The White City

by Miles Clements

THE RUINS of the Echo Mountain House appear like a low-budget Machu Picchu wrapped in smog, like a run-down Hollywood stand-in for some lost civilization. The building's stone base, now crumbling into the mountain's topsoil, traces the outline of the spot where the elaborate Victorian hotel once stood. In place of its seventy grand rooms are patches of overgrown chaparral and a pair of scorched pines. Sagebrush lizards dash through what was once the ornate lobby while a bluebird flies circles in the sky.

At the site of the ruined structure, day hikers come and go. Some sit on the remaining tracks of the Mount Lowe Railway, taking in the obscured vistas of the Los Angeles basin and the San Gabriel Valley. Others, more intent on exploration, head to the strategically placed "Echophones" and shout into the megaphone-like devices, waiting for their voices to careen off the canyon walls.

As the hikers' yells slowly fade into the mountainside, a family of six ascends the granite staircase leading to the Echo Mountain House. They mill about the former chateau, taking pictures and eating granola bars. But after about fifteen minutes and a few swigs of water, the mother, donning a green Nike sweatshirt, corrals the family back into a small cluster. Walking past graffiti-covered plaques and huge, rusting railroad equipment, they head down the mountain and pack into their minivan, leaving their brief contact with the Echo Mountain House behind, surely taking only a few scant memories with them on their way back to the stucco houses and well-maintained lawns of Los Angeles' suburbs.

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Young Thaddeus Lowe gathered his instruments: a huge kite, a metal cage and a watchman's lantern. As the cold Maine wind began to pick up, the teenage Lowe placed a cat inside the cage, tied it, along with the lantern, to a string and sent the kite up into the air – he was a boy who loved to experiment. With the wind whipping the kite back and forth, Lowe secured it to a hitching post and left the cat and the lantern tethered there overnight, watching the lantern's trails of light from his room. In the morning, he untied the kite and released the terrified cat. The young scientist was convinced, among other things, that there was something special in the currents of the Earth's upper atmosphere and that one day he would build some sort of vessel that would glide through those high, gusty winds as easily as ships did through the seas.

For much of his life, Thaddeus Lowe defined himself by that dream. As a young man, he would buy up small hot-air balloons and send them into the sky, testing different gasses and delivery systems trying to achieve the optimum balance of speed and control. With larger balloons, such as his enormous City of New-York, Lowe began to travel longer distances, hoping one day to conduct a transatlantic flight. Eventually, Lowe's balloon experiments gained national attention, with Harper's Weekly routinely covering him and the other balloonists of the era in their quests to circle the globe and fulfill their

Jules Verne-like fantasies.

Thaddeus Lowe even brought ballooning to the Civil War. With the consent of President Lincoln, Lowe established the Army Balloon Corps, a group that pioneered the tactic of aerial reconnaissance as it floated over Confederate strongholds. It might be called America's first Air Force. Soon after the war, Lowe led a campaign to found a National Weather Service, an organization that at its inception was tied all but directly to Lowe's billowing silk balloons and his constant fascination with weather patterns. And even as Lowe began a wildly successful career as a brilliant refrigeration and gas engineer, he kept his focus on the sky, on the dream of a transatlantic flight in some massive balloon.

But there came a point when Lowe could no longer operate many of his floating experiments. Continually ailing from a case of malaria contracted during the Civil War, Thaddeus Lowe, at the age of 56, left the East Coast with his wife and youngest child and moved to Pasadena in 1887. Lowe immediately took to Southern California's moderate climate, light, golden air and perpetual warmth, which at the time was believed to have near-medicinal qualities. Soon after, Lowe bought up a lot of land in the heart of Pasadena and constructed his home: a nearly 24,000-square-foot Victorian mansion. Capped by a tall, cylindrical turret and an enormous American flag, the building stared out towards the nearby San Gabriel Mountains. For Lowe, the mountains became a focus of attention, recalling the rolling New England mountains of his youth where he would ride the small cog railroads through the bright green hills. Indeed, almost immediately, Lowe began pouring much of his engineering and financial energy into the San Gabriels and the idea of his own mountain railroad system, one that would climb the daunting peaks that rose up from beyond the valley.

