

History of Lair o' the Bear Park

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, Paleo Indians, in a timeless symbiosis with their environment, followed wildlife and ripening vegetation from the plains to progressively higher elevations as far away as South, Middle and North Parks, over the Continental Divide and back to the Hogback for the winter, before beginning their annual cycle again. From 7,000 to about 2,000 years ago, 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 diversity of plant and animal resources.

From 2,000 to 200 years ago semi-nomadic Plains Ceramic Stage people were the first to use bow and arrows and pottery. Although the Foothills region continued to provide hunting grounds for multiple tribes, and the Hogback Valley area continued to be used for winter camps and seasonal meeting grounds, this group began settling for longer periods of time in one place. They developed more substantial shelters and campgrounds, supported by incipient horticultural techniques. Anchored by these new sites, Ute, Cheyenne, Arapahoe and other tribes' hunting parties began longer forays covering greater distances and lasting several days. One such route led up Bear Creek Canyon through the area now known as Lair o' the Bear Park.

When Mexico won independence from Spain in 1821 the old Spanish ban on trading with the United States was repealed. The Santa Fe Trail opened up, bringing traders and trappers to Colorado. They explored every Indian trail in the Colorado Rockies, but by the late 1830s the fur trade began to decline. In 1845, Jessie Benton Fremont published her account of her husband John Charles Fremont's journey west from Colorado to Oregon, and fired the nation's imagination with tales of an alluring wilderness. The Oregon Trail crossed Colorado, and, along with the California gold rush of 1849, brought tens of thousands of men west. In 1857 a major business crash sent others west to escape their creditors. Then in 1858 gold was found in Colorado. Many prospected on their way through Colorado, and some decided to stay. A growing network of toll roads supported mining camps throughout the region by providing access and easing the difficulties of moving mining materials, food supplies, and daily necessities to the mining camps.

The town of Morrison, at the mouth of Bear Creek Canyon, was a major mining supply town. George Morrison came to the area in 1864, purchased 320 acres of land, and shortly sold it to the Morrison Town Company. The town also provided easy access to lime for local smelters, gypsum for plaster of Paris, clay and timber. The Turkey Creek toll road and toll house were operated by George Morrison's son, Thomas.

After emigrating from Sweden in 1902, John Albin Johnson and his wife, Mathilda, traveled about four miles up Bear Creek Canyon, purchased 560 acres, and named it "Mountain Nook Ranch." In addition to raising Red Durham cattle, the Johnsons grew a variety of produce, which they trucked to Evergreen and Denver. John's reputation for growing fine vegetables quickly earned him the nickname "Rutabaga." Mountain Nook's crops were irrigated with the help of three log dams, which John designed. John and Mathilda also planted over 200 cherry and apple trees, many of which can still be found throughout Lair o' the Bear.

Mountain Nook Ranch boasted one of the only lathe and plaster houses in the area. Built in the 1880s, the house had four bedrooms (one for each of their sons, Finis and Francis), as well as two fireplaces, a dining room, living room and kitchen. Many a long winter was spent in the main house, most notably, during the big blizzard of 1913. The entire family was snowed in for

10 days. Fortunately, they had a well-stocked root cellar.

Frequent, and often severe, flooding of Bear Creek also created problems for the Johnsons. The Lariat Trail (now known as Highway 74) crossed Bear Creek six times between Morrison and Mountain Nook Ranch. It was not uncommon for a flood to wash away the Creek's fragile wooden bridges and strand travellers in Bear Creek Canyon for days. In the early 1920s, a flood warning system was implemented in Evergreen. Evergreen's telephone operator would call the Johnsons, and other families along the canyon, to warn them if a flood was headed their way.

When they weren't hunting rabbits or fishing, Finis and Francis Johnson used to hike the 1½ miles to school in Starbuck. Starbuck got its name from John Starbuck who won the town property in a poker game. Today, we know the area as Idledale. In later years, the Johnson boys attended school in Golden. Francis attended Colorado University Medical School and moved to California in 1930. Finis became a teacher and also moved to California, becoming Superintendent of Schools in Carlsbad, California. Their mother, Mathilda, moved to California after John died in 1928. She held on to Mountain Nook Ranch until 1959, when she had her sons sell the land to Marcus and Muriel Wright. The Wrights were well known in Idledale as the owners of the famed Wright Castle, which is still visible across Bear Creek from the Creekside Trail. In the mid-1960s, the land was sold to the Mountain Air Corporation, which, in turn, sold it to Open Space in 1987. "Lair o' the Bear" was the name that members of the Mountain Air Corporation gave to the property when they owned it. The name was taken from the student union at the University of California, whose mascot is a bear.

The ruins of the Johnson house are still visible on the northwest side of the Lair o' the Bear parking lot. The overgrown lilac bushes and cherry trees, along with the stone remnants of a fireplace, are all that remain of the once bustling and bountiful Mountain Nook Ranch.