

## Lookout Mountain Nature Center and Preserve History

The Lookout Mountain Nature Center and Preserve lie in the transition zone from the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains and the western edge of the Great Plains. The earliest evidence of people living in Colorado spans the period from approximately 7,000 to 12,000 years ago. These Paleoindians were a dispersed and highly mobile people. They used the plains to Front Range transitional area as they followed the seasonal ripening of vegetation. During the period from 7,000 to about 2,000 years ago semi-nomadic people settled in camps along the foothills, occupying both open ridges and valleys and many rock shelters nestled among rock outcrops.

The Plains Ceramic Stage began nearly 2,000 years ago, ending approximately 200 years ago, and included the earliest contacts of the native population with people from Europe. Although Ceramic Stage remains have been found throughout Jefferson County, a few sites stand out in particular as wonderful remnants of life during this period. One of these sites, representing limited occupation, is the Chimney Gulch Rockshelter near the entrance to Clear Creek Canyon, and below and just to the north of the Lookout Mountain Nature Center.

At the foot of Lookout Mountain, the area surrounding Golden was heavily prospected from 1858 on, and four embryo towns developed near Clear Creek (previously called Vasques Creek). Golden City (now Golden) was officially established in June, 1859, with a population of between 700-800, and eventually became the county seat. Mining, agriculture and transportation became the driving economic forces to determine the survival and long-term success of these Front Range towns. Golden continued to grow while Arapahoe City, Golden Gate City and Mount Vernon struggled, dwindled and faded away.

William "Cement Bill" Williams came to Golden in 1901, recognized the need for cement sidewalks, bridges and reservoirs, and went into business. "Cement Bill" promoted building a road from Idaho Springs over Lookout Mountain and down Mount Zion to Golden. "Cement Bill" made a zigzag survey up Mount Zion in 1911, and appealed to the State Highway Commission for funds. He spent nearly \$10,000 of his own money and allowed a profitable contracting business to fall into neglect to build Lariat Trail. After three grueling years, Lariat Trail opened on August 10, 1913, with little public fanfare, and Lookout Mountain Park opened on August 27 on 58 acres donated by Rees Vidler.

The idea of the Golden area as a day trip destination had gradually emerged as a by-product of the efficient transportation system of interurban railways and auto roads that connected Denver to the Golden area. The nearby country offered amusement parks, dance halls, horseback riding, community clubs, sporting organizations, and theme parks to attract visitors. Also in the Golden environs there were three men, each of whom owned a mountain, and who had the same vision of narrow ribbons of steel ascending the steep, rocky slopes of their mountain carrying pleasure-seekers, in jaunty little cable cars, to new heights and experiences – for a modest fee.

Rees Vidler initially opposed giving right of way for the road on his land, but eventually changed his mind. He had bought much of Lookout Mountain and decided his Lookout Mountain Development Company would benefit from the improved access to his proposed resort with its castellated, turreted homes, grand French-style hotel, golf course

and ballpark.

Charles Boettcher, a German immigrant, became a self-made millionaire through his chain of hardware stores and then leadership in the cement and beet-sugar industries. Boettcher founded the Ideal Cement Company and the Great Western Sugar Company, and was involved in banking, mining, insurance, and even ownership of the Brown Palace Hotel. Boettcher was also one of the major investors in the construction of the Lariat Loop.

In 1917 Charles Boettcher hired the Denver architectural firm of Fisher and Fisher to design a hunting lodge and summer home on Lookout Mountain. The beautiful stone buildings with their hand-carved beams are very much in the style of the contemporary Arts and Crafts movement. The complex eventually included the mansion itself, a carriage house, caretaker's house, and a gazebo. The Boettchers christened their new mountain retreat "Lorraine Lodge". It was used as a mountain home by successive generations of the Boettcher relatives after Charles Boettcher's death at the age of 96 in 1948.

In 1968 Charles Boettcher's granddaughter, Charline Breeden, deeded the Lorraine Lodge buildings and 110 acres of land to Jefferson County to be used "for the benefit of the general public." This donation included not only the Lorraine Lodge buildings, but also the associated group of structures that included a schoolhouse, caretaker's residence, and garage and shop buildings as well as a stone fireplace and amphitheater. The donation became public after Mrs. Breeden's death in 1972.

Throughout the next several years, planning for the use of the buildings progressed and several nature trails were constructed. In March 1975, the Lodge opened as the "Jefferson County Nature and Conference Center". Initially, the Lodge was under the supervision of the Jefferson County Cooperative Extension Service. The Nature Center was in one second-floor room of the Lodge.

In 1985-86, Open Space remodeled and renovated Lorraine Lodge. The ground floor of the carriage house was also remodeled to hold an enlarged Nature Center. The Lorraine Lodge complex was rechristened the "Boettcher Mansion" and removed from Open Space supervision. It became an independent, self-sustaining "enterprise" function of Jefferson County in 1988.

The following year the old caretaker's house was remodeled and transformed into an independent Lookout Mountain Nature Center under Open Space administration. Jefferson County made the decision to demolish the old building and build an enlarged and improved Nature Center, which opened on November 7, 1997. The Open Space land surrounding the Nature Center became known as the Lookout Mountain Nature Preserve. Lookout Mountain Nature Center and Preserve functions as the main nature education facility of Jefferson County Open Space. Its staff also provides research and design guidance for many of the Open Space parks' interpretive plans and displays.