Lowe was not alone in this fantasy. Entire fortunes were being made all throughout the country on the railroad's crisscrossed tracks and clacking iron, and because of this, a swell of support grew for an increased railroad presence in Los Angeles. It was out of this desire that the push for a mountain railway in the San Gabriels gained hold, with much of its support anchored in wealthy Southern Californians' fascination with this still wild and demanding landscape. Naturalism was in vogue then, and traversing the mountain terrain was a popular hobby, as adventurers would gather at the base of the mountains – the men in tailored Norfolk jackets and short-brimmed Boater hats; the women in slim, corseted dresses and flowery headgear – and explore the nearby crests and ridges. They sought out waterfalls that gushed out of the mountainsides, the deep, plunging canyons that seemed to disappear under the dense vegetation and the high, lumbering pines that dotted the mountaintops. For nearly all who visited the San Gabriels, there was an air of wonder, a pride in the rugged wilderness and an overwhelming desire to conquer it.

In the spring of 1890, Thaddeus Lowe set out to do just that. Meeting with David Macpherson, a Cornell graduate and civil engineer with the Santa Fe Railway, the two men exchanged their visions of how best to implement their mountain railroad fantasy. After much discussion and a trip to the railroad at Pike's Peak, they ultimately decided that an electric incline railway would be the most efficient mode of transport. With Lowe's wealth and imagination and Macpherson's engineering talent, construction soon

began on what was christened the Mount Lowe Railway. Lowe, however, imagined more than just the railroad: he envisioned a state-of-the-art observatory and a series of lavish mountaintop hotels.

The Mount Lowe Railway officially opened on July 4, 1893. Hundreds of dapper Californians crowded the base of the incline railroad, clutching parasols to shade themselves from the summer sun. The railway's specially made cars, known as "opera-box cars" for their three-tiered seats, were painted a bright white and were decked in red, white and blue garlands. The first car was reserved for the Pasadena City Band. As they slowly and noiselessly began the maiden ascent, they struck up the opening notes of the hymn "Nearer My God to Thee."

At the peak of Echo Mountain, a small, three-story hotel sat on a promontory overlooking the hills. The hotel, known as the Chalet, was impressive in its location and its grand vistas, but was not what Thaddeus Lowe so grandly envisioned; its plain, house-like appearance was not the type of elegance of which Lowe dreamed. Nevertheless, a handful of people immediately bought tickets to take the trip to the top and stay in the brand-new hotel. But intent on bringing European-style elegance to the
San Gabriels, Lowe again dipped into his personal finances, this time to bankroll the Echo Mountain House.

Completed in the fall of 1894, the Echo Mountain House was a marvel. Like Lowe's own residence, the four-story Victorian building was marked by a tall, cylindrical tower and capped by a metal dome and a huge American flag. The bright white exterior was marked by a long row of windows on each floor. At the building's entrance, two sweeping verandas looked off across the canyons and the valley. The interior of the hotel was extravagant, with detailed wood inlay, the finest floral-patterned carpet and handmade furniture throughout. There were seventy guest rooms, large areas for office space, a massive social hall and dining room, a souvenir shop, a Western Union office, a bowling alley, a billiard room, a barbershop and a shoeshine stand.

All of the buildings on the mountain, including the Chateau, were painted the same brilliant white. "The White City," as it was called, included the Echo Mountain House, a dance hall, a petting zoo, a post office, tennis courts and, to Lowe's scientific delight, an observatory. Visitors were lifted up the incline railway in the elegant opera-box cars known as the White Chariots. The trip was surely a surreal experience, the largely undeveloped land spreading out before the eager naturalists as they rose up the railway in the clouds to the palatial Echo Mountain House.

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At the corner of Lake Avenue and East Loma Alta Drive in Altadena, a huge wrought-iron gate marks the entrance to the Sam Merrill Trail. Flanked by masses of dried-out agave plants and pale green cacti, the trail follows a messy concrete path, and then quickly juts off into the dirt and up Echo Mountain.

The hike is on a perpetual incline, rising about 1,400 feet over two miles. The trail is well-maintained, allowing hikers free range across its singular path. But it is also quite thin, barely wide enough for two hikers to walk side by side. All along the trek, a series of switchbacks lead the visitors in a zigzag up the mountain.

