a girl companion and a dog. The girl I chose. I chose her because she was steadfast, and keen for adventure; she was gentle, not talkative, earnest and good-looking. We called her A. A. [from Annie Adele Shreve]. The dog somebody else chose. It happened to be a Great Dane, named Gypsy.

And so I took up the homestead in the Rocky Mountains, hoping the land would become valuable as summer cottage sites. The quarter section lies in northern Colorado eighty miles from Denver. Less than a year after I began living on the homestead, the Rocky Mountain National Park was created by an act of Congress [1915]. My north line was the south boundary of the National Park. An increasing number of tourists came to our region in summer so that the cabin was converted into a tea room. This served the same purpose as road mending did the old man who gave me my first lessons in homesteading. The nine months when the tourists were not with us were to be spent fighting the wildness of winter in the wilderness, together with the more profitable occupation of making salable articles for the gift shop connected with the tea room.

For about seven weeks, including October and November, up to Thanksgiving, while the claim cabin was in process of building, we lived in the cottage where I had spent the summer. That was over two miles north of the claim and close to Long's Peak Inn. This summer house was heated by fireplace only. During those cold October nights, we suffered more than we