

Remember When? — An Account Of Early Days in Chaffee County

By MRS. BESSIE SHEWALTER

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However, we can let our imagination stretch back to some two hundred years ago when Chaffee County was a wilderness, land covered with cedars, pines, spruce and wild grass. Here roamed deer, elk, mountain sheep, antelope and even buffalo. Wild turkey were to be seen and the cold streams were filled with trout.

Then in 1779, Juan Bautista De Anza led a small band of adventurous Spaniards and Indians from Santa Fe by way of Poncha Pass, or Punche Pass as it was called then, down thru Chaffee County and to the Arkansas River. These were the first white men to view this valley of the upper Arkansas. But we can see them, some two hundred Spaniards in their striking costumes, heavy silver trappings on their saddles.

Then came Pike in 1806 with his buckskin clad adventurers, braving many hardships. Pike spent Christmas Day where the old Sneddon home ranch now stands. The party feasted on eight buffalo killed in the Brown's Canon region. In 1843-44 came Fremont on one of his expeditions.

This was really a paradise for the Indians who made this part of the country their summer hunting grounds. Colorow and his band were here every summer until the government compelled them to remain on the reservation. At this time the Indians were friendly to the white men and many of the old settlers remember such Indians as Ouray and Chipeta, Shavano, Piah, Curricanti and Colorow.

In 1886 an important Indian battle took place just north of Salida and a number of Indians were killed.

In 1859 came the daring and tireless prospector making his way to the Arkansas River where he found in the sands and gravel of the river banks, the glittering gold for which he was searching. The first real efforts at mining were made about four miles south of Granite on Kelly's Bar about 1860. This same year H. A. W. Tabor and S. B. Kellogg took up claims at the mouth of Cache Creek, and began placer mining. With Tabor was his wife, Augusta. I often wonder why we do not hear more of her. She seems to have been a woman of intelligence, business ability and rare judgment. She was one of the first white women in this county, and remained about a month before moving to California Gulch. In an interview she stated that this was a beautiful country. There were a good many Indians around, but they were friendly and were not feared altho they were a thieving people and unpleasant to have around. Mrs. Tabor cared for the sick and injured, often helping to remove shot from the wounded, and setting fractures. Even at that time men disliked to cook for themselves and she had as many boarders as she could cook for. She also helped to wash the sands for gold dust.

Georgia Bar about two miles below Granite, was discovered by a party from Georgia, but was afterwards sold to Peter Fries and Chris Kirsh.

Duing the years 1867-69 hordes of grasshoppers came thru here and destroyed all the crops so that the people were forced to wash the river sand for gold that they might make a living.

The first ranching was done by Frank Mayol in 1862 near Riverside. He sold potatoes for fifty

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cents a pound and claims to have realized \$5,000 on his first year's crop. Shortly after this other ranches were taken up. Mr. and Mrs. John McPherson, grandparents of Arthur and Bailey Hutchinson, John Burnett, father of Alfred Burnett, Charles Nachtrieb, Joseph Hutchinson, Nate Rich, J. E. Gorrell, and O. E. Harrington were some of the early ranchers in these parts.

On the South Arkansas John Tenassee, an Italian, took up a ranch and constructed the first ditch from the Little River. This ditch still bears his name. His place was later sold to Noah Bear and later became the Swallow ranch.

School districts were organized as early as 1866. The earliest schools were located at Granite, Poncha and Centerville.

Produce and materials were brought in by freighters using horse drawn wagons and sometimes oxen. Finished lumber was shipped in, altho most of the houses were made of log and later some stone was used.

About 1868 Charles Nachtrieb built a saw mill and grist mill on Chalk Creek, which was run by water power. The old building is still standing, but the water wheel is gone. Not far from Chaffee County, but in Park County, are the old salt works where the early settlers obtained salt.

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The older settlers were sometimes hard on newcomers. A newcomer by the name of Gibbs, had trouble with a Mr. Harrington over irrigating water. That night the out buildings on the Harrington ranch began to burn. When Mr. Harrington started to put out the fires, he was shot and killed. Gibbs was accused of the murder, but was freed by the court. However, a committee formed, went to his place at night and attempted to set fire to his home to force him out. He shot into the group and killed one or two of the Boon family. A third man was killed, but it is believed he was accidentally killed by a member of the Committee. Gibbs escaped and left the country. When the Boons were buried, the funeral was described as "truly military" as the men all stood around with firearms ready for action in case of more trouble. Later, in connection with this same case, young Judge Dyer was killed in the Court room at Granite by an unknown assailant, who was never caught and never identified.

At this time Chaffee County was part of Lake County and extended to the Utah line. A Court House was erected in Granite in 1861

The unprecedented growth of Leadville during the year of 1878 caused a demand for a new county to be formed. Lake County was formed from the north end and the southern part became Chaffee County, named after Jerome Chaffee. The first appointed officers were, County Commissioners James P. True, Griffith Evans and J. E. Cole; County Judge, Julius S. Hughes; Clerk and Recorder, George Leonhardy; Treasurer, Matt Johnson; and Sheriff, John Mear.

It was not until 1879 that a church was built in the County. However, religious services were held in the homes, and Father Dyer, an itinerant minister used to come through here and often preached in the saloons.

Cache Creek was the first settlement of any note and at one time had a population of 300. Granite, the second settlement was a busy place, being the county seat. It had gold mining stamp mills and was called a wide-open town, having saloons, gambling and honky-tonks. At one time about 600 persons lived here. Mining was important in the Cotton Creek region. The Gunnison Toll road passed up this valley of the North branch of the Cottonwood, and crossed the range into Gunnison County.

