

## Centennial Cone Park Historical Background

Centennial Cone Park sits atop the foothills overlooking the Front Range and the adjacent eastern plains, an area repeatedly folded, faulted, uplifted, and eroded to create a dramatic backdrop for both the prehistoric and historic uses of the area. 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, west of the Front Range, and then wintered at lower elevations 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 combination of water, shelter, diversity of plant and animal resources, and unobstructed views.

The Plains Ceramic Stage began nearly 2,000 years ago and lasted until approximately 200 years ago, the first native people to use of pottery and the bow and arrow. As a towering landscape feature with convenient rock overhangs and shelters nearby, Centennial Cone was a magnet for early hunter-gatherer people traveling through the Clear Creek Canyon corridor.

Centennial Cone served as a natural landmark and apparently as a center for religious ceremonies for these native people. Local resident Carla Swan Coleman has recounted stories her mother told her about sunrise ceremonies on Centennial Cone held by the Arapaho or Cheyenne, and of evening farewell ceremonies by torchlight. A travois trail long-used by the Arapaho people in their travels from the plains to the mountains and back can clearly be seen crossing several hills in the Centennial Cone property.

From the earliest days of our country's settlement, the west has exerted a pull on the American spirit. By the 1850s, the Louisiana Purchase and other huge land acquisitions by the government had created the continental United States. The country's seemingly limitless expanses strengthened the public's conviction that all this land rightfully belonged to the people.

The Homestead Act of 1862, signed into law by President Lincoln, opened up much of the West for settlement, allowing many people to own land for the first time. Western territories, such as Colorado, were measured into square mile sections and further divided into "quarter sections," or 160-acre lots (1/2 mile squares). Any citizen who was the head of a family or 21 years of age, who had never taken up arms against the government, was entitled to 160 free acres of land. For an \$18 filing fee, the homesteader could own a piece of America. Homesteaders were required to "improve" their plot with a dwelling and grow crops; after five years, if the original filer was still on the land, it was his property, free and clear.

Settlers were drawn to the Great American Desert by "broad-sides" (one-sided fliers) from railroad companies and the United States government advertising "Millions of Acres" of free and fertile land. At the same time, the unusually rainy climatic period of the 1870s and early 1880s made the land appear more inviting to potential settlers than it really was.

Settlement increased rapidly during the 1870s, but by the 1890s, after years of drought, grasshopper plague, and other hardships, tens of thousands of people abandoned

their homesteads and moved on to new adventures. The Homestead Act's lenient terms proved the undoing of many settlers who did not own equipment and knew nothing about farming.

The quarter sections were too small to support settlers west of the 100th meridian, where water scarcity reduced yields. Timber was also scarce, so settlers built homes of sod to withstand hailstorms, drought, prairie fires, blizzards and relentless wind. From 1874 to 1877, swarms of locusts darkened the skies and consuming everything in sight, including leather boots. Cattlemen resisted the dividing up of the open range by farmers with their miles of barbed wire. While Indian attacks were rare, pioneer families kept the peace by giving visiting Indians food and goods. Farmers faced heavy debt, lack of cash, expensive rail transportation and grain storage, and market fluctuations.

Though never the paradise described in popular myth, the plains became home to settlers able to cope with hardship and adversity. Searching for economic and social freedom, thousands of former slaves and their families left the South between 1879 and 1881, joining the mass migration of Americans seeking homesteads in the West. African Americans who moved from southern states to Kansas after Reconstruction became known as "Exodusters." This "exodus" from the South occurred largely between 1879 and 1881, beginning at the Mississippi River, seen by many as a symbolic "Red Sea" that, when crossed, would lead to freedom. The Exodusters founded close to 20 African American towns in Kansas, while others moved on to Nebraska, Colorado, and Oklahoma. Local tradition has it that an African-American family of former slaves homesteaded northeast of Centennial Cone, building "The Plantation."

Evidence of early historic Euro-American occupation is scattered across many areas on the Centennial Cone property. As well as homesteaders, miners on their way to the nearby Gregory Diggings are believed to have prospected on the property.

The 8,679-foot summit after which the park is named was originally called Sheep Mountain, as were two other mountains in Jefferson County. To eliminate duplicate names within the county, the summit was renamed Centennial Cone after nearby Centennial Ranch.

Jefferson County Open Space purchased 2,899 acres from Peter Goltra, and an additional 429.597 acres from Josephine Hayes and Robert Angel in 1999. Forty acres were purchased in 2000 from Gloria Ann McCoy, and 17.25 acres from Mr. Leroy Jacobs.

The remains of many ranches and homesteads are scattered across the Centennial Cone property, including property once owned by the Ballingers, Mayhems, Gulliksens, and Forests. Most of the property now owned by Open Space was once part of the Green family ranch. George and Edna Hunt Green and their family ranched Centennial Cone from 1917 until the 1990s. Since that time, Colorado State Parks and Jefferson County Open Space have preserved much of their land.