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Next Meeting: Sunday, April 24, 1:00-4:00pm at the Aurora History Museum

Dr. Gordon Tucker's Mile Houses along the Cherokee/Smoky Hill Trail: History and Archeology

Many people living along the Front Range of Colorado have visited, or at least heard about, the historic mile houses which follow Cherry Creek along the Cherokee/Smoky Hill Trails. The most important of these were the 20 Mile House in Parker, 17 Mile House just north of Parker, 12 Mile House in present-day Cherry Creek State Park, and 4 Mile House in Denver. Much is known historically about the mile houses, but their archaeological importance has often been overlooked. This presentation discusses the archaeological excavations that have been done at 17 Mile House and 12 Mile House and how the recovered data have expanded our understanding of these significant historic resources.

We are honored to have Dr. Gordon Tucker, one of the foremost archaeologists in the area, as our speaker on April 24th. He is the Cultural Resources Team Lead and Senior Archaeologist in the Denver office of AECOM, where he has worked for 15 years. He holds a doctorate in anthropology (archeology emphasis) from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Dr. Tucker is the chairman of the Aurora Historic Preservation Commission.

After Dr. Tucker's presentation Ms. Kirsten Canfield, Technology Specialist with the Arapahoe Libraries, will speak briefly on the media conversion tools available at the Arapahoe Libraries for digitizing old 35mm slides, negatives, photos, VHS tapes, audio cassette tapes, and vinyl records. Kirsten is a preservationist who collects of old photos and books.

April 17th Field Trip to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal

Our next CCVHS field trip will be on Sunday April 17th (1-3pm). This will be a bus tour of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal for those who were not able to go last year or who simply want to take this outstanding tour again. The Arsenal made chemical weapons during World War II and the Cold War years, but the site has been cleaned up and is now a National Wildlife Refuge. Several vestiges of the old Arsenal can still be seen, however, and this will be the focus of our visit.

Details and directions to the Arsenal are provided after the following narrative. The tour is free.
The Rocky Mountain Arsenal and its Conversion to a National Wildlife Refuge

Just east of Commerce City, and only eight miles from the Colorado State Capitol, lies the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. For many years this place was a military base at which chemical weapons were made and stored, but it has now been converted into one of the largest urban wildlife refuges in the nation. The buildings for manufacturing and stockpiling chemical ordinance have been demolished, and the former Arsenal’s acres of contaminated soil have been buried under a capstone of clay. Most vestiges of U.S. Army presence are long gone, but there are some traces of the Refuge’s former life as a World War II and Cold War installation.

Before the property was condemned for building the Arsenal in 1942, this land was homesteaded by about 200 farm families. Unfortunately for them, this place was exactly what the U.S. military was looking for after it was tasked with producing chemical weapons after World War II began. This place was chosen because it was near railroad lines and supplies of water and electricity, and it was near a large source of labor that was reasonably skilled and well educated. The site was also in the interior of the country and therefore almost invulnerable to enemy attack.

Although the headline in a May 1942 edition of the Rocky Mountain News read "Denver to Get Huge Chemical War Plant," many of the applicants for work at the Arsenal were simply trying to get employment at the end of the Great Depression and had no idea of what they were getting into. Certainly none of the applicants had done this kind of work before. The Arsenal's workforce eventually reached about 3500, the majority of whom were women.

Although the official U.S. position in World War II was that it would not use chemical weapons unless an enemy first used them, the rapid construction of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal was a priority for the Army. All the families on the condemned land were ordered to leave their homes within a short amount of time. Some were given only thirteen days to move; their crops were left to rot in the fields. Construction of the Arsenal began only six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor and exactly one month after the Army’s Chemical Warfare Service had announced that the facility would be built.

The Arsenal turned out its first quota of mustard gas on January 1, 1943. The production of chemical weapons would take place in a 260-acre complex located in the center of the Arsenal property. Toxic munitions would be sent to both coasts by rail for shipment overseas. The facility was initially tasked to make poison gas weapons as well as the artillery shells that delivered them. But the production of most poison gases was halted at the Arsenal in May 1943. This was partly because neither Japan nor Germany were using gas against U.S. soldiers (possibly because the large U.S. stockpiles of poison gas acted as a deterrent to their use). However, the Arsenal was to get a new chemical-warfare mission in mid-1943: the production of incendiaries ("fire bombs"). It would continue making these aircraft-delivered bombs and filling them with petroleum-based incendiaries until the end of the war.

With the end of World War II, most activity at the Arsenal ended. By late 1946 the installation was put on "standby" status, during which it was assigned to destroy weapons that were no longer needed (mostly poison gases) and to store weapons that might be used again (mostly incendiaries). In 1947 several of the Arsenal's buildings were leased to private industry for the manufacture of pesticides. (These operations were bought out in 1952 by Shell Chemical, which made pesticides at the Arsenal for 30 more years.)

