

## PIONEERS ALONG THE SOUTH BRANCH of the SOUTH PLATTE RIVER in COLORADO

### By OPAL KENDALL-LONGINO

Gold discoveries in Colorado in 1858 brought a sudden surge of prospective miners across the plains to the gold fields, leading to fast development in Colorado of pathways to the treasures in the 1850 and 60's.

Development of the South Platte area was boosted rapidly when the Denver and South Park railroad began a rail line from Denver along the South Platte River to a junction on the line that was originally called Symes. Here the rail line turned toward Jefferson County to follow the north fork of the river up to Kenosha Pass and on to Leadville to the heart of the mining activities. When the line was completed to Symes in August, 1877, it opened the area upriver on the south fork to a more direct way for marketing the vast timber and other resources of that area to Denver.

The Zang Brewery Co. of Denver built the South Platte Hotel at this junction. A station house with telegraph, saloon, general store, post office and several houses and cabins soon followed. The area was later most often referred to as "South Platte" though never incorporated. Its highest population was not more than around 350. The Zang Brewery placed Charles and Mata **Walbrecht** in charge of operating the hotel for a percentage of the profits – he was a former bartender in a Zang subsidized tavern in Denver, Mata a maid in the Zang home. It was considered a "better class" resort hotel with beer



garden and popular with Denver visitors, fishermen and their families. The **Walbrechts** later became owners of the hotel. In August of 1912, a stage coach driver, George **Bellew**, living nearby became drunken and belligerent, having been aggravated because the **Walbrechts** supported his abused 16 year old bride in leaving him. **Bellew** shot at the **Walbrechts**, several guests, and employees and threatened the local telegraph operator, J. A. **Paine**, as he was trying to summons help. **Bellew** set fire to the building before galloping away on his horse. Two days later he was tracked to La Junta, Colorado, where as he was cornered and shot himself to death while trying to escape a posse. Though only two of the victims, Mrs. **Walbrecht** and a guest, were seriously wounded and taken by train to a hospital in Denver, all recovered and Mr. **Walbrecht** soon rebuilt the hotel.<sup>1</sup> In the 1920s two escaping convicts from the state penitentiary also attacked the couple when Mr. **Walbrecht** was the most seriously injured and never fully recovered.. The rail line was abandoned in 1937 but the hotel continued to offer rooms to guests for a few years. The building was sold to the Denver Water Company in 1942. Now the boarded up and vandalized building is all that is left.

Researching the history of the **Kendall** family who settled in Jefferson and Douglas counties of Colorado along the South Platte River spurred my interest in the history of the area. Coming from West Virginia in the 1870s, Stephen **Kendall** (1817 – 1893) homesteaded along Pleasant Park road near Conifer, while several of his children chose to settle along the south branch of the South

<sup>1</sup>. Rocky Mountain News, Aug 4, 2, 1912

Platte River in an area generally referred to as the Sugar Creek community near the present site of Deckers

First in that area his oldest daughter, Eliza Ann, with her husband Theodore **Metz** arrived in Colorado in 1873. They chose a grant in 1879 on the Douglas County side of the river about 5 miles north of Deckers. They named their place the Ox Yoke Ranch. Here besides ranching, Theodore dabbled in trout raising and took wagon loads of fish to Denver where he conducted a profitable business. In summer of 1885 a flash flood roared through his property sweeping away many of his buildings. Discouraged, he left with his family and returned to West Virginia. Elias **Ammons**, later to be Governor of Colorado in 1913, who had earlier homesteaded in this area near several of the **Kendall** families, purchased the ranch from **Metz** to add to his holdings and retained the Ox Yoke name. He was active in the Sugar Creek community as well as in state government. He married in 1888 and built a new home for his bride with an outstanding view of Old Craggie Mountain

(sometimes referred to as Long Craggie Peaks) across the river, one of the most picturesque in the area. Following him to Colorado were four of his sisters, three of whom also homesteaded nearby on Horse Creek south-east of Deckers – the fourth sister, Gwendolyn, may have lived on the original **Metz** ranch and in interviews and correspondence over the years she contributed to stories of the pioneer times



