

WINTER 2018

PUBLISHED BY  
*Telluride Newspapers*

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HOME & LIVING IN THE *western san juans*



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The Bridal Veil Power House, built in 1907, hunkers at cliff's edge like a watchful sentry from another time.



# POWERHOUSE

## LIFE ON THE BRINK AT BRIDAL VEIL FALLS

If you are ever so lucky as to find yourself at the Bridal Veil Falls Power House near Telluride on a summer's evening, open a window and stick your head out into the thin, cool mountain air. Better yet, go out onto the balcony that looks out over the edge of everything.

Presuming you don't pass out from vertigo (better not do that — it's a long way down), you might catch a glimpse of shape-shifting shadows darting through the rising waterfall mist, as black swifts hunt tiny insects in the twilight.

The nests of these aerialists cling to sheer cliff walls behind the mighty Bridal Veil Falls, which pours itself over the edge of the precipice beside the house, plunging 365 feet down into the valley below like a bolt of straight white tulle.

What, you may wonder, inspired these birds to build their homes, lay their eggs, raise their chicks on such a precarious perch? What, indeed, inspired humans to build this brooding boondoggle of a structure that hunkers at cliff's edge, like a watchful sentry from another time?

Perhaps, as the local poet McRedeye says, "It's the precarious perch that inspires us to fly."

### 'A GENTLEMAN AND A SAVAGE'

The fabled Bridal Veil Falls Power House, built in 1907 to supply hydroelectric power to the Smuggler-Union mine and mill, is an enduring Telluride icon that powers the imaginations of all who fall under its spell.

Listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1978, it boasts the second-oldest operating AC generator in the United States, the first being the nearby Ames Plant in Ophir, Colo.

Long before Bridal Veil graced the covers of glossy magazines, it was the aerie, the lair, the fortress and fever dream of Bulkeley Wells, the president and manager of the Smuggler-Union Mining



Bulkeley Wells, circa 1904, at which time he was captain of Troop A of the Colorado National Guard.

Company and leader for the Colorado National Guard during Telluride's labor strikes from 1899 to 1908.

A Harvard-educated Chicago native, Wells was described in a Socialist Party pamphlet of the day as "a gentleman and a savage." He married into the wealthy family of Colonel Thomas L. Livermore, Chairman of the Board of Telluride's Smuggler-Union Mine, taking the Colonel's daughter Grace Livermore as his wife.

Perhaps Colonel Livermore wanted to test his new son-in-law's mettle. Or perhaps he could already see the cruel ambition that streaked Wells' character like a cold, glittery vein of fool's gold.

In any case, there was labor trouble brewing in Telluride, and the Colonel needed someone to attend to it. He dispatched his son-in-law there in 1902 to take the place of recently deceased Smuggler Mine manager Arthur Collins, who had been murdered by a mining union henchman while eating dinner at his house in Pandora.

Wells proved himself up for the job. Like Darth Vader striking back at the rebellion, he employed swift, bloody and terribly repressive measures against

the Western Federation of Miners, while shoring up his own power by earning a deputy sheriff's commission and becoming captain of "Troop A" of the Colorado National Guard.

For a time, during the height of the labor troubles, Wells declared martial law in Telluride, and became the supreme military commander of San Miguel County, impeding freedom of assembly, shutting down gambling halls, censoring the press and deporting union sympathizers from town, according to newspaper reports.

To keep union sympathizers from sneaking back into the county, he ordered the construction of an armed sentry post at Imogene Pass that he named Fort Peabody, after the Colorado governor of the time.

Wells was so reviled by the union boys that they attempted to murder him as they had his predecessor, blowing him up in his bedroom as the labor wars shuddered to a halt.

The April 9, 1908 issue of the Telluride Journal documented the assault, printing a photograph of "General Wells' home at Pandora" and reporting that a portion of the siding on the north side-wall had been "broken through by the force of the explosion." The assassin, or assassins, had sneaked into the house through a third-floor bathroom window, by means of a ladder kept hanging near the foundation.

