

Deer Creek Canyon Park History

Deer Creek Canyon has been a natural corridor through the Front Range foothills toward the Colorado mountains for thousands of years. While no major archaeological sites have been found within the present Deer Creek Canyon Park boundaries, the presence of other sites in the area indicates use of the canyon by the region's prehistoric people. The Lamb Springs site, located near Chatfield reservoir, is one of the biggest mammoth kill sites discovered in the United States. Now owned by the Denver Museum of Nature and Science, this site reveals the sophisticated cooperative hunting techniques used by ancient hunters and the presence of a large prehistoric population in the area. In historic times, plentiful resources drew the Ute, Arapaho, and Cheyenne people to Deer Creek Canyon.

Many settlers explored the canyon following the 1850s Colorado Gold Rush. By the early 1870s, the South Platte & Deer Creek Tram & Wagon Road Company had constructed a wagon road up Deer Creek Canyon from the South Platte River to the Hutchinson District, now known as Conifer.

Two English families, the Williamsons and the Couches, purchased much of the land now within Deer Creek Canyon Park. In 1872 John and Annie Williamson, their son, John, and niece, Esther, immigrated to America, seeking relief for Mr. Williamson's lung disease. Given three months to live in England, John lived until 1911 in the high, dry Colorado climate.

The Williamsons purchased squatter's rights to the property, and named it "Glen Plym Ranch," for their former home in Plymouth, England. The mountain to their west became Plymouth Mountain, and the creek flowing from that direction became Plym Creek. John Williamson constructed a sturdy home, using a cement mixture instead of wood or brick, and began raising oats, corn, and hay. After building an addition on their home in 1882, the Williamsons began hosting tubercular patients on the ranch. The patients lived in wall tents and were fed by the Williamsons during their stay.

About 1878 Sam Couch, a lawyer also from Plymouth, England, began ranching on property adjoining Glen Plym Ranch. He married the Williamsons' niece, Esther, and gradually expanded his ranch property to over 600 acres. Couch enjoyed cultural pursuits, such as the theater and opera.

Visitors to the Glen Plym and Couch Ranches included Chief Colorow and his band of Ute Indians, and groups of Arapaho and Cheyenne hunting and gathering supplies in the area. The two English families often fed these visitors, and struggled to keep up with Colorow's enormous appetite for biscuits and molasses.

During the Spanish-American War of 1898, African - American Buffalo Soldiers of the 24th (or 25th) U.S. Infantry stationed at Fort Logan established a rifle range at Couch Ranch and often visited the local families.

Remote Deer Creek Canyon also attracted some seeking refuge from the prying eyes of the law. A woman known to the Williamsons only as Bessie lived a short distance southwest of Glen Plym Ranch. An outlaw known as Horse-Thief Thompson, reportedly a member of the Jesse James and Hole-In-The-Wall gangs, lived with Bessie and brought stolen livestock to her ranch until he could dispose of it.

An African-American minister named Sampson was among the first to discover mineral wealth in the Deer Creek Canyon area. In 1874 Sampson discovered veins of

gold and silver on the southeast face of the mountain now named for him. Sampson sold his mine about 1880, and Sampson Mine was productive until the turn of the century.

In the late 1890's, small amounts of gold, copper, and other minerals were found near Critchell, five miles southwest of Deer Creek Canyon, starting another minor mining boom in Jefferson County. Wiley Phillips had homesteaded a ranch in Deer Creek Canyon since the late 1880's. He planned a new town, named Phillipsburg, at the western end of present-day Deer Creek Canyon Park. Numerous small mining and smelting operations sprang up, producing gold, bismuth, copper, and tin. However, Phillipsburg's mining boom faded away as the small deposits were quickly depleted and most of Phillipsburg's 500 residents moved on.

Alferd Packer, the infamous "Colorado Cannibal," lived in Phillipsburg after his release from prison in 1905. Although never proven to have murdered his five prospecting companions in 1874, it is indisputable that Packer ate portions of their bodies after their deaths to survive while lost in the southwestern Colorado mountains. His long prison term was shortened through the efforts of The Denver Post and its "sob sister" reporter, Polly Pry.

Alferd Packer worked on various nearby ranches while working some small mining claims. Local children found him kind and fatherly, and many Phillipsburg residents who knew him refused to believe Packer guilty of murder. In July, 1906, game warden Charles Cash found Packer unconscious in the woods after an apparent stroke. The local Van Alstine (sometimes "Van Alderstein") family cared for Packer until his death in April, 1907. Packer is buried in Littleton Cemetery; his tombstone simply notes his honorable service in the U.S. Army during the Civil War.

Phillipsburg's population dwindled until the 1930s when the few residents included the Clark family, who ran the Lone Pine Dance Hall, and Ben Cook, who owned the general store. By the 1970s Cook was the sole resident of Phillipsburg. A highway sign read "Phillipsburg Population 1," prompting a popular television show "Hee-Haw" to salute Phillipsburg. Ben Cook died in 1974. Although several business ventures have since been tried in the old dance hall, none succeeded. It now stands deserted and derelict: a forlorn reminder of a once-thriving mountain community. Other short-lived mining communities in the area included Hill City and Deer Creek.

During the 1980s TCD North, Inc., acquired 1776 acres of Deer Creek Canyon property, calling it alternately the Denver Technical Center Red Mesa Project and 1776. A housing development on the eastern portion of 1776 was planned, and construction began. In 1991 Jefferson County Open Space purchased the remaining Red Mesa property, creating Deer Creek Canyon Park.