Oldest son of Stephen **Kendall** was Silas S. **Kendall**

(1838 -1908). He came to Colorado with the family in 1878. He with some brothers went first to the Breckenridge area, where he had mining claims near Montezuma in Summit County, but in 1880 returned to the South Platte community and took up a pre-emption claim just north of Deckers on 160 acres, which spanned the river. In the 1870 census of West Virginia, his occupation was listed as “sawyer.” Experienced in that business, he became prominent in the lumbering business, as well as ranching and was a community leader. Among sawmill operators in the area, he was listed along with the South Platte Land and Lumber Company, G. E. **Kearney**, W. W. **Alpine** and Tim **Gill** - also John and Jerry **Mouat** who had a complex operation which included a large mill on Sugar Creek. with at times 60 – 80 employees including men to work in mountainous terrain to reach the timber and haul it out, as well as workers to drive finished lumber to the rail line. A rail spur had been built south along the river for a short distance out of South Platte to facilitate the railroad cars needed to load lumber waiting to be shipped. Timber land was acquired through homesteading of owners, their employees, family members, pre-emption, special timber claims, purchase, etc.<sup>2</sup> At one time, according to an article in the Colorado Magazine, Vol XIII, 10 sawmills in Jefferson County were delivering lumber to the rail line at Buffalo Creek a few

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<sup>2</sup> Montezuma Millrun, Sept 2, 1882; Castle Rock Journal, Jul 14, 28, Dec 29, 1886, Dec 25, 1889, Apr 12, 1895

miles west of South Platte, while as many or more sawmills were operating along the south branch of the river in Douglas County.

This improved road from South Platte (Symes) had been built south as far as the major lumber mills were located with the original intention of extending the railroad that way later – that was not completed at that time, but the road bed provided an excellent route for the huge wagon loads of lumber that were transported regularly to a rail spur near South Platte. This road was maintained by the county, but other wagon roads had to be constructed and maintained by individual ranchers and lumber men as needed to reach their property. It was several years before better roads were built across the mountains in Douglas County to Sedalia and the county seat of Castle Rock.

Development of the ranching business in the river country was led in part by Elias **Ammons** as well as the **Kendall** brothers with Sep **Ackerman**, and George **Fleming** and others in Douglas County, as well as Jonathan **Higginson**, Harvey **Corbin** and their families in Jefferson County, along with many of their associates who had arrived at about the same time. (Many of these men signed as witnesses for each other to prove they had worked their claims as required by the laws.) Before the passing of the Open Range, large round-ups were occasion of great community efforts.<sup>3</sup> Elias **Ammons** along with Jonathan **Higginson** who homesteaded on the north branch of the river, just north of Old Craggie Mountain, continued to be instrumental in organizing Cattle Growers Associations from the local to county and state levels.

Another son of Stephen was William A. **Kendall** (1850 – 1930) who also had some mining claims at Montezuma as well as on the mountain property he homesteaded in Jefferson County on the river across from family members, where he joined them in Sugar Creek community activities. The wives of Silas and William were sisters, with a total of 13 children between the two families. The two brothers were instrumental in establishing the Sugar Creek school with their neighbors. As was the case in many country schools, it was the social center for the community. The **Kendall** brothers as well as Elias **Ammons** were school board members in 1888. A Sunday School met regularly at the school house with William **Kendall** as superintendent, Lizzie **Fleming** as secretary and Nellie **Kendall** as treasurer. A literary club, parties and dances were popular in the community as well.<sup>4</sup>

Two other brothers, Elias and George **Kendall** also tried their hand at mining for a short time near Breckenridge. Elias returned to Jefferson County to homestead along the Kennedy Gulch road between Conifer and South Platte and later on the Pleasant Park road outside Conifer, before heading toward the Western slope of Colorado. George **Kendall** soon headed on to Utah with his family.