Wells survived the assassination attempt.

But with a hole blasted through the side of his house, he needed a new place to live, someplace where he could see his enemies coming from a long way off and keep them at a distance — a house, moreover, that fit his worldview of himself. Luckily, he had that covered.

Several years earlier, at the height of the labor troubles, Wells had appealed to the board of directors of the Smuggler-Union mine to build a summer house for his family atop Bridal Veil Falls, three-and-

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a-half miles east of Telluride, rivaling the grandiosity of the new Walsh House at the Camp Bird Mine.

The board of directors said no. So he tried another tactic, asking instead for funding to build a hydroelectric plant above the falls. The mine and its mill needed power, after all, and Bridal Veil Falls was the perfect place to get it. Wells succeeded in obtaining corporate funding for this proposal.

And just like magic, his summer house rose seamlessly atop the new generator and transformer plant, built flush with the edge of the cliff for the fullest dramatic effect.

The house was composed of two large sections connected by a smaller, rectangular hallway. Finished in shiplapped cedar, it had a hipped and gabled roof and a tower projection crowned by a conical spire, comprising half the facade of the cliff-facing side of the house.

When the erection was complete, it loomed above the sheer cliff like an elegant middle finger, raised to all the people down in town that reviled him.

Inside, the house was equally impressive, with 12-foot ceilings, expensive tongue-and-groove hardwood paneling, and an enormous living room with a bay of windows that arced like a captain's bridge out over the valley 365 feet below.

It was a house that was built to impress,

and to entertain the gilded masses. Newspapers from 1910 to WWI bore reports of dinner parties on the brink of the cliff. Guests would ride by tram up to the house, and would frequently stay the night in one of the Wells' four bedrooms.

When nature called, they could relieve themselves in the loftiest water closet in San Miguel County. The rudimentary plumbing jettisoned the raw sewage straight out over the cliff, where it descended in a stream alongside the pure virgin waters of Bridal Veil Falls.

The real magic, the literal engine of the house, lay in its basement.

Here, an enormous nautilus-shaped Pelton wheel and 2300 volt Westinghouse Electric AC generator — laboriously dragged to the site with horses and block-and-tackle — hummed day and night, spinning pressurized water into a powerful AC current that helped to light the tunnels and run the mill equipment of the nearby Smuggler-Union Mine for the next five decades, until the Idarado Mine acquired the property and finally shut the hydro plant down in 1955.

### FRANKENSTEIN'S CASTLE

Eric Jacobson will never forget the first time he saw the Bridal Veil hydro plant, a decade or so later.

He was a boy growing up in Grand

Junction, 100 miles to the north, in a neighborhood that had been colonized by a bunch of old Smuggler-Union families—the Sayers, the Parkers, the Ritters. These characters filled his young head with stories about the good old days in Telluride.

In all of these tales, Bridal Veil loomed, holy grail-like, in Jacobson's imagination. He finally beheld the storied structure when he was eight years old, on a family Jeep trip over Black Bear Pass.

The building was in pretty rough shape by then. But Jacobson was enchanted. "It looked to me like Frankenstein's Castle," he recalled. "I said to myself, 'I'm gonna live here someday.'"

It took him 20 or so more years, but eventually he figured out a way to make it happen.

As a college student, Jacobson got a summer job with a civil engineering firm in Grand Junction. Jacobson was the firm's permitting guy, helping small communities on the Western Slope tap into new federal incentives that had recently been introduced in the wake of the Arab oil embargo to reopen abandoned hydroelectric plants.

Through his work, Jacobson became well versed in the details of the National Energy Act of 1978, which contained provisions to spur small-scale power generation and reduce the need for oil imports. Under these provisions, he learned, anybody could file a permit to restart an idle hydroelectric facility — even if they didn't own the property. Even better, utility companies had to buy the power generated at such facilities, at a regulated price.

