

## Web Article Sample

### Thaddeus Lowe and the White City in the Sky

Hike-LosAngeles.com

Historical article to accompany Hike-LosAngeles' website trail guide to Echo Mountain

High on promontory above the town of Altadena, CA, there once was a dazzling Victorian resort known as The White City in the Sky. This 'city' was comprised of a 40-room chalet, astronomical observatory, zoo, dormitories, dance hall, bowling alley, tennis courts, picnic areas, machine shops and, the jewel of the city, the palatial 70-room Echo Mountain House. The entire complex of buildings was painted a brilliant white to reflect the southern California sun. Situated as it was at the tip of Echo Mountain, the resort could be seen glowing against the backdrop of the San Gabriel Mountains (then called the Sierra Madre Mountains) from downtown Los Angeles, some 13 miles distant. The resort was part of a series of hotels and taverns built to service the Mount Lowe Railway.

The railway was the dream project of Professor Thaddeus Lowe and his engineer partner, David J Macpherson. At the time of the project's undertaking, Professor Lowe had retired to southern California after having already lived a rather adventurous life. Entering this world in August of 1832, Lowe was one of five children born to Clovis and Alpha Lowe of Jefferson Mills, NH. Around the age of 10, Lowe's mother passed away and his father remarried to Mary Randall and, by some estimates, sired another 7 children. Unable to support such a large brood, Lowe's father boarded the young boy with a nearby farm. Unhappy with what was essentially an indentured servitude, Thaddeus ran away at the age of 14 to join his older brother in Boston where he began work as a shoe cutter.

While recovering from an illness at age 18, Lowe attended a travelling road show demonstrating the uses of lighter-than-air gases led by Professor Reginald Dinkelhoff. Fascinated by the science, Lowe joined the show as Dinkelhoff's assistant and 2 years later bought the show when Dinkelhoff retired. Within five years, Lowe, using his knowledge of lighter-than-air gases, had become one of America's premiere balloonists, creating a lucrative business giving balloon rides at state and county fairs. During one of his lecture-exhibitions, Lowe met a 19-year old Parisian actress, Leotine Augustine Gaschon. One week later on February 14, 1855, the pair were married. Over the course of their marriage Leotine would give her husband ten children, seven boys and three girls.

In 1859, Lowe constructed a massive 103-foot diameter balloon named the City of New York with the intent of making a transatlantic flight. The balloon, later renamed the Great Western, made several successful test flights, but before the transatlantic voyage could be undertaken, the American Civil War broke out. Two days after the state of Virginia seceded from the Union, Lowe attempted to reach the eastern seaboard from Cincinnati in the balloon Enterprise. Unfortunately for Lowe, the balloon went off course and he landed in Unionville, SC where he was promptly taken prisoner as a Yankee spy by Confederate forces. After some careful negotiation where Lowe pleaded his case as a man of science, the professor and his balloon were released.

The incident opened up new possibilities for Lowe and in July of 1861, he offered to demonstrate the surveillance capabilities of his balloon for President Abraham Lincoln. Floating 500' above the White House Lowe sent the first aerial dispatch by telegraph. Lincoln and his war department seized upon the idea of aerial surveillance and real-time troop movements relayed to commanders in the field. Lowe was given the go-ahead, and he flew in battle for the first time during the First Battle of Bull Run. So impressive was his flight that Lincoln ordered the formation of the Union Army Balloon Corps with Lowe named as Chief Aeronaut. Lowe would eventually command seven balloons with the corps, even launching them from a converted coal barge, effectively creating America's first aircraft carrier. During his time with the Union Army, Lowe contracted malaria, an affliction that would bother him for the remainder of his life.

Following the war, Lowe moved to Norristown, PA. He continued experimenting with hydrogen and acquired 200 patents for his inventions. His most successful enterprise was a water gas process that generated large quantities of enriched hydrogen for heating and lighting, earning him a fortune in the process. In 1887, Lowe retired to Pasadena, CA with the hopes the dry climate would ease the lingering ailments from his bout with malaria. It was there he met the engineer David Macpherson. With Macpherson's engineering skills and Lowe's financial resources, the two hoped to create a rail line that would ride the crest of the San Gabriel Mountains to Mount Wilson. Unfortunately, the pair were unable to obtain all the necessary rights-of-way and so rerouted their planned railway to Oak Mountain (later named Mount Lowe) via the Echo Mountain promontory above Altadena.