Post-war relations between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated into what became known as the Cold War. The immediate Cold War event that put the Arsenal back in business was the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950; the Arsenal resumed making incendiary bombs. It was also ordered to resume making poison gas, but this time the product was Sarin (the most potent nerve gas known). The Rocky Mountain Arsenal became the only facility making Sarin outside the Soviet Union. This was kept secret until the headline in the Rocky Mountain News of March 20, 1954 read "Nerve Gas Made Here!" Sarin production ended at the Arsenal in 1957.

The Rocky Mountain Arsenal was assigned a few new missions in the 1960s. These missions included mixing and storing fuel for the Titan ICBM and making rocket fuel for NASA lunar landings. The Arsenal also was involved for a time in the biological warfare program. But as opposition to the Vietnam War grew in the 1960s, and as the local population complained about groundwater pollution and the safety of wildlife, the Arsenal found itself increasingly at the center of controversy. The Denver Post even called for the closing of the Arsenal in May 1969.

After President Nixon in 1970 ordered the destruction of mustard gas, nerve gas, and biological munitions stored at the facility, the Arsenal's primary function became the destruction ("demilitarization") of such weapons. In short, the facility was tasked with getting rid of the very weaponry it had made and stockpiled. All production at the Arsenal stopped in 1982, and decontamination became its sole mission.
To quote John F. Hoffecker’s excellent book Twenty-Seven Square Miles, "At the beginning of 1983, the U.S. Army faced an almost overwhelming task. Four decades of chemical weapons and pesticide production had created a monumental contamination problem at Rocky Mountain Arsenal. Buildings, equipment, soil, and water were infected with what was labeled as ‘an alphabet soup of pollutants.’" The following year the Arsenal was designated a Superfund Site by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Then, in 1986, 20 bald eagles were seen nesting in trees at the Arsenal. Within a couple years many other birds and animals were seen thriving on the grounds. People were beginning to think that the Arsenal property would make a good wildlife refuge, especially since it would never be used for residential or commercial purposes. Once an extremely vocal critic of the Arsenal, Congresswoman Pat Schroeder formally proposed this idea in 1989. (Last year the Refuge’s Visitor Center was named for her.) In 1992 President George H.W. Bush signed into law the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge Act.

The 14-year clean-up effort cost over $2 billion. This involved the creation of enormous landfills, removal of many tons of contaminated earth and debris, and the demolition of numerous buildings. In 2004 the Department of the Interior’s Fish & Wildlife Service started restoring native vegetation and selecting areas for animal viewing. The Arsenal/Refuge was turned over to the Fish & Wildlife Service in 2007, although the central 1,084 acres of the property (where the contaminated debris was collected and capped off) remains under Army jurisdiction. The clean-up was officially completed in 2012.

The only homestead that is left standing on Arsenal property is the Egli house. Gottlieb Egli and family came to the United States from Switzerland and settled here in 1910. The Egli farmhouse was not torn down because it was used for Army officers’ quarters in World War II. Parts of a World War II bunker also may still be seen on the premises. And sections of the guard towers are still visible from a prisoner-of-war camp that was built on Arsenal grounds to house captured German and Italian troops in 1944.

April 17th Field Trip to the Rocky Mountain Arsenal (CONT’D)

For our Sunday April 17th field trip we will meet at the Arsenal/Refuge’s Visitor Center at 1:00pm (directions below). A bus will then take us past the now-demolished buildings where chemical weapons were made and stockpiled. We’ll stop at two buildings where we will see World War II/Cold War artifacts that are not normally shown to the public. Our next stop will be at the Egli homestead, the last remaining farmhouse on the property. After passing by what is left of the World War II POW camp and bunker, we’ll return to the Visitor Center by 3:00pm. Please take some time to walk through this interesting Visitor Center, which closes at 4:00pm.

Our tour guide will be Terry Wright, who has been with the Fish & Wildlife Service for 14 years. Last year several of us called his tour the "best bus tour we’d ever been on.” To get to the Visitor Center, go north on Quebec Street to Prairie Parkway (6400 North); then go right/east on Prairie Parkway for about one-half mile to Gateway Road (if you get to Dick’s Sporting Goods soccer stadium, you’ve gone too far). Go left/north on Gateway for a mile to the Visitor Center (the only building you can see at that point). The address is 6550 Gateway Road, Commerce City 80022-1748 (303-289-0930). There is no charge for this bus tour.

As with last year, we need to know how many of us will be on the bus. PLEASE LET GARRY KNOW AS SOON AS YOU CAN IF YOU WISH TO GO ON THIS FIELD TRIP (home 303-751-3140 or cell 303-709-7295).