In an aha moment, Jacobson saw a pathway to achieve his childhood dream, and put in a permit application for the Bridal Veil plant in 1981. The feds basically rubber-stamped his application, which took Idarado by surprise, and triggered years of litigation as the mining company tried to prevent Jacobson's stealth takeover of the hydroelectric plant.

### HAIRY EYEBALLS

The summer Jacobson finally got Bridal Veil was the summer the Grateful Dead came to Telluride. A bunch of Dead Heads had a huge party up at the hydro plant to celebrate the "harmonic convergence," an event supposedly prophesied



by the Mayan God Quetzalcoatl, in which humanity was to emerge from chaos and enter a brave new age of peace.

But instead of peace, the Dead Heads stirred up some epic craziness at the Bridal Veil hydro plant. One reveler jumped off the cliff to his death. Others built a campfire on the living room floor and almost burned the whole place down. They also left bizarre, LSD-inspired “flying eye” graffiti — white eyeballs with blue irises and red pupils, sporting legs and wings — crawling across the hydro plant’s elegantly paneled walls.

“It wasn’t just spray-and-go graffiti. There were a lot of hours in it,” Jacobson said. “They were pretty crazy.”

Each eyeball featured intricate, hand-brushed little red veins. There were hundreds of them, tracing an invisible route like armies of ants tripping throughout the building, across shelves and on to the floor, all through the living room and stairways, and even down into the generator room.

The eyeballs must have worked a strange kind of juju in Jacobson’s favor. Because later that year, worn down by years of litigation, Idarado finally relented, granting him a 99-year lease on the hydro plant.

“The party at Bridal Veil convinced Idarado to get out of there,” Jacobson reckons. “They weren’t prepared to deal with a bunch of stoned people into painting eyeballs on the walls.”

## RAISING CAIN AND LAZARUS

The year was 1987. “I was young and happy and had a few bucks and my dreams,” Jacobson said. He took a room on Oak Street down in Telluride, and started in on the renovations.

The place was pretty much a mess — and not just because of all the eyeballs. It had a giant hole in the roof, and had seen “zero maintenance since the late 1950s,” Jacobson said. “But the nice thing was, nothing was destroyed. Nobody had moved the interior walls. We had a very good framework for the restoration, because nobody had really torn anything out.”

New windows and a new roof were job one. Jacobson finished the dining room that first summer — it was a warm, dry spot that served as home base — and from there, gradually took on other parts of the



house. Next came the kitchen, and a new floor and windows in the generator room.

There was also the hydroelectric plant to get running again. The generator was still in place, but scavengers had stripped it of its copper wiring. To make it work, all the insulated copper coils had to be rewound, and painstakingly put back into the cast iron frame.

Because the Bridal Veil Hydroelectric Plant had been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, Jacobson was obliged to follow the Secretary of the Interior’s standards for historic rehabilitation, leaving intact as much of the historic fabric of the structure as possible.

“We used the original siding, the original studs and repaired them wherever we could, rather than wholesale ripping up,” he said. “It was a very extensive repair job. We strictly followed what was there, and made zero new additions. We simply repaired.”

This made some things about the house a little awkward by modern standards. For example, the house only had one indoor bathroom (albeit with a fantastic view). “In 1907, society was just getting used to indoor bathrooms,” Jacobson explained. “To think you would need more than one was a fantastic idea.”

There was also an outhouse clinging to the edge of the cliff nearby — just in case the indoor plumbing quit.

To accommodate the sanitary sensibilities of modern times, Jacobson also installed a proper sewage pipe that drained from the house to a leach field at the bottom of the cliff. It was a real battle to keep the pipe from freezing every winter.

## GOOD STUFF

In spite of its quirks, the house’s charms were numerous, starting of course with the location. The cliff-perch offered stupendous views in all directions — especially down valley. It was far from the madding crowd, which suited Jacobson just fine. And being built in a very early Craftsman style with the slightest nod to the late Queen Anne, it had loads of character “and no Victorian geegaws,” Jacobson said approvingly.

