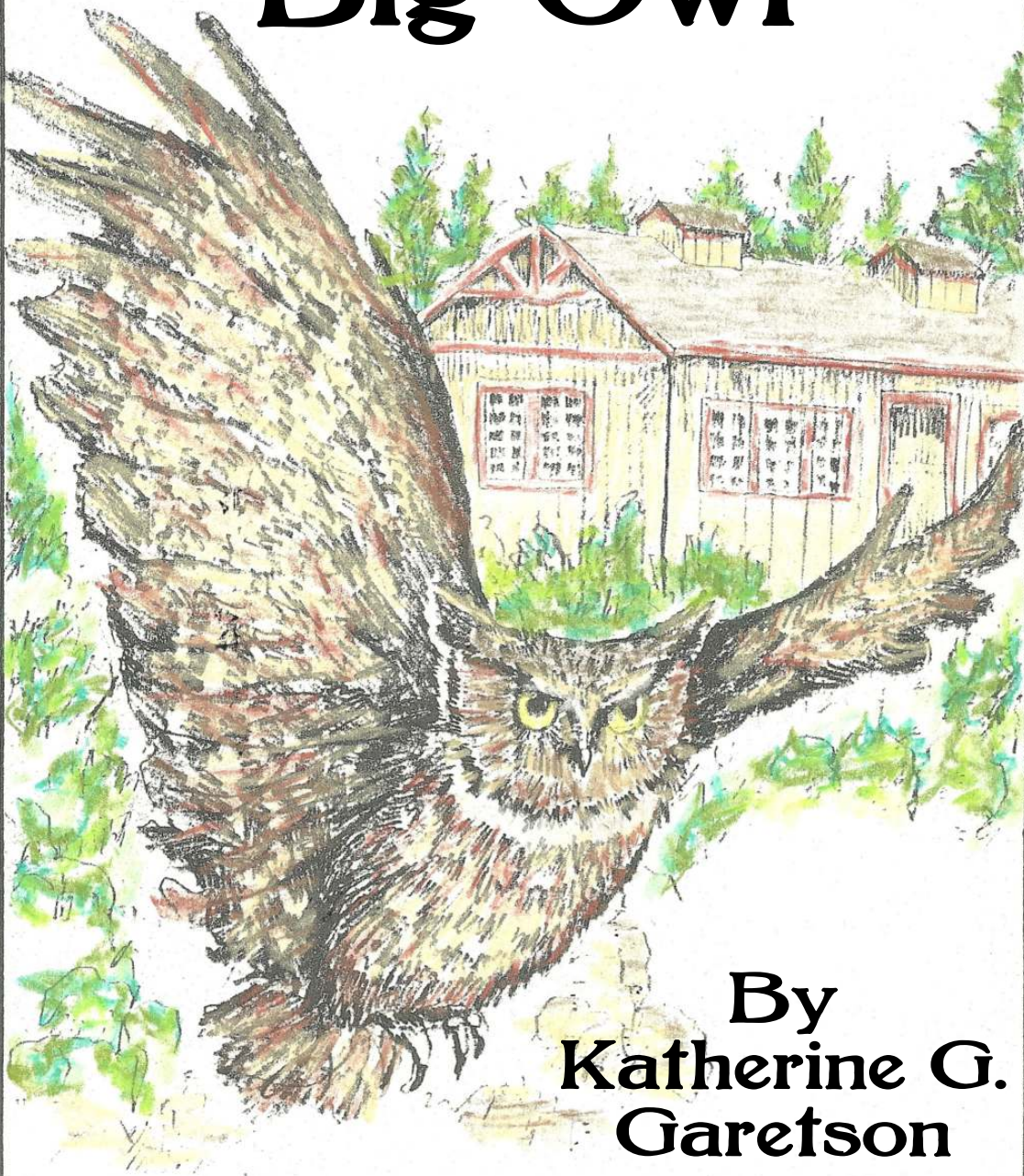


Homesteading Big Owl



By
Katherine G.
Garetson



"To have a single woman take on the task of homesteading property high in a mountain wilderness is extraordinary. . . to write about it so well is remarkable." ~Scott McKean

Step into 1914 and a life Katherine Garetson never imagined for herself. With little more than a friend and a dog and the kindness of some unusual mountain neighbors, she stakes her claim to 160 acres of rocks and pines and sets about "proving-up" her homestead. She finds a secret romance, snow-bound hardships, independence, and glorious days in the wilds of Colorado.

Published by the Allenspark Wind, 2012
ISBN

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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