

COLORADO HISTORY 1803- 1862
White House Ranch

Dates of Some Significant Events

1803	Louisiana Purchase (cost approximately 3¢ an acre)
1804	Lewis & Clark Expedition (not through Colorado)
1806	Pike Expedition
1820	Major Long's Expedition
1820 - 1840	Era of the Fur Trapper (Mountain Men) Bents Fort built in 1833.
1842 - 1845	John Fremont made three expeditions West (Pathfinder of the West)
1846	War with Mexico (Col. Kearny captured Sante Fe)
1848	Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo All of Colorado now part of U.S.
1849	Gold found in California
1854	Gunnison, Fremont surveys for transcontinental railroad
1858	Gold found in Colorado (Cherry Creek near Denver)
1859	Colorado City and Denver founded
1861	Colorado Territory formed (Colorado City Territorial Capital)

Colorado Springs Area

18 - 1821	Spanish Territory
1821- 1848	Mexican Territory (Texas Claim 1836- 1848)
1848- 1854	Unorganized U.S. Territory
1854- 1861	Kansas Territory
1861	Colorado Territory

After the United States acquired part of Colorado from the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the government started sending out military expeditions to explore the new territory. Lewis and Clark are the most famous explorers of the time, but did not pass through Colorado. Lt. Pike and Major Long did explore the area, but both of them supported the "Great American Desert" myth (this was for the plains East of the Rockies).

Pike tried to climb Pikes Peak in 1806, but came to the conclusion that "no human being could have ascended to its pinical (sic)" His men wore only light cotton overalls, and the snow was waist deep. Pike was the first to describe the "great peak", and later it was named for him. (Later to become a brigadier general, Pike died in the War of 1812, long before the cry "Pikes Peak or Bust" was heard.)

Major Long's expedition followed in 1820, and Dr. Edwin James and several others in Long's party were the first to climb Pikes Peak. Long felt that the land East of the Rockies would serve as a barrier to expansion- and labeled it the "Great American Desert". He expanded on Pike's earlier pessimistic predictions that the "vast plains...may become in time equally celebrated as the sandy desarts (sic) of Africa; for I saw my route, in various places, tracts of many leagues, where the wind had thrown up the sand, in all the fanciful forms of the ocean's rolling waves, and on which not a speck of vegetable matter existed." Long added that the whole region was "uninhabitable by a people depending on agriculture" for a livelihood; the area would much better "remain the unmolested haunt of the native hunter, the bison, and the jackall." Even textbooks of the time labeled the Great Plains as the "American Desert"- and it took many years to change this myth.¹

In time, peoples attitudes did change, however. Stories of the abundant game and scenic beauty filtered back from the mountain men and other early travelers. John Fremont made three expeditions West between 1842 and 1845, and was labeled the "Pathfinder of the West". Most importantly, Fremont's journal and writings destroyed the "Great American Desert" idea. Fremont minimized the regions shortcomings and emphasized the presence of rich arable soil, sparkling streams and lush grasses.² Also at this time many believed the "rain follows the plow" theory. This said

that as the population increases, the amount of moisture will increase. The expression of the Mexicans "that the Americans bring rain with them" aided the growth of this unfounded idea.³

Then in 1849, gold was found in California, and thousands of people crossed the plains to strike it rich. Gold was soon after found in Colorado in 1858, and a mass exodus followed along with the railroad and growing new towns and cities.

The 1858 Gold Strike

When gold was found in Colorado in 1858, a recession was going on back East, and the entire nation was waiting for hopeful news. Following the strike, the words "Pikes Peak or Bust" was heard everywhere, and the largest migration of people ever known in United States history followed. About 2000 people came out in 1858, and waited out the winter. Then in 1859 around 150,000 people headed West. "People poured out to the gold-fields in every conceivable conveyance from wagons to small carts: some were on horseback, some walked, some even pushed wheelbarrows. Most had no idea of the length or the rigors of the trip or how they would mine gold."⁴

The Overland Trail (Platte River), the Smokey Hill, and the Arkansas were the three routes followed West, although the main route was the Overland Trail (later called "the finest natural highway in the world"). The fifty-niners, like most amateurs, traveled overloaded. This caused wagon wheels to become stuck in prairie sand and mud, putting a strain on animal and wagon. As in 1849, the trail was littered with camping equipment, iron stoves, trunks of clothes, and dead horses and oxen. All one could really afford to carry was firearms, tools, a few personal possessions, food, and water and fodder for livestock (for crossing arid stretches).⁵ The fare for the trip by stage coach to Denver was \$100.⁶

Both Denver and Colorado City were founded in 1859, and competed for the gold-seekers business. When gold was found in South Park in August 1859, Colorado City became a funnel of humanity since it sat at the foot of Ute Pass- the only route to South Park. Later, in 1861, a road was built from Denver to South Park, and Colorado City's population and prestige went on the decline.

