

A NARRATIVE HISTORY OF
BEAVER CREEK
EAGLE COUNTY, COLORADO

BY DON SIMONTON

"It sounds romantic now, but there was a lot of tears and heartbreaks then. And very little money."
-Fred Kroelling, 1975

EARLY VISITORS

The Indians were there first -- the indigenous Ute and hunting parties of Cheyenne and Arapaho. And their unnamed ancestors. Points and chips and campfire remains, some of them above timberline, prove at least seasonal occupancy of the Upper Eagle Valley for thousands of years.¹ Before the Meeker Massacre in 1879 this was technically the homeland of the Utes,² and there is no doubt that the valley of Beaver Creek had been seen or visited by the famous Chief Ouray and lieutenants like Colorow and Yarmonite (or Yarmony, for whom a mountain in northern Eagle County was named).³

The fact that this was their land by treaty in no way discouraged unin-
vited exploration, prospecting, hunting, and fishing by the white men. Beaver Creek must have been visited by numerous unnamed trappers, possibly including one who gave his name to the lakes along the Eagle River near modern Edwards. When John C. Fremont camped there on September 4, 1845 (having passed the mouth of Beaver Creek enroute) and caught what he called a "buffalo fish", he identified the spot as "Williams Fishery".⁴ Dr. Frederick V. Hayden's Survey of 1873 must have traveled past following his ascents of the Mount of the Holy Cross and Mount Powell (he appears to have left the Eagle Valley near present-day Wolcott).⁵ Dr. A. C. Peale, leader of the Hayden party of 1874, found commercial fishermen camped at what obviously are the same lakes earlier known as Williams Fishery. These men

¹Office of the State Archaeologist, c/o State Historical Society of Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

²Colorado, A Guide to the Highest State (Harry Hansen, Ed.), Hastings House, New York, New York, rev. 1970, pp 27-29.

³Ewing, Berube, and Ewing: Early McCoy, Raymond's Printing, Glenwood Springs, Colo. 1976, pp 6-7.

⁴John C. Fremont: Memoirs of My Life, New York, New York 1887, pp 428-429.

⁵F. V. Hayden: Annual Report of the US Geological and Geographical Survey of 1873, Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. 1874, pp 70-78.

reported having found some gold in the streams flowing north out of the Sawatch Range.⁶

MINING

First permanent occupation of the Beaver Creek area is associated with the mining boom around Leadville, revived by the discovery of silver in the previously-discarded lead carbonate ores. Prospecting by a man named James Denney (or Denning) led to the staking of the first claims on Battle Mountain in 1878,⁷ and the town of Red Cliff was established the next year.⁸

By 1880 the Aurora Mine had been opened at the head of Beaver Creek by miners who probably came across the divide from Cross Creek (rather than up the valley). Although described as "promising" and worked for several years, it never became a major producer.⁹ (The report on this mine in 1882 is the earliest identification I have found of Beaver Creek, by name.)¹⁰

Associated with the mining were two other major industries; fishing-and-hunting, and logging. Although the Williams of Fremont's day had no identifiable market, the fishermen discovered on the Eagle by Dr. Peale in 1874 had specific plans to ship their catch of "large-size" trout once a week to Oro City (later Leadville) for the mining population.¹¹ Bud Knoxey, of Central City, later reported that 100-300 pounds of trout passed through Red Cliff daily, enroute to Leadville, where they brought 40¢ a pound.¹² Hunting too was popular and profitable. The James Denney who discovered the valuable rocks of Battle Mountain originally came into the Eagle Valley to get wild meat to feed the miners.¹³ Old timers report that

⁶F. V. Hayden: Annual Report of the U. S. Geological and Geographical Survey of 1874, Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. 1876, p 81.

⁷Knight and Hammock: Early Days on the Eagle, Eagle, Colorado 1965, p 7.

⁸ibid., p 17.

⁹See notes: Aurora Mine.

¹⁰Leadville Daily Herald, Leadville, Colorado Nov. 3, 1882.

¹¹F. V. Hayden, idem (1874), p 81.

¹²Knight and Hammock: idem p 4.