The house was surprisingly cozy, thanks to the hydroelectric generator that hummed down in “Frankenstein’s laboratory,” which kept the house at a constant 55-60 degrees even without supplementary heat. While the north-facing side of the house that looked out over Telluride was most often in shadow, strong sunlight baked its back side.

“You would get a surprising amount of sunshine up there,” Jacobson said. “It’s really balmy than people expect it to be.” To make things even cozier,

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The interior of the house features 12-foot ceilings and tongue-in-groove hardwood paneling.

Jacobson put wood-burning stoves in almost every room.

Bulkeley Wells had lavishly decorated the house in the style of the times. Most of this furniture was gone by the time Jacobson came on the scene. But here, he got lucky once again.

Turns out, a fellow named Mel Porterfield had been dispatched by Idarado to clear the place out when the mining company decided to retire the hydro plant back in the 1950s.

Porterfield drove his truck up the narrow windy switchbacks to the hydro plant, loaded up the stuff, came down to the Idarado headquarters and said, “Here it is.”

It looked like junk to the Idarado higher-ups, who instructed Porterfield to haul it to the dump. Instead, he drove it out to Nucla and stuck the stuff in an outbuilding on the family farm, where it remained for the next 30 years.

When Porterfield caught wind of what Jacobson was up to, he invited the young hydro baron out to the farm to have a look. Jacobson couldn’t believe his luck when he saw all that remained of the loot — an old pool table, gorgeous Mission-style furniture, even the kitchen stove. A good collection of stuff.

Porterfield agreed to trade it all for a new lawn tractor. And just like that, Bridal Veil was refurnished in its original style.

In spite of all its charms, it took a special brand of fortitude to live at Bridal Veil year-round. Come winter, avalanches were a constant hazard on trips back and forth to Telluride.

“We would sometimes get snowed in for a couple weeks — and that was okay, too,” Jacobson said. “We always had a lot of firewood, and a couple tons of coal and lots of pancake mix and canned goods. You knew you could weather just about any storm. It was a nice way to live life. It was nice to check the hydro turbine wheel in my pajamas, drinking my first cup of coffee.”

## LOST BOYS CLUB

Early on, it was pretty much a Lost Boys Club up on the cliff, with Jacobson and various friends and employees holding down the fort. First to join the club was one Steve Storm, a “total dreadlocked hippy musician carpenter” who showed up the first week Jacobson started work-



ing on the hydro plant, and stuck around, off and on, for the next 25 years.

Come evening, after the day’s work was done, Storm would head out onto the deck and play Grateful Dead songs or Ravel’s “Bolero” on the French horn.

The hydro plant’s location at cliff’s edge made building maintenance a miserable task. The work required sheer nerve, and an intricately rigged bosun’s chair to be slung over the roof of the building on ropes in order to repair siding and repoint masonry on the foundation.

Jacobson had befriended a group of Chilean climbers on his travels and convinced them to come to Telluride to conduct these repairs. They, too, joined the rowdy brotherhood. Slowly, things were coming together up at the old hydro plant.

Jacobson was just finishing up the living room when his wife Alessandra arrived on the scene in 1997. Their first daughter was born the following December, and the Bridal Veil Hydroelectric Plant became the Jacobson family home. For a while, they lived up there full time with their young children, but after a near-deadly avalanche encounter, new rules were put into effect, and the family established winter quarters down in town.

The Jacobsons took a page out of Bulkeley Wells’ book, and entertained guests in style up at the hydro plant. “Everybody liked coming up there for parties,” Jacobson said. “We used to have black tie Valentine’s parties.” They could sometimes even hear the laughter of dinner parties from a century ago, echoing through the wood-paneled walls.

“It was superlative up there,” Jacobson said. “That’s the only way to describe it.”

## UNINVITED VISITORS

Years before Alessandra had entered the mix, Jacobson once hosted a different sort of Valentine’s Day party that had nothing whatsoever to do with black ties. He and a lady friend were enjoying a romantic interlude up at Bridal Veil, soaking in the hot tub at cliff’s edge, drinking champagne and eating chocolates.