17 Mile House News

What a wonderful time to visit 17 Mile House! Stop by to see the beautiful flowers blooming around the house and along the fence thanks to the efforts of our volunteers and special friends from the Piney Creek DAR who planted bulbs and seeds last autumn. Two new cherry trees donated by Ruth Race Dolan have been planted and the old heritage yellow roses will bloom soon! Four school visits are confirmed for the spring and we will be busy soon at open houses when visitors go outside for hikes in this nice spring weather. The 17 Mile House Volunteers will present the property’s history at the Arapahoe County Fair this summer on Friday, July 29th, 11am-1pm and Sunday, July 30th, 11am-1pm. For more information or to volunteer with any 17 Mile House events, please contact Karen Sear at seark@msn.com or (303) 514-2094.
Items of Interest to History Buffs

The spring 2016 meeting of the Eastern Colorado Museums & Historical Societies will be held on Saturday April 30th in Hugo from 10am to 2pm. (Registration and a continental breakfast starts at 9:30am.) It will be hosted by Lincoln County's Hedlund House Museum and will take place at the Eastern Trails Museum & Cultural Arts Center (formerly the Old Depot) at 635 4th Street, Hugo 80821. Dee Ann Blevins will speak on the efforts of Roundhouse Preservation Inc. (RPI) to preserve Hugo's railroad roundhouse. Ms. Blevins is president of the Hedlund House Museum and a board member of RPI. Lunch will be served for a cost of $10 (payable at the meeting), and a visit to the historic roundhouse follows lunch. Sign up at notification@whoozin.com.

On Monday May 9th (1-2pm) well-known local historian Debra Faulkner will portray Elizabeth "Baby Doe" Tabor at the History Colorado Center (1200 Broadway, Denver 80203). This performance is part of the Meet the Legends 2016 series. The fee is only $4 for members and $5 for nonmembers. Call 303-866-2394 or visit HistoryColoradoCenter.org.

On Saturday June 4th at 2pm Terry Stokka, president of Black Forest Historical Society, will speak on the terribly destructive Black Forest fire of 2013. The venue is (appropriately) the Larkspur Fire Station at 9414 S. Spruce Mountain Road, Larkspur CO 80118. All are welcome to this event which is sponsored by the Larkspur Historical Society. For directions and more information, call Garry at 303-751-3140.

The Larkspur Historical Society (LHS) is having open houses at the 1873 Crull cabin from 10am to 2pm on June 18th and July 16th. This log cabin, which was restored by LHS members ten years ago, was built by pioneer William Crull on the west side of present-day I-25 and just north of today's Jellystone campground. The log cabin has been furnished with period furniture and is an interesting and fascinating part of our heritage. Now owned by Douglas County, its address is 6225 Bear Dance Drive, Larkspur CO 80118.

Farewell to Two Giants of Local History

We were saddened to learn that Bob Schultz died last year at age 90. Bob bought Prairie Canyon Ranch in 1980 and owned it until Douglas County Open Space acquired it in 2000. The ranch was homesteaded by Frederick Bartruff in 1873 and underwent a recent restoration of the original house and barn. Cherry Creek meanders through the property. Bob leased the house and several outbuildings at Prairie Canyon and was always on hand to greet guests and talk history. One of his favorite places to show-off was the "Happy Days" saloon on the property. He served as a Navy radioman on the USS Missouri in World War II and witnessed the Japanese surrender aboard that battleship ("A day to remember" he later wrote.) Bob Schultz's memorial service will be held at the Prairie Canyon Ranch on Saturday June 11th from noon to 3:00pm; RSVP to Lisa Schultz at lisajschultz@gmail.com.

And we regret to report the death of Lionel Oberlin on February 17th at the age of 92. Lionel was instrumental in forming the Castle Rock Historical Society (CRHS). He was the first (and long-time) director of the Castle Rock Museum, which was built in 1875 as the Denver & Rio Grande railroad depot. He and his wife Starr, who preceded him in death, were standouts in the pursuit of local history in our area. For many years they lived in the historic stone house that Benjamin Hammar built in 1887 in Castle Rock. According to the CRHS website, "The Society is especially indebted to Starr and Lionel Oberlin who guided the Society and the museum from its early days. Their drive and vision made both a reality.” Their remains will be interred in a ceremony at Castle Rock’s Cedar Hill Cemetery later this year.
Happenings at the Aurora History Museum

The City of Aurora began as the town of Fletcher on April 30, 1891 and changed its name to Aurora in 1907. Through July 10th the Aurora History Museum (AHM) is celebrating Aurora's 125th birthday ("quasquicentennial") with the photo exhibit Worth Discovering: 125 Years of Aurora History. Curator of Exhibits Mary Jane Vealade is quoted in the March 24-30 Aurora Sentinel, "[W]e tried to chose images that have not been seen very often. We also looked for events or people our museum visitors might not be familiar with so they can learn something new about this city." The AHM website states, To celebrate Aurora's 125th birthday, we want to help share what people love about Aurora. It's simple: just visit, record, tag, and post from one of your favorite places in Aurora and share it with the museum on Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter (AuroraHistoryCO, @AuroraHistoryMuseum&HistoricSites, #Aurora125).