¹³ibid. p 7.

elk in the Beaver Creek area were exterminated before the turn of the century, and deer were extremely scarce.¹⁴

Logging, which was facilitated by the extension of the railroad past Avon in 1887,¹⁵ was primarily for mine props and railroad ties, the size of the trees that were cut leading to the identification of such areas as "tiehacks". Large lumber companies (Owens, Fleming, et al) from Leadville and Red Cliff, along with local ranchers seeking work in the wintertime, cut trees on Beaver Creek Mountain (Baldy), as well as in the valley itself and up in McCoy Park to the west. Snow was dug out by the cutters to get as much of the tree as possible (some stumps were still six feet tall) and the logs were then skidded or chuted to a collection point, from which they were dragged, with tips chained together on a front sled-bob, by horses to flat cars at Avon. Sawmills were in operation at Beaver Lake and below it; in the former instance, the logs were shot down an ingenious chute into the lake, then floated to the outlet, where they were picked up and run through the mill. These were then taken out by wagons in the summer time. Because of weight of loads and grade of roads, both sleds and wagons used chain "roughlocks" as supplementary brakes. Most of the logging on the mountain and in the valley seems to have ended around World War I,¹⁶ but photographs show logging in McCoy Park continuing into the 20's.¹⁷

SETTLERS

Two factors were primarily responsible for the settlement of the Beaver Creek region: the 1882 opening of the Ute Indian lands to white settlers under the

¹⁴See notes: Wildlife.

¹⁵Knight and Hammock: idem pp 37-38.

¹⁶See notes: Logging.

¹⁷See photographic collection.

Homestead Act,¹⁸ and the supplying of food to the miners at Red Cliff and Leadville.

The first settler on the subject property at Beaver Creek was George A. Townsend, a young Englishman who had probably come by way of Leadville. Townsend had a "very comfortable place" by April 1883,¹⁹ making it obvious that he had established himself at least the year before. Because the Homestead Act limited a would-be owner to 160 acres,¹⁹ and in a custom of the day,²⁰ Townsend apparently "grub-staked" some friends, Abijah Berry and Daniel Burnison, to some adjacent land, winding up in 1889 with patents to 400 acres along Beaver Creek. Townsend raised beef cattle and did a respectable job of it for 15 years. He also operated a post office (Townsend's) and stage station at his home.²¹

Quick as he was to take advantage of the Ute Reservation Bill, George Townsend was not the first permanent settler in his immediate neighborhood. Just a few miles to the west (modern Edwards), a Frenchman named Joseph Brett had sneaked in in 1877. It is interesting to note that Brett settled right above the old William's Fishery, and the nature of his enterprise was that of a fishing-and-hunting resort. He set up two tents, one for sleeping and one for "gaming"; when his friends, the Utes, came through, certain articles (probably normally found in the "gaming" tent) were hidden under the floor of his cabin.²²

Early neighbors of Townsend in the vicinity of Avon, which he named for the area in England from which he had come,²³ were Swift, Trayer, Puder, Nottingham and Metcalf.²⁴ On Beaver Creek itself, he had no company at all, the next homesteads

¹⁸For good descriptions of the Homestead Act of 1863, see The World Almanac and Book of Facts 1975 and James A. Michener: Centennial, Random House, New York, NY 1974 p 435. For local application of the Ute Reservation Bill, see Ewing, Berube, and Ewing, idem p 14. It is important to note that patenting a homestead required the applicant to reside on and improve the land involved for five years prior to the issuance of the final certificate.

¹⁹Rocky Mountain News, April 12, 1883.

²⁰See notes: Berry, Burnison.

²¹See notes: Townsend.

²²Eagle County Historical Society: tape of interview with Leona Brett, 1975.

²³Ruth Estelle Matthews: A Study of Colorado Place Names, 1940, Colorado State Historical Society Library.

²⁴See notes: Harry Nottingham.

being started about the time he left. These were eventually patented by Rial Oxford, Edward Schlaepfer, Hiram Spaulding, and Julia Wiltshire.²⁵

John Howard, a Virginian, had acquired Townsend's Ranch in 1898, naming it the Avondale Ranch.²⁶ In 1902 he sold to Gulling Offerson, a Dane by way of Kansas, Blackhawk, and Leadville, who proceeded to buy up adjacent homesteads during the next 40 years until he became one of the prominent ranchers of Eagle County.²⁷

The settlers along Beaver Creek came from a variety of states and nations. Townsend and Alfred Wiltshire were Englishmen. Schlaepfer and Hahnwald were Swiss. The Holdens fulfilled a life-long dream with their Scottish dairy farm. Scandinavia was represented by Offerson (Danish), Anderson (Swedish) and Berg (Swedish?). The Kreollings were German. There were Virginians, Iowans, Vermonters, Texans, Georgians, and Chicagoans.²⁸

Deserving special note among the pioneers were the bachelors (always, it seems, identified affectionately as "old bachelors"). Bachelor Gulch, the drainage immediately west of Beaver Creek (originally Smith Creek) was named for several of them. They may reflect the general shortage of women in the pioneer West, or they may be early representatives of a life-style still common on ranches and resorts in the Rockies. At any rate, they contributed some good stories to the history of Beaver Creek.²⁹

AVON

The name of Avon, as mentioned, grew out of the nostalgia of its pioneer resident, George Townsend. After being alluded to in occasional and incidental fashion for many years, it was officially established, as a post office, on November 26, 1900,³⁰ after Townsend's departure.