The first section of rail began service on Independence Day of 1893. It ran from Lake and Calaveras in Altadena to Rubio Pavilion, a 12-room hotel at the entrance of Rubio Canyon. Passengers could then transfer to a funicular incline railway climbing the canyon to Echo Mountain. In 1894, the grand Echo Mountain House Victorian resort was opened, and in 1896, the final leg of the railway was completed to the Ye Alpine Tavern in Grand Canyon at the base of Mount Lowe. In all, there were nearly 7 miles of track.

The Echo Mountain house was a grand and stately structure capped with an imposing dome. A large porch for socializing ran along the front and two wings of the building, providing spectacular views of Pasadena, the San Gabriel Valley and even Catalina Island 65 miles away. The interior of the hotel was completed with natural wood and held a curio shop, a Western Union office, billiard room, shoeshine stand and barbershop among other amenities. To the left and right of the domed lobby were two wings of rooms for guests, while to the rear of the lobby was a formal dining room with views of Castle Canyon and Mount Lowe. Atop the incline railway powerhouse located in front of the resort, a 3-million candlepower searchlight had been installed that could be seen up to 50 miles at sea. Lowe's publicist, George Wharton James, took that a step further and claimed he could read his newspaper from the beam's power shining through his window on Catalina Island. On the ridge behind Echo Mountain House was an astronomical observatory featuring a 16" telescope. Visitors could spend their days playing tennis, bowling, taking mule rides into the mountains or listening to their voices echo across Castle Canyon on several echo-phones installed along the rim of the canyon. At night there was a white-linen dinner service prepared on dishes etched with the resorts logo followed by dancing. The luxuriousness and sheer spectacle of the resort along with the incredible scenery quickly made the White City the top honeymoon destination in America. Unfortunately, the cost to construct and maintain the railway and the hotels proved to be too much for Lowe and the project fell into receivership. In 1899, only six years after it opened, the professor lost everything except for title to the observatory. But that was only the beginning of the end for the White City.

In 1900, a kitchen fire destroyed the Echo Mountain House, leaving only the foundation in its wake. The building had not been properly insured and thus was never rebuilt. In 1905, a second fire destroyed all the remaining buildings with the exception of the observatory. The incline railway powerhouse was rebuilt in 1906, but the rest of the property on Echo Mountain was left in ruins. In 1909, a flash flood destroyed the Rubio Pavilion hotel at the bottom of the funicular incline railway. The observatory held on until 1928 when a particularly strong Santa Ana wind blew the building down. The curator managed to escape moments before the collapse, taking the expensive telescope with him. Despite the catastrophes, the railway continued to operate under various owners, hauling passengers to the Mount Lowe Tavern (the renamed Ye Alpine Tavern) at Mount Lowe until 1936 when the tavern also succumbed to fire. The railway was now a line without a destination. As such, the railroad's booster club organized one final excursion, and in December of 1937, the Mount Lowe Railway made its last public trek past the remains of the White City to the burnt ruins of the Mount Lowe Tavern. In March of the following year, a three-day thunderstorm washed the railroad itself from the mountain. What little remained of the buildings that once graced the promontory of Echo Mountain was declared a hazardous nuisance and blasted into history with dynamite by the US Forest Service between 1959 and 1962.

Today, all that remains of Professor Lowe's dream are some foundations marking the location of the Echo Mountain House and its periphery buildings. The grip and guide wheels from the funicular powerhouse lay trailside, rusting in the bright California sun. On the rim of Castle Canyon, a replica echo-phone has been installed, allowing hikers to hear their voices reverberating across the canyon as tourists did more than 100 years ago.

The easiest way to reach the ruins of the White City is via the Sam Merrill Trail located at the intersection on Lake Avenue and East Loma Alta Drive in Altadena, CA. For trail details, click [here](#).