Throughout Echo Mountain, there is a hushed swell of sound. Instead of the grinding brakes and rolling tires that resonate through Los Angeles, there is a stillness, a pure white noise that rushes over you like the sound of a seashell held to your ear. The air, weightless and clean, pours slowly across your face. On clear days, you can see through it to what seems like all of Southern California: the San Gabriel Valley, downtown Los Angeles, even the Port of Los Angeles. On others, the smog blocks out the sky like a thin, gray cataract.

At the mountain's peak, huge gears from the Mount Lowe Railway's powerhouse are tilted on their sides. A historical marker sits in front of them commemorating the designation of the site as a National Historical Place in 1993. But only a few feet of the railway remain among the pieces of shattered concrete and weeds. With the incline portion of the railway completely destroyed, the tracks at the peak look as if they travel off the edge of the mountain and on into the clouds.

Up the adjacent granite staircase is where the Echo Mountain House once stood. The site looks completely barren, like the grand hotel never even existed. Only pieces of the hotel's foundation remain, the crumbling bits of stone barely rising out of the dirt. Behind this rubble, cement fountains stand with their rusted pipes half-exposed. What once was the Echo Mountain House's huge reservoir is now just a gaping cement hole filled with piles of railroad equipment and the occasional water bottle or food wrapper.

For most, the ruins are a diversion. The mountain bikers, their orange and blue spandex shirts drenched in morning sweat, prop up their bikes and sit on the Echo Mountain House's old granite staircase. The veteran hikers, with sweatshirts tied around their waists and canteens hanging from their backpacks, read over the historical markers and remark to their friends that the site seems more overgrown and unkempt than they remember. Most of the visitors, though, are casual, in loose t-shirts and wide-brimmed visors or gardening hats. They clutch large water bottles and daypacks and spend just a few minutes at the site of the ruined hotel, enough to catch their breath, eat a protein bar and drink some water. On their way back down the mountain, they talk about business plans and friends that have found new love.

For Michael Patris, however, the hike is more than an exercise. Michael first explored the trail over a decade ago while helping a friend with his physical therapy after he was hit by a drunk driver. Michael noticed the steady grade rising up Echo Mountain. He saw the remnants of the incline railway and the tracks leading to nowhere. At the top of the mountain, he saw the rusting railroad equipment and the deteriorating foundation of Echo Mountain House. In his head, he could imagine how the grand building might have appeared. Now, though, it looked like some lost city of ruin. Intent on piecing together

the seeming mystery behind the site's destruction, Michael began making the hike once a week and immersing himself in the history of Thaddeus Lowe and the railway.

Michael Patris has been interested in history and antiques since he was a pre-teen and explains that he felt a natural affinity towards the Mount Lowe Railway. At 46, Michael, a former television producer, now works as a private fiduciary, dealing in estates and antiques. Over the years, he in effect became a fiduciary for the Lowe estate, tracking down information and people and artifacts. It was when Michael's knowledge of the site grew and grew and he began to be known as "the Mount Lowe guy," though, that he knew that he should turn his own obsession into something more. And he did: in 2000 he established the Mount Lowe Preservation Society, an organization dedicated to memorializing and documenting the place and the people behind it. As the gregarious and occasionally overzealous president of the Society, Michael has met with the heirs of Thaddeus Lowe and David Macpherson, organizing family reunions and simulated hot-air balloon rides. Michael spends "thousands and thousands" of dollars on the project, he claims, as well as countless hours poring over artifacts and documents. "It's something that spiraled out of control very quickly," he admits.

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Aided by the flowery diction and aggrandizing pomp of Thaddeus Lowe's publicist George Wharton James, the Echo Mountain House proved an immediate success. Indeed, the hotel became a major tourist attraction, bringing in visitors from all over the country. Among the hotel's most famous sights was its searchlight. At the time, Lowe's acquisition from the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition was the strongest searchlight ever constructed; its light could reportedly be seen from 150 miles at sea. Though Lowe originally intended the light to beam down weather signals to Los Angeles, it became a spectacle in and of itself, shining its focused light onto the Echo Mountain House and illuminating the White City for everyone in Los Angeles and Pasadena to see. George Wharton James also promoted the hotel by bombarding the local papers with public relations, routinely paying for advertisements in the
Los Angeles Times that extolled the "Health, Pleasure and Scenery" of the hotel. Other advertisements compared the Echo Mountain House to the best that Switzerland and Italy had to offer, albeit in an affordable, nearby locale. James even began his own publication, the Mount Lowe Echo, to fill readers in on the goings-on of the powerbrokers, such as Henry Ford and Chicago Tribune editor and Windy City mayor Joseph Medill, who visited the Echo Mountain House.

