

## History of Elk Meadow Park

Among the oldest rocks found anywhere on earth, the rocks that compose the bedrock of the Elk Meadow area were deposited 1.8 billion years ago. Elk Meadow's rocks have been metamorphosed three to four times during their long history, forming large granite masses, visible today as the mountains immediately to the south of the park.

From 2,000 to 200 years ago semi-nomadic Plains Ceramic Stage people used the Foothills region for hunting grounds, and the Hogback Valley area for winter camps and seasonal meeting grounds. Their hunting parties covered greater distances over several days. One route led up Bear Creek Canyon to the area now known as Elk Meadow Park. The Utes, Cheyenne and Arapahoe tribes visited the area, relying on it for summer hunting and as a source of lodgepole pines for their teepee supports.

Robert A. Strain gradually acquired much of the land that is now Elk Meadow Park. In 1858 Strain built a hand-hewn log cabin, and filed for a homestead of 160 acres on March 25, 1870, which was finally granted in 1904. In 1870 Strain bought the 160-acre homestead by Charles S. Abbott, and in 1871 bought Thomas S. Ardrey's 160-acre homestead. In 1872 Strain bought 40 acres from the Denver and Pacific Railway and Telegraph Company. Strain's wife, Charlotta Dow, an Indian girl, homesteaded 120 acres in 1884, bringing their total holdings to 800 acres.

Thomas Cunningham Bergen led a group of ten strong men in joining the throng moving west to the gold fields of Central City and Cripple Creek. Bergen convinced the men to help him build a cabin in a broad grassy valley known as Elk Park, in the middle of the summer hunting grounds for the Ute and Sioux bands. Bergen returned to Illinois, sold his farm, and brought his growing family to "Bergen Park." The Bergen Park settlement was situated along the Mount Vernon toll road to the mining districts. The Bergen home was expanded and provided a meal and night's lodging for \$1.00 for weary travelers and freighters.

When the Evergreen Township survey was completed in 1861 the government's land became available for homesteading in 160-acre parcels. Settlers were required to file their homestead with Jefferson County. They were no longer able to hold large acreages provisionally without payment, or use land they didn't own. Previously, hay had been cut from any convenient field; logging teams had moved from hillside to hillside; and cattle and oxen were turned out to pasture in any ravine or draw that would hold them.

Amos Post, part of Thomas Bergen's original group, was well known for his excellent carpentry skills. In 1862 Post married Bergen's daughter, Sarah Ellen, built a general store near Bergen's lodging house, and, with Bergen, built Evergreen's first school. By 1877 Post opened a trading post, called "The Post," along the banks of Bear Creek. A number of stage stops and lodging houses sprang up in Bear Creek Canyon and in the area now known as Evergreen. Between 1860 and 1900 timber was the most lucrative harvest in the Evergreen area, and many sawmills sprang up.

Farming and ranching became well established in the meadows and valleys despite the rocky, unfavorable conditions. In 1905 the three Johnson brothers bought Robert Strain's property. One brother, Theodore (Ted), had worked for Robert Strain. Ted was born near Kittredge in 1881, and his brothers, George and Oscar, were born in Parmalee Gulch. All three attended school in the old Bergen Park School. When they

bought Strain's ranch, the two bachelor brothers, George and Oscar, took the land east of what is now Highway 74. Ted moved his wife into the Strain's log cabin, and their two children were born there.

Early settlers found an abundance of elk at the lower elevations of the Front Range. During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century a wholesale slaughter of elk and they were wiped out. In 1917, shortly following the creation of the Colorado State Game and Fish Department, a public subscription paid for transporting 26 head of elk from Wyoming to Idaho Springs. These were the ancestors of the present herd, which is culled annually to limit it to 1000 head.

George was a blacksmith, maintained Squaw Mountain Road, and worked for Denver Mountain Parks. Oscar managed their ranch. Ted Johnson's ranch had two barns and a sawmill to the south of the Strain's cabin. Ted Johnson's first barn still stands in the meadow near Painters Pause Trail and is the sole survivor of his original ranch outbuildings. The Johnsons raised turkeys and ducks, sold cream to Denver, Christmas trees to the Denver Civic Center, and ran cattle. Their hay was put up in haystacks by a crew of 12-14 neighbors. The hay they sold was baled and went to the buffalo herd on Genesee and to Idaho Springs.

From 1916 to 1921, Ted Johnson bought several nearby homesteads, ultimately owning nearly 1,000 acres, which Darst Buchanan bought in December, 1943. Buchanan was the owner of Hiwan Ranch, including what is now the Hiwan Homestead Museum. Parcel by parcel, Buchanan gradually amassed a ranching property of 10,000 acres and bred prize-winning Hereford cattle on his Hiwan Ranch.

In 1945 Buchanan bought Hamrick's ranch, and the 200 acres at its southwest corner completed the property that is now Elk Meadow Park. The Hamrick ranch was originally homesteaded by the Kryders in 1882 and bought by Hamrick in 1917. In 1949 Cole A. Means and his brother, Robert, purchased the northern portion of the meadow for summer grazing for their Texas herds.

Rather than pursuing a proposed commercial development, the Means family decided to keep the entire meadow as open space, selling their 1,140 acres of Means Meadow to Open Space in September, 1975.

In the spring of 1994 John Thompson, President of Hiwan Ridge Development Corporation, negotiated with the Mountain Area Land Trust for the sale of 402 acres of Noble Meadow, adjacent to Elk Meadow Park.