Sarah Jane **Kendall** (1854-1920) youngest daughter of Stephen **Kendall** came to Colorado in 1873 with Theodore and Eliza Ann **Metz** (Eliza and Sarah were sister). She married Jesse E. **Ray** who homesteaded near her father on Pleasant Park road near Conifer. He also had a saw mill operation near Conifer and later in Wamblee Gulch near the north branch of the South Platte River. Jesse **Ray** was a county commissioner in Jefferson County from 1891 to 1894. Most of the sons of Silas and William were active in the ranching and lumber businesses. Frank seemed to be following in his father, Silas' footsteps. In the February 27, 1903 issue of the Castle Rock Journal, it was stated "Frank **Kendall** now has the largest wood camp in the county. He is employing 14 men at present and intends to put on more the first of the month." His father, Silas,

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<sup>3</sup> Castle Rock Journal, Feb 8, 1888

<sup>4</sup> Castle Rock Journal, Feb 29, May 2, 1888



perhaps influenced by gold discoveries in Cripple Creek, spent some time in that area leaving some of his large family to maintain his lumber and ranching business – he was living in Cripple Creek at the time of the 1900 census. The oldest of Silas' sons was Jesse Scott **Kendall** who was old enough when they arrived in Colorado to file for a homestead near the others in Sugar Creek community. He was about the same age as Elias **Ammons**, and they were partners in round-ups and other ranching activities.<sup>5</sup> In 1892 he married, Sarah **McCauley**, a school teacher at Symes. He had a timber claim near Nighthawk, a blacksmith shop in the Sugar Creek community, and for a while was road overseer in that area. Also at one time he held a contract to supply decomposed granite for paving projects in Denver loading 10 – 12 cars per day, and 5 cars of lumber a week in 1903 on the railroad.<sup>6</sup> He continued in the black smith business in Breckenridge, Littleton and later Wyoming, before returning to the Platte River in 1921 to live out his life..

A daughter of Silas, Florence, married Marquez **Cathey** of a neighboring ranch family, who lived near Nighthawk. Their daughter Ethel at age 20 was employed at the South Platte Hotel at the time of the 1912 rampage there. Clara, also daughter of Silas, married Delmar **Manning**, another neighbor in the Sugar Creek area. They lived on the Sway Back ranch and Mr. **Manning** had been an associate with the **Kendall** family in the lumber business. Florence **Bossler**, daughter of Sarah Jane **Kendall Ray** lived near Pine in Jefferson County, and was a noted historian in both Jefferson and Douglas Counties.