²⁵See notes on these persons.

²⁶See notes: John Howard.

²⁷See notes: Gulling Offerson.

²⁸See notes: Townsend, Wiltshire, Schlaepfer, Hahnwald, Holden, Gulling Offerson, Bachelor Gulch - John Anderson, Berg, Kroelling, John Howard, Spaulding, Mahoney, Rodgers, Garfield Anderson, Bienkowski.

²⁹See notes: Bachelor Gulch.

³⁰Bauer, Ozment, and Willard: Colorado Postal History.

Avon's first official function may have been as a stagecoach stop on the line set up in 1883 between Red Cliff and Dotsero (station for the new silver-mining camp at Carbonate, in the Flattops).³¹ The line came down the river on its north side, crossing at the ford just west of the present bridge, before passing Townsend's.³² Although the service was periodic during the next few years (largely due to the early failure of Carbonate) it did establish a road of sorts in the Eagle Valley.³³

The Denver and Rio Grande Western extended its narrow gauge tracks from Rock Creek (Battle Mountain) to Glenwood Springs in 1887, and Avon became a station on the line, with its own depot building.³⁴ All the residents seem to have obtained railroad passes and used the line regularly for shopping and laundry trips to Glenwood. Two daily "mixed" trains (freight and passengers), #15 (2-coaches) in the morning and #16 (the mail train) in the evening, became local institutions³⁵ until their discontinuation in 1938.³⁶ Dairy products, produce and lumber went in the other direction, to the mines and eastward.³⁷

Through the first half of the 20th Century, Avon was much more of a community center than it is today. It had its own school district, #9, formed in 1888. The Owens Lumber Company store, and the store later started on the other side of the road by Charley Thomas were obviously prosperous. The post office originally established under Townsend's name continued in various stores and residences in the immediate vicinity until being moved to the Benchmark Shopping Center, on the north side of the tracks, in 1976. And, during the lettuce boom of the 20's and 30's, a large community hall was operated by the Avon Amusement Association.

³¹Knight and Hammock: idem pp 35-36.

³²See notes: Avon, Townsend.

³³Knight and Hammock: idem p 36.

³⁴Eagle Valley Enterprise December 16, 1921.

³⁵Robert Hart interview, August 1975, p 13.

³⁶Eagle Valley Enterprise May 20, 1938.

³⁷Melvin Eaton interview, September 1974, p 2.

The community's population and prestige obviously peaked during the lettuce days. As many as 500 men were reportedly employed by the produce companies at the lettuce sheds along the railroad. Some of this population was certainly seasonal because of the nature of the industry, but the fact that a girl scout troop of 50 was active indicates a sizeable town.³⁸

AGRICULTURE

As noted, the early industries on Beaver Creek were related to the nearby mines. Townsend was a cattleman,³⁹ obviously trailing his beef to Red Cliff and Leadville before the advent of the railroad. He and his early neighbors also raised hay, not only for their own stock (much of which was simply turned out on winter range down the Eagle Valley),⁴⁰ but also for the horses used to pull the ore wagons.⁴¹

A rather surprising early industry (for what might be thought of as cowboy country) was dairy farming. Many of the early settlers were associated with it -- John Howard, Gulling Offerson, Charles Adams, the Wiltshires -- and the Holdens continued in the business for many years.⁴² The cows were milked late in the afternoon, and milk and cream were shipped to Leadville on the early morning train (#5, about 5:00 a.m.).⁴³

The long winters created some problems for the early settlers economically. Some worked in the mines,⁴⁴ others taught school,⁴⁵ while many spent the snowy months logging in the high country.⁴⁶

Perhaps as early as 1900 many of the farmers and ranchers began planting potatoes. While it seems always to have been a secondary crop, it continued as a

³⁸See notes: Avon.

³⁹See notes: Townsend.