On the city's birthday itself (April 30) the museum will host a 125th birthday party from 10am to 4pm. A free shuttle bus will be on hand to take people to and from the museum, DeLaney Farm, and the Morrison Nature Center. The museum is located at 15051 E. Alameda Pkwy, Aurora 80012 (in Aurora's civic complex west of Chambers St.). Closed Monday; Tuesday-Friday 9am-4pm; Saturday-Sunday 11am-4pm. Call (303) 739-6660 or go to auroramuseum.org. Admission is always free.

A Little April History

Listen my children and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

Most of us have heard these opening lines from a famous poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. It tells of Paul Revere's ride near Boston to warn the American colonists that British troops were advancing their way at the start of the Revolutionary War. What is less known, however, is that two other Americans also rode that night to warn the colonists.

On April 18, 1775 Revere and another rider named William Dawes rode out of Boston headed for Concord with the message that "the British are coming." Revere also enlisted a man named Samuel Prescott to serve as a guide. British soldiers intercepted them, however, and Revere was captured. Dawes got away but was later thrown from his horse, leaving Prescott as the only one of the three messengers to reach Concord. In 1896 American poet Helen F. Moore tried to memorialize William Dawes by poking fun at Longfellow:

'Tis all very well for the children to hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere;
But why should my name be quite forgot,
Who rode as boldly and well, God wot?
Why should I ask? The reason is clear -
My name was Dawes and his Revere.

What's also little known is that the longest of the 1775 "midnight rides" was done on April 13th. A professional rider named Israel Bissell rode for over four days from near Boston all the way to Philadelphia (with at least one horse dying along the way). U.S. poet Clay Perry later wrote:

Listen, my children, to my epistle,
Of the long, long ride of Israel Bissell,
Who outrode Paul by miles and time
But didn't rate a poet's rhyme.

We hope to see you at our meeting on Sunday April 24th. And please let Garry know if you plan to go on our bus tour at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal on April 17th (home 303-751-3140 or cell 303-709-7295).
A BRIEF CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF THE MELVIN SCHOOL

1922 - The Melvin School was built in the NW1/4 of Section 13, T5S, R67W, Arapahoe County, Colorado on land donated by Hans Dransfeldt. The DeBoer brothers built the school for $4,450. The original site was at the junction of Belleview Avenue and the old Sullivan Road (now Jordan Road) in Cherry Creek State Park. The school opened in September of 1922.

1949 - Families in the community of Melvin received condemnation papers telling them to move from the area in preparation for the building of the dam. The school was included in this area, and it closed its doors in June of 1949. The building was sold to J. Edwin Stout for $1,500. He sold it to William Minshall who had it moved to the southwest corner of the intersection of Parker Road and Quincy Avenue (Section 12, T5S, R67W).

1953 - After extensive remodeling, the former schoolhouse opened as the Emerald Isle Tavern on Saint Patrick's Day. Glenn Barrier managed it as Glenn's Emerald Isle Tavern until 1970.

1975 - Five area residents who were interested in local history and in saving the old Melvin School incorporated and became the first Board of Directors of the Cherry Creek Valley Historical Society, Inc. They persuaded Mr. Silverberg to donate the building to the Society in trade for their moving it elsewhere and leveling the site after the moving of the building. The Society's purpose was to restore the old Melvin School and to use it as a classroom-museum-library for the study and collection of local historical information.

1976 - Cherry Creek School District offered a site on the campus of Smoky Hill High School. It was moved on December 14, 1976.

1977-1981 - With the help of the community, the school district, and the historical society, the Melvin School was restored. The exterior was authentically restored as was one classroom. The second classroom, the one which originally had a stage, was adaptively restored into a museum and a library. A plaque which honors those who helped in the restoration has been engraved with the slogan: "Restored by the Community - For the Community."

1984 - The Melvin School was put on the National Register of Historic Places.

1988 - The City of Aurora honored the Melvin School as Aurora Historic Landmark #1.

The Quill is the quarterly newsletter of the Cherry Creek Valley Historical Society (CCVHS). The purposes of the Society are to study, record, preserve, and display the history of the Cherry Creek Valley and surrounding areas. Membership is open to anyone interested in this history. Quarterly general meetings are usually held at the Melvin Schoolhouse, 4950 S. Laredo St. (between Smoky Hill High School and Laredo Middle School) in Aurora, Colo. Correspondence concerning The Quill should be directed to Garry O’Hara, editor, at (303) 751-3140.

YOU CAN HELP MAKE HISTORY

Collect the past Preserve the present Plan for the future