Most people found upon arriving in Colorado that the gold was not nearly as abundant as they had been led to believe. Many headed back East in the late summer and fall of 1859 with "Busted, by God" on their wagons, and words of discouragement replaced the previous optimism. The passage of the Homestead Act in 1862 did provide some with a means of survival in the new Colorado Territory.

The Indians in Colorado were pretty friendly in the early days of the territory (no uprisings until 1864). The Utes lived in the mountains, while the Arapahoe and Cheyenne lived on the plains. It was not until their food supply (mainly the buffalo) started dwindling, and the introduction of alcohol and disease that the Indians became restless. Even then, only a few of the tribes caused any trouble.

Crossing the Plains

From the "Great American Desert" to Fremont's "Rose garden", peoples impressions of the Great Plains varied quite a bit. In general, it was felt that the abundance of wildlife would never run out. A lot of times animals as the buffalo were killed for sport or to just use a small portion- as the buffalo's tongue. Their meat was left to rot on the plain. People did starve on the plains though, especially if they followed a route that offered little water (as the Smokey Hills route). Timber was often hard to find, and travelers often used "buffalo chips" to make fires.

Speaking of the Overland Trail, it was said that buffalo "were not often out of sight". Once in awhile a stampede was encountered- some as large as a quarter of a mile wide, and lasting 5 to 6 hours.⁶

Major Long in his crossing of the plains wrote of seeing "immense herds of bison blackening the whole country and vast numbers of horses". They found an abundance of wildflowers, wild game, and birds, including antelope, wolves, bison, and deer. He noted anthills standing twelve to eighteen inches high.⁷ Fremont noted an abundance of buffalo, deer, antelope, and elk.

The reality of a prairie fire or rapid changes in weather was a real threat to the early travelers to Colorado. Fremont mentions the last

days of April being so hot one year that men shed their shirts to work. A few days later, on May 1st, a storm burst so rapidly that the men barely had time to set up camp. The snow, high winds, and zero weather were to last for more than two weeks, and leave waist deep snow and enormous drifts. The animals that had been so abundant before the storm, were reduced to carcasses.⁸

Travelers on the Overland Trail found small settlements and stage stops started as time passed by. Some of the folks along the trail got so tired of constant questioning, that they put up signs as the following; (It was said that during the Spring and Summer of 1859, a quarter of the distance of the Overland Trail was occupied by wagons at any time.)

JUST LOOKA HERE

Don't ask any questions, for God's sake, for here they are all answered:

"How far are we from Kearney?"

"Just 88 miles."

"Any good water in?"

"Not a damned drop. Good spring 80 rods beyond, on the road, on the right-hand side."

"Any wood at Cottonwood Springs?"

"No, sir, not a damned bit."

"Are you a married man?"

"No sir E."

"Don't you want a wife?"

"Well, wouldn't object."

"How old are you?"

"None of your damned business." ⁹

In the Mountains

The gold seekers found the Rockies to be a paradise of sorts- especially in the Spring and Summer. But winter was a severe time, and many perished because they weren't prepared for the large amounts of snow, chilling winds, and sub-zero temperatures. Life in the mining camps was not easy, especially if one was use to a cultured life. Often staking a claim required guarding 24 hours a day so no one claim jumped it.

Wild animals were fairly easy to find- if one knew where to look. Pike in his exploration mentioned herds of deer to innumerable to count.¹⁰

Bear, bighorn sheep, moose, beaver, and elk are just a few of the animals found in the mountains. Buffalo were found in the lower elevations, but were not as many in number as those on the plains.

Development to 1862

By 1862 Colorado was rapidly becoming linked to the rest of the United States. Several stage lines ran to Denver, Colorado City, and on to Salt Lake City. The Pony Express had operated from 1860 to 1861, then the Pacific Telegraph had replaced it in 1861 (completed to California on October 24, 1861). A plan for a transcontinental railroad was stalled by the Civil War, but still was being pondered. In 1861 Colorado became a territory in its own right, but statehood would not follow until many years later.

References

- 1 a colorado history by Carl Ubbelohde, Maxine Benson, and Duane Smith pg. 29
- 2 The Trailblazers Time-Life Series Books pg. 162
- 3 Ibid, pg. 191
- 4 Forgotten People, A History of the South Platte Trail
by Nell Brown Propst pg. 27-26
- 5 The Forty-Niners Time-Life Series Book pg. 55
- 6 Propst, op. cit., pg. 27, 36
- 7 Ibid, pg. 4
- 8 Ibid, pg. 20
- 9 Ibid, pg. 35
- 10 Pike in Colorado By Carrol Joe Carter pg. 42
Newport in the Rockies by Marshall Sprague