

Apex Park History

For 10,000 years, hunter-gatherers migrated through the Front Range area, wintering in Jefferson County's Hogback Valley. From 12,000 to 7,000 years ago, Paleoindians followed wildlife and ripening vegetation from the plains to progressively higher elevations as far away as South, Middle and North Parks, and then wintered in the Hogback Valley before beginning their annual cycle again.

From 7,000 to about 2,000 years ago, semi-nomadic Archaic Indians settled in camps along the foothills, occupying open ridges, valleys and shelters among rock outcrops. They chose locations offering a reliable water source, shelter, and diverse of plant and animal resources.

From 2,000 to 200 years ago Plains Ceramic Stage people were the first to use bow and arrows and pottery. The Foothills region provided hunting grounds for multiple tribes, and the Hogback Valley area continued to be used for winter camps and seasonal meeting grounds.

The California gold rush of 1849 brought tens of thousands of men west. Many prospected on their way through Colorado, and some decided to stay. Thus began the boom and bust pattern of Colorado's mining history. After the easily worked deposits were mined out, the miners moved to the next promising camp. They were generally limited to "placer mining," washing the heavier gold from the gravel in a sluice box.

Finding "mining the miners" brought more wealth than prospecting for rare gold strikes, entrepreneurs began building toll roads to the gold-mining camps. They founded rough supply towns along their toll roads, including Arapahoe City, Golden Gate City, Boulder City, Golden City, Mount Vernon, Bradford City, Piedmont and Apex. A *Rocky Mountain News* article from July, 1861, reported a confessed horse thief hanging from a tree near the Apex road — the local people "preferred that his trial should cost nothing."

In October, 1861, the Colorado territorial legislature granted an act to incorporate the "Apex and Gregory Wagon Road." It ran from Cold Spring Ranch (near Camp George West) through Apex, over the summit of Lookout Mountain, down to the mouth of Clear Creek and on to the Gregory and Russell diggings. It became one of the primary arteries bringing supplies and people to the thriving Gregory and Russell diggings, later known as Central City and Black Hawk. "Governor" Robert W. Steele promoted Apex and its toll road. In 1864 a stone stagecoach stop and tavern was built.

Apex thrived for a decade, but, eventually, the prosperous business community of Golden City eclipsed nearby communities. The extension of the Colorado Central Railroad from Golden to Central City, Black Hawk, Georgetown, and Silver Plume in the 1870's was a death knell to local toll roads. Towns whose existence depended on the toll roads began to dry up and blow away. Floods in 1878 and 1879 heavily damaged toll roads and made their profitability even more marginal. In 1880 Jefferson County Commissioners decided to repair nearby Mount Vernon Toll Road and operate it as a free thoroughfare, the final blow to Apex Road.

Apex residents solicited funding for a railroad from Apex to Central City, but the "paper railroad," the Apex & Western, was never built. At some point in the 1880's or 1890's, brick kilns were constructed to process limestone into lime for use as fertilizer and in making Portland cement.

In 1893, fire destroyed the home of James Binder, the “Mayor” of Apex. *The Denver Republican* newspaper noted, “With its destruction is removed the last remnant of the little town of Apex, quite a thriving settlement in pioneer days.”

In 1957, Hathaway Investment Corporation launched stock in “Magic Mountain, Inc.,” promising a western theme park at the old Apex site that would rival the newly opened Disneyland in Anaheim, California. Plans featured a frontier village, a storybook-land for children and other entertainment facilities. Slated to open by June, 1958, financial difficulties plagued the project and, in the fall of 1959, a scaled down version of the park opened on weekends only. Later that year, Magic Mountain entered bankruptcy, affecting 12,000 Colorado investors.

During 1959 and 1960 Denver natives, Cynthia Irwin-Williams and her brother, Henry Irwin, from Harvard University, undertook a major archaeological excavation. Their “Magic Mountain” site, named for the property’s owners, became one of Colorado’s best know prehistoric archaeological sites. Magic Mountain formed the basis for Cynthia Irwin-Williams’ doctoral dissertation. The pair wrote a monograph, which was published by the Denver Museum of Natural History in 1966. Since its publication, Magic Mountain has served as a cornerstone for virtually all important archaeological research in the Colorado Front Range, while providing a basis for comparison and contrast of data from hundreds of other sites.

Magic Mountain’s importance comes, in part, from its density and diversity of cultural artifacts. Also, the Irwins attempted to age the deposits through correlation with known geological sediments, using detailed artifact types to distinguish cultures both vertically and horizontally, and to define interregional relationships through comparison of specific artifact types.

The rich and diverse cultural artifacts from Magic Mountain represent various domestic, culinary and manufacturing tasks typically performed at residential bases. Its ceramic artifacts are primarily cord-marked pottery of the Ceramic stage of the Western High Plains.

Later excavations in 1994 and 1996 exposed a massive dry-laid rock wall in the deepest portion of the excavated pit. Directly overlying the rock wall is an evidently later structure distinguished by a unique tamped sandstone floor and associated rock wall rubble. The effort required to construct such features suggests extended periods of seasonal occupation with possible re-use of the site through time.

In 1969 Steven Arnold purchased the Magic Mountain property, planning extensive residential development. Instead, in 1971, he opened Heritage Square, a replica Old West town with specialty shops in Victorian-style buildings and an Opera House offering melodramas and musical reviews. The Heritage Square parking lot buried the site that once was Apex.

Much of the area surrounding Heritage Square was purchased by Jefferson County Open Space in the fall of 1974, with additional areas being added since then through purchase and donation.