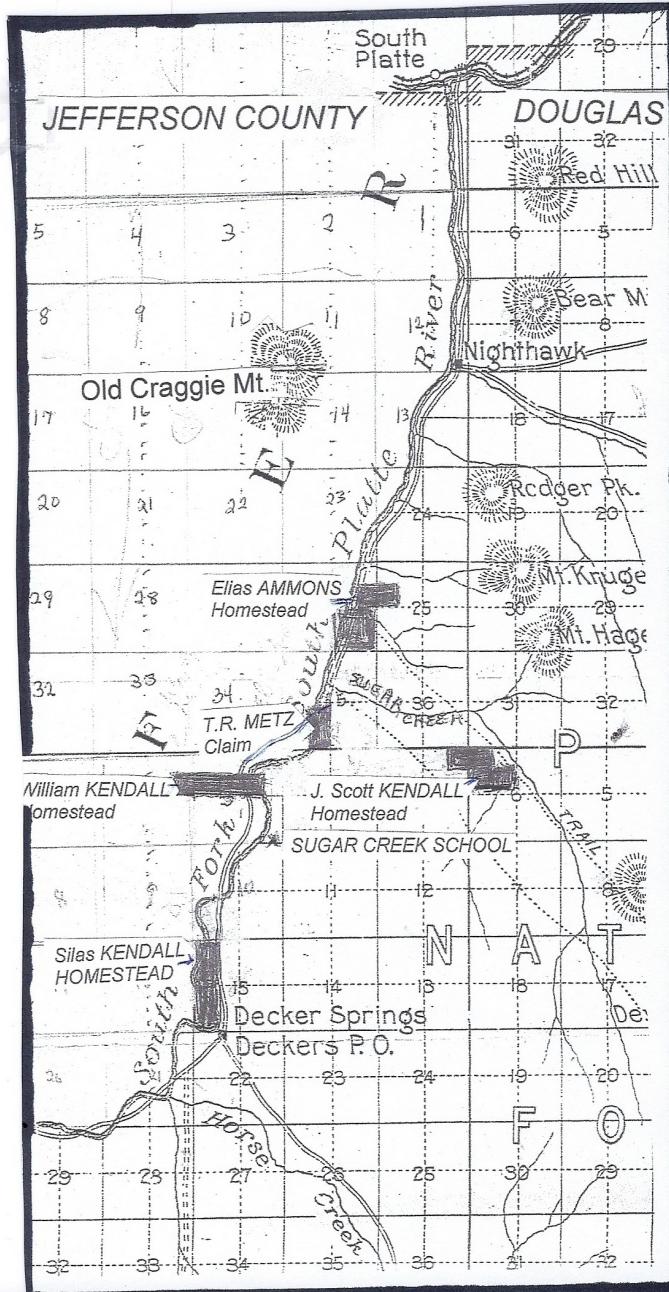
Over the years, several small villages or resorts sprung up along the river. Enoch **Martin** and a son Noah arrived in 1876 and established their place on the river about 4 miles south of South Platte which they called Martin's Place, a popular fisherman's destination. He also operated a quarry where blocks of granite were quarried to be used in the construction of the state capitol in Denver, also gravel for Denver streets. His place continued to operate for a number of years as Twin Cedars, a pleasant summer retreat. Nearby Nighthawk was platted in 1896 where Pine Creek entered the Platte River, when promising gold deposits brought new interest to the area. With expectations of a large community including a mineral spring, a general store, livery stable, two newspapers, and plans for a hotel (that was never completed), hopes were high. When mining in the area did not prove to be as successful as predicted, the town had a short life. The population never exceeded 100 and faded away. Only the sign, some summer cabins and local ranches remain. A little further south, Dunaway was a settlement beginning with mining claims as well; which didn't last long either. About where Mount's big sawmill



<sup>5</sup> Castle Rock Journal, Feb 1, 1888

<sup>6</sup> Castle Rock Journal, Oct 1894, Jul 12, 1901, May 8, 1903

once stood at Sugar Creek, a site proposed as Columbine was platted in 1896 by Frank **Trumbull** who changed the name to Trumbull. A large mercantile store with groceries, mining supplies, dry goods, etc. and a number of cabins to rent was in place to serve the new gold rush but flourished as a community center for some time.



Stephen A. **Decker**, at a spot originally called Daffodil, on both sides of the river began a development about 1897, gradually called Decker's Mineral Spring Resort, with the usual general store, saloon and cabins. The name was officially changed to Deckers in 1917. The Lithia springs water found there were recognized by the Ute Indians with curative powers, and were bottled and shipped by Decker from South Platte to Denver and beyond with some success.

The big project of Cheesman Dam just a few miles south of Deckers was built between 1900 and 1905 by the Denver Water Company who bought out many of the small establishments along the river as the business decreased and their popularity for local entertainment faded. Denver Water Company first proposed building the Two Forks Dam above South Platte in 1902 but the Cheesman Dam was built instead. Two Forks was proposed again in 1950 and in 1974, which would have flooded much of the river basin from South Platte to Deckers, but was defeated by vote each time.

As the years have passed, the lumber and mining businesses have become less important. The ranching and summer tourist families quietly enjoy their peaceful beautiful country and invite a pleasant afternoon drive or visits of fishing enthusiasts from the surrounding area.

#### Sources:

*History and Genealogy of **Kendalls*** by Norman Festus **Kendall**, 1942

Census, marriage, cemetery and homestead records of **Kendall** families

There were many references to the pioneer **Kendall** families in the *Castle Rock Journal* newspaper during these early years about their activities – marriages, deaths and social events.

Pictures by author, Opal **Longino**

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