

## History of Hildebrand Ranch Park

Hildebrand Ranch Park is largely a grassland area bisected by the southern Hogback. On Hildebrand Ranch much of the rock formations typical of the Hogback area have eroded, exposing the harder rock of the mountain core. For centuries 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. This annual nomadic rotation probably crossed the Hildebrand Ranch Park, but, possibly as a result of more than a century of farming and ranching, few remnants of early human presence remain.

Frank and Elizabeth Hildebrand, both natives of Germany, came to America as youths. Frank started west across the plains in 1859, settling in the Platte River bottom, near the mouth of Clear Creek. In 1864 heavy floods ruined his crops and Frank sold out, becoming a freighter between Denver and Cheyenne, and working in Georgetown District placer mines. Elizabeth came to America at age 18 in 1864. Somehow they met, and married between 1859 and 1865.

In 1866 Frank settled in Deer Creek, although the records about Hildebrand's acquisition of the land are somewhat contradictory, but the ownership was undisputed. Hildebrand is believed to have homesteaded, but one book of records in the County Clerk and Recorder's office shows it as a "soldier's bounty" patent from the United States government after the Civil War. Another County record book records a warranty deed conveying Deer Creek valley land from Mr. and Mrs. Peter Peterson to Frank Hildebrand on November 10, 1866.

In 1866, Elizabeth arrived on Frank's new ranch, 160 acres of raw, uncultivated prairie land. Frank began to graze cattle, but it was necessary to break the raw ground to raise crops for their winter feed. Breaking one or two acres behind a horse-drawn one-way hand plow was considered a good day's work.

Mining was the backbone of Colorado's early economy, but farming and ranching were crucial mining support industries. The Hildebrands helped set the standard for successful ranchers in Jefferson County. Frank and Elizabeth had two sons, Francis J., born either on August 22, 1871, or, according to Deer Creek School records, in 1869, and Albert, born sometime in 1876.

At first Frank did the spring planting and worked through the harvest, returning to the mines during the winters. Later Frank worked year-round to develop and improve the farm, and began cattle breeding.

Frank slowly increased his cultivated acreage, but poor harvests forced Frank to begin irrigating, which allowed planting alfalfa and increased production of grain crops. Early irrigation ditches, dug using a horse drawn two-handled "slip," similar to but larger than a hand grain scoop, were 2-3 feet wide and 12-18 inches deep. Gradually the Hildebrands built three ditches, creating a ditch system that irrigated 200 acres. They sold wheat as a cash crop and harvested the rest of their crops as livestock feed or for the family's use.

Hildebrand improved his land, increased his holdings and cattle herd's size, and added new livestock. His sons tended livestock and the vegetable garden. Vegetables were stored in the root cellar and basement, or canned for winter use. Berries became jams and jellies. The smokehouse transformed butchered beef and pork into steaks, bacon, sausages and more. The Hildebrands became practically self-sufficient. They visited the grocery store in Littleton to trade their surplus dairy products for items they couldn't produce, including sugar, salt, pepper, vinegar, and kerosene.

On the Ranch, the women raised poultry and gardened and the men fed livestock, farmed, irrigated and raised cattle. A fall threshing crew of up to 20 men was hired. In winter one or two hired hands were enough. Mrs. Hildebrand had at least one “hired girl” to help her take care of the hired hands.

In 1902 Albert left the Ranch, moving to Gunnison’s Ohio Creek valley. Albert and his wife, Hilda, were childless, and remained prominent in Gunnison and Western Slope cattle circles until at least 1978.

In 1909 Francis married Josephine Shekley of Humboldt, Iowa. In 1911 their daughter, Dorothy, was born. In 1912 Josephine died, and sometime between 1912 and 1919 Francis married a second wife, Margaret.

Frank Hildebrand died in 1914, and Francis took over the home farm. In 1921 Margaret and Francis had a daughter, Florence. When Francis’ two daughters were grown, Dorothy married Billy Huggins, and Florence married Bill Traynor. Francis Hildebrand spent his entire life on the family ranch, and became one of Jefferson County’s exemplary farmers. Francis Hildebrand died in 1943, and Florence Hildebrand Traynor took control of the Ranch. She later married John Stockwell, and they had a son, John Stockwell Jr.

In 1950 a plan was authorized for a flood-control reservoir in southern Jefferson County to protect Denver, but Congress didn’t appropriate the funds. On June 16, 1965, torrential rains on upper Plum Creek brought massive flooding along the South Platte River through Denver, taking 13 lives and leaving millions of dollars of property damage.

On June 17, 1971, to provide adequate flood control, the Secretary of the Army condemned 333.73 acres of the original Hildebrand Ranch holdings and improvements. This land became the site of Chatfield Reservoir, built by the Army Corps of Engineers. The land taken by the condemnation proceeding is only a small portion of the total ranch land acquired over the years by the Hildebrands.

In March, 1973, the City of Denver leased 750 acres at the Chatfield Reservoir site from the federal government, including 67 acres for the Denver Botanic Garden’s arboretum and environmental study area. A 5-acre area within the Arboretum’s 67 acres, including most of the Ranch’s buildings, was accepted into the National Register of Historic Places on March 13, 1975. This land is a portion of the original land deeded to Frank Hildebrand by the Petersons in 1866.

Jefferson County Open Space purchased 1,450 acres of Hildebrand Ranch on February 23, 2001.