Buena Vista became an incorporated town in 1879. Because of the beautiful view, the town was given the Spanish name, Buena Vista. At one time three railroads ran into the town. It had a smelter and sampling works, three churches and a \$12,000 school. This building is still standing, but not used as a school. The South Park railroad went to Gunnison by way of Alpine, St. Elmo, Romley and Hancock.

In 1880 it was voted to move the County Seat. Salida received 147 votes, Nathrop 800 votes, Granite 67 and Buena Vista 1,100. However, something seemed not satisfactory about the voting and the County Seat was not moved at once. One night a flat car and engine arrived in Granite and some men removed all the records from the Court House and took them to Buena Vista, where a Court House was built.

Chaffee County has many ghost towns. Going up Clear Creek we have Winfield and Vicksburg where we see neat log houses standing along carefully laid streets. Then going up Chalk Creek we follow the old railroad bed and find Hortense, Alpine, Iron City, St. Elmo, Romley and Hancock. Again we find the remains of well built houses, streets, water systems, mines, remains of smelters, stores, schools, saloons and other buildings. Each of these places had thriving newspapers. Nathrop was a thriving place,

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named after its early settler, Charles Nachtrieb.

With the building of the railroad, Poncha Springs became quite a town and at one time had about 2000 persons. They had a large hotel, a bank, a newspaper, a library and a good school.

Maysville was a thriving little town; also Garfield and Monarch, and Arborville. In Weldon Gulch (at the foot of Shavano) was another mining community that became a ghost town. Then there is Turret with its fast disappearing buildings. These old ghost towns bring a feeling of sadness when we think of the busy life once lived there and now nothing but decay and ruin.

The early settlers began to make use of the hot springs in the county. Cottonwood Springs were located in a beautiful place. Here was built a large hotel and sanitarium, one of the best in the state. It was operated by the Rev. J. A. Adams and his wife, a practicing physician of thorough education, rare ability, and long experience. Then there were the Mt. Princeton Springs, the Hortense Springs and the Heywood Springs.

John McPherson established the first Post Office in the County and named it Helena after his wife Helen.

J. G. Ehrhart, father of Tom Ehrhart, was an early day settler and was one of the first representatives from this county.

Joseph Mero was an early settler in Granite.

Early advertisers in Salida papers were G. F. Bateman, hardware store; Hawkins House and Grand Hotel; G. D. Moll, tobacco store, Roller & Twitchell, Furniture and undertaker; Peter Mulvany, wholesaler; M. M. French, Drugs; R. S. Hallock, and R. F. Parsons, Physicians and surgeons, Barlow & Sanderson, Stage Coach.

The Sterling Jones Ranch just south of Salida was the stage station, and part of the old barn is still standing.

The old Burnett ranch at Poncha was used as a government store house for provisions for the Indians and some of the old buildings are still standing. Here the Utes would come to receive their allotments and were often issued very foolish things, such as sewing thimbles for the squaws, who did not know how to use them; pants for the bucks who immediately cut out the seats. Barrels of brown sugar were opened and the squaws joyously helped themselves.

One day Chief Colorow brought his squaw to see Mrs. Hutchinson. She was dressed for the occasion, wearing a white night cap, her blanket wrapped around her, over which she had placed a pair of old fashioned wire hoops.

Mary Nash Mear of Buena Vista came to this county in 1866. Her family came over Trout Creek Pass and settled on a ranch near Centerville. They used to drive to the hot springs for baths. Supplies were hauled in from Fairplay and flour cost \$50 per hundred pounds,

coffee and sugar \$2.00 per pound and calico 45 cents a yard. Wild meat was used for food.

The men's chief amusement at this time was horse racing with small but powerful ponies.

While living at Granite, Mrs. Mear remembered the family driving to a dance in South Arkansas, (now Salida), a distance of fifty miles. It took two and one half days each way and the dance lasted two days and nights. There was plenty of food and drink. Music was made by fiddles and mouth-harps. There were square dances, Virginia reels and so on.

Later we had bands that played for dances. Well known were the St. Elmo Band and Billings Tunnel Band.

Dances became elaborate affairs and were called balls. We had the two step, the waltz, the schotische, the rye waltz, the polka and other dances. Every ball opened with a grand march. Elaborate programs were printed and usually, at this time there were more men than women and the programs were soon filled.

These were the days of cold, snowy winters and sleigh riding was quite a pastime. There were parties in the school houses in the country. It was the day of the leg of mutton sleeves and the bustle.

In the early eighties Poncha was a thriving town. It was reached by stage coach from Canon City, and many wealthy easterners built homes there. Many more came after the railroad was built through Poncha. Among those who lived in or near Poncha were the McRuders of Civil War fame; Henry Van Kleeck, Miss Ballistier, (later Mrs. Rudyard Kipling,) and her brother, visited the Van Kleecks one summer and Mr. Kipling who knew Miss Ballistier, spent considerable time there. Mr. Kipling also lived in Salida for a while in a house that used to stand at Third and E. While here he wrote a short novel — the setting around Salida, which he called "Topaz." At that time there were quite a few English people living here and they spent much time horseback riding in fashionable clothes.

It was English capital that built the old Windsor Hotel in Denver. Much of the mining in Colorado was sponsored by Englishmen,

many of whom came to Colorado and could find no place to stay. This building was patterned after Windsor Castle and was built in 1882. This winter I attended a meeting of Colorado poets that was held in the old ballroom. Here I met Mrs. Robertson, a well known Colorado poet, who used to live in Salida. Also present was Dr. Julia May Courtney, now blind. She is also well known for her poetry. She taught in the Salida Schools in 1895 and 1896 and was known then as Julia May Harper.

And now the old west has gone—days of wild living, rich mining camps and lavish spending. It is replaced with a less showy life of farming, industry and trade.

Most of the material in the article has been copied from old stories of Chaffee County and may not always be accurate in historic date.
