

# The Writing of "America the Beautiful"



By Katharine Lee Bates

My Line-A-Day book carries, under date of July 22, 1893: "Most glorious scenery I ever beheld." And I had seen the Alps and the Pyrenees.

My memory of that supreme day of our Colorado sojourn is fairly distinct even across the stretch of 35 crowded years. It was before the advent of automobiles and the cog railway was not then in operation.

I think we went by train to Cascade, where the carriage road began, and there scrambled up into a belated prairie schooner, its tail-board emblazoned with the traditional slogan, "Pikes Peak or Bust." Wondering at the brilliant spread of devil's paint brush and the grey reaches of giant mignette, we came to the halfway house, where the horses were taken out and sturdy mules were put in. We had all brought basket lunches, but our astronomer, Professor Todd of Amherst, warned us so solemnly of the danger we incurred in eating above the clouds that we meekly passed over our baskets to him. As a seasoned abider in the upper spaces, he proposed to remain a week on the summit, where the observation station was more famous for its view than for its food. The mules tugged our cumbrous chariot up and up thru a waste of dead white stems, a ghostly forest, until the awful abode of the ancient Manitou, the Peak that young Lieutenant Pike had seen but never trod, was attained. We were all eager to jump out, but again were warned by our mentor that we must descend leisurely.

An erect, decorous group, we stood at last on the Gate-of-Heaven summit, hallowed by the worship of perished races, and gazed in wordless rapture over the far expanse of mountain ranges and sea-like sweep of plain. It was then and there that the opening lines of "America the Beautiful" sprang into being. But our stay was brief — barely half an hour. Professor Todd himself fainted and we were all ceremoniously bundled into the big wagon.

It is my impression that I wrote out the entire song on my return that evening to Colorado Springs. At all events, the four stanzas were penciled in the notebook that I brought back to Wellesley. The comment carried in my Line-A-Day book on the poetic output of the summer under date of August 15 is: "Consider my verses. Disheartening."