⁴⁰For an example (George Bowman, 1880), see Eagle Valley Enterprise, July 22, 1921; also cf. Ewing, Berube, and Ewing: idem p 9.

⁴¹See notes: especially Adams and Holden.

⁴²Melvin Eaton interview, September 1974, p 2.

⁴³See notes: Holden, et al.

⁴⁴See notes: John Thomas.

⁴⁵See notes: Everett Howard, Spaulding, Charles Eaton, et al.

substantial local industry until World War II. The State Experimental Farm east of Avon did some research on high-altitude potato-growing and was ~~probably~~ very helpful to the local farmers.⁴⁷

In the early 1920's, spurred by Southwestern produce commissioners, the valley farmers began planting their land extensively in head lettuce. The local depot agent, Claude Robertson, was especially active in this boom, buying ranches and farming them with the help of relatives and friends from Texas.⁴⁸ Some Japanese families were among the seasonal laborers.⁴⁹ A combination of factors, including poor cultivation and shipping practices, led to the end of the boom in the mid-30's.⁵⁰ After some attempts at other hardy vegetables -- peas, spinach, etc. -- the smaller farmers, also bruised by the depression, began looking for opportunities to sell out.

They got their chance in the 40's as Gulling Offerson and W. Emmett Nottingham began buying and consolidating ranches in Beaver Creek valley and Bachelor Gulch. Following Offerson's accidental death in 1941, his son was unable to manage the ranch and these extensive holdings finally wound up mostly in the hands of E. Willis Nottingham, Emmett's son. This was in 1950; by 1968, all of the subject property was in his name.⁵¹ The Nottinghams during this era were into the sheep business, having been impressed by the success of Greek and Mormon sheepmen who moved into the Eagle Valley in the 20's and 30's.⁵²

Vail Associates, Inc. purchased this ranch in December 1972.

LIFE IN THE VALLEY

One gains the impression, particularly from interviews, that life for most of the residents of Beaver Creek down through the years has been something less than

⁴⁷See notes: Potatoes.

⁴⁸See notes: Robertson, Rodgers, et al.

⁴⁹See notes: Ikada, Matsumongi, Takahashi. For some background on the arrival of Japanese in Colorado, see Michener, *idem* pp 679 ff.

⁵⁰See notes: Lettuce.

⁵¹See notes: Gulling Offerson, W. E. Nottingham, E. W. Nottingham and Arnold Nottingham.

⁵²From an unrecorded interview with Chris Jouflas, September 1976.

affluent and leisurely. In addition to the daily threat of illness or accident in a remote location, there was the constant possibility of business failure due to circumstances beyond local control -- weather or markets.

Small "social events" probably had great value. Trips to the Avon store were very important.⁵³ There was occasional, but extended, visiting from house to house.⁵⁴ Nearly everyone, it appears, made a little wine and moonshine. The cowmen apparently found periodic excuse for lengthy and expensive card games; some of these even took place in Denver, where the rendezvous was the St. James Hotel.⁵⁵ And, during the lettuce days there were dances, box socials and pie socials at the Avon Community Hall.⁵⁶ The baseball games between community teams along the river were very significant events in the summers.⁵⁷

But leave it to the kids to find the fun and point to the future. In addition to typical summertime games, they enjoyed unique adventures like hiking along the top of the "gyp" cliffs to the post office.⁵⁸ In the wintertime they would skate on the river at the ford,⁵⁹ or sled down the log-packed road to the store.⁶⁰ And they went skiing, on "boards" (literally) taken from the barns, carved to a point and bent up in front by soaking these tips in hot water and sticking them between the logs of the house to dry. They skied to school, skied on their afternoon traplines, and skied in the moonlight just for fun.⁶¹

Some of their children and grandchildren may well be skiing in their invisible pioneer tracks along Beaver Creek tomorrow.

⁵³See notes: - Bienkowski, Holden, et al.

⁵⁴Melvin Eaton interview, August 1975, p 23. For interesting information about pioneer social life in the immediate neighborhood, see Eagle County School Historical Collection: Gore Creek.

⁵⁵W. Emmett Nottingham interview, September 1975, p 4a.

⁵⁶See notes: Avon.

⁵⁷See summer copies of the Eagle Valley Enterprise during the 20's and 30's, "Avon items".

⁵⁸See notes: Holden.

⁵⁹See notes: Avon.

⁶⁰See notes: Hart, Holden.

⁶¹See notes: Skiing; also photographic collection.