“We heard a chink chink chink, and an ice climber pops up,” Jacobson recalled. It was the famed ice climber Jeff Lowe, who in the 1970s had bagged Bridal Veil Falls’ famous first ascent, and was back in the area again.

“Jeff being Jeff, he takes his clothes off and hops in the hot tub and starts scarfing champagne,” Jacobson laughed. Lowe



The house still retains a cozy, historic character, with features including dormer and stained glass windows and a wood-burning cook stove.



was climbing that day with a well-known cinematographer and movie producer, who popped over the edge just after Lowe, and jumped in the hot tub as well.

"And he starts hitting on my girlfriend while I'm cooking dinner," Jacobson continued, "convincing her that her future lies in movies." The movie producer got the girl, and Lowe and Jacobson became lifelong friends.

Bears, lynx and porcupines were also frequent visitors at Bridal Veil. Jacobson remembers a cinnamon-colored bear that came around every fall. "She always had twins, and she would go crazy in the fall for food," he said. "She liked Iams dog food. But she was very respectful; if you yelled at her she ran away."

Not so a presumptuous Brit (who turned out to be the rock star Sting) who walked right into the house on another occasion, announcing that he wanted to buy it out from under Jacobson.

Needless to say, the house was not for sale.

## A NEW ERA

Eventually, Jacobson's run up at Bridal Veil did come to an end. In a sealed settlement agreement in 2010, his 99-year lease

for the Bridal Veil Hydroelectric Plant was terminated early, and operation of the power plant returned to Idarado and its parent company, Newmont Mining. The Jacobsons departed Bridal Veil for good, their lives tilting in separate directions as they each pursued new adventures.

The power house is now empty, and silent, and cold enough inside to make your nose drip on a gray November day. Its hydro plant is temporarily offline for repairs, but it is being actively preserved as part of Newmont Mining's Idarado Legacy venture.

Newmont takes its role as custodian of the century-old structure seriously. "The Bridal Veil Power House is an integral part of the community's history and Idarado's operations," said Larry Fiske, Newmont Mining Corporation's Director of Legacy Sites Closure and Reclamation, who oversees the preservation effort.

Over the past five years, Idarado and the Town of Telluride have also made significant investments in the Bridal Veil penstock system — the historic pipeline that carries water from high alpine lakes into the hydro plant and down to Pandora, augmenting the town's municipal water supply.

"We plan to continue upgrading the system over the years to come in order

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to improve its reliability and operability," Fiske said.

## SONS OF NIGHT

It may sound odd, but through all the years of living up at Bridal Veil, Jacobson developed a certain affinity for Bulkeley Wells.

"I didn't like his politics, but he certainly had a charismatic personality," Jacobson reflected. "He started the Western Colorado Power Company that is now San Miguel Power Association. He built the ditch that irrigated lands around Norwood. He had all sorts of things going on. And his gift of gab was legendary."

Wells also had a way with women that may have been his eventual undoing.

Divorced from his first wife, Wells left Telluride in 1921 to reopen the famous mines on the Comstock Lode in Nevada. In Virginia City, he fell in love with the Governor of Nevada's wife. She left her husband and ran off with Wells. The wealthy Whitney family of New York, who had been Wells' patrons at that time, pulled their financial support. Wells found himself abruptly unemployed.

"He went from being well-to-do to an absolute nothing," Jacobson said. By the time the depression hit, Wells was in dire straits. In 1931, he committed suicide in a hotel room in San Francisco with a gunshot to the heart.

For all his fatal flaws, Wells had a romantic soul — he left behind a hand-lettered snippet of poetry by Sir Thomas Moore that still trails its way across the dining room walls of the power house up at Bridal Veil Falls:

*Fly not yet,  
'tis just the hour When pleasure,  
like the midnight flower  
That scorns the eye of vulgar light,  
Begins to bloom for sons of night,  
And maids who love the moon!*

Jacobson can still recite the lines by heart. 