Lowe eventually pushed even further into the mountains and his own pockets. The so-called "Alpine Division" of the railroad began construction on the neighboring and eponymous Mount Lowe, where Lowe constructed a second hotel, the Alpine Tavern. Modeled after rustic European lodgings, the Alpine Tavern was subtly elegant when compared to the Echo Mountain House's overwhelming grandeur. But even with the seeming success of the Alpine Division in the mid-1890s, Lowe and the Mount Lowe Railway began to suffer serious financial hardships. Because of swelling operating costs and his own perpetual desire for bigger and greater additions, Lowe was forced to dispose

of his banking, ice manufacturing and gas interests. He also began taxing his own holdings and began taking mortgages on his home and other properties in Pasadena. Eventually, Lowe's creditors grew weary of his leadership and wrested control of the railway away from the 66-year-old balloonist. The reins of the railway were passed from one person to the next, eventually landing in the hands local railroad magnate Henry Huntington and his Pacific Electric Railway.

While the enraged Thaddeus Lowe sent out pamphlets claiming that his railway had been stolen, Huntington began performing major upgrades on its infrastructure and buildings. However, this couldn't prevent the later misfortunes of the Mount Lowe Railway and Echo Mountain House. Throughout the turn of the century, numerous natural disasters plagued the site. Floods and boulders repeatedly washed through Echo Mountain House's lower floors. Electrical storms struck the pavilion at the base of the incline. But on December 9th, 1905, a severe windstorm whipped up howling gusts, ripping the roof off of the White City's dance hall and sending it up into the air like a kite. Soon after the wind began flying across the mountaintop, fire somehow erupted in nearly every building on Echo Mountain: the Chalet, the dance hall and Echo Mountain House. The nighttime blaze was probably visible through much of Southern California, the flames leaping from the windows of Echo Mountain House and the rest of the White City. Although there were no casualties, the buildings burned to the ground, their ashes swept up into the air by the currents of the Earth's upper atmosphere. That was the end of Lowe's empire.

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Somewhere in Michael Patris' collection of documents and ephemera is a lock of Thaddeus Lowe's hair. Michael explains that the lock was cut in 1856 at the time of Lowe's marriage, signaling a stylistic change from Lowe's youthful ponytail to a shorter, more formal appearance. Michael sounds giddy as he discusses Lowe's lock of hair, as if he had been waiting to burst forth with talk of his treasure. He pauses, then boasts that he also has a pair of gloves worn by Thaddeus Lowe during a cordial ceremony with President Lincoln.

Michael's devotion to Thaddeus Lowe and the railway is at times overwhelming. Though he distances himself from the type of rabid fanatics that he refers to as "foamers," his enthusiasm is boundless. For this and other reasons, Michael and the Scenic Mount Lowe Railway Historical Committee, a separate preservation group that maintains the physical integrity of the site, have come to various disagreements. Both sides admit that they don't always see eye-to-eye, despite the fact that they seem to share similar desires and goals.

The difference, however, is that for Michael, the Mount Lowe Railway, the Echo Mountain House and Lowe himself are all part of Michael's own legacy. With no children, Michael admits that he and his wife have have essentially taken Thaddeus Lowe as their own, maintaining rosebushes at his grave, bringing his extended family into theirs and tracking down and spreading all the knowledge to be had of the forgotten man and his projects.

Routinely poring over his archival collections for lectures and research, Michael must often imagine the railway and the Echo Mountain House built anew. He pictures the hotel's refurbished exterior: its four-story frame rising tall against the mountaintops, its bright white paint reflecting the heavy California sun. Inside, the building's rooms are all restored: the decadent sitting room, the lavishly furnished sleeping quarters, even the understated dining hall – all are renewed to their former glory. But this is just a fantasy. Michael knows that the best he can do is reconstruct the Echo Mountain House in a museum and in his collections. And until then, it's left in his mind: its big, gaping windows, wide verandas and shining metal dome all rebuilt out of yellowing postcards and creased photographs.

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