

PARK COUNTY HISTORY

Pike

Captain Pike's itinerary through the Rockies in 1806 took him through South Park. Following up the Platte, the explorers camped 2 miles west of Hartsel's Ranch, December 17. Thence his route took him westward through Park Range by Trout Creek Pass (9,800 feet high).

Pursley

However, Pike was not the first white man in South Park. James Pursley, a Kentuckian, had penetrated this virgin solitude a year or two before him, and there are traditions of Spanish mines in the Sierra Madre, as the Snowy Range used to be called. The exact location of the diggings was lost. Numerous parties of men, fired by the tales of Indians and Mexicans, set out time and again in the quest for veins of gold and silver supposed to be fabulously rich. It is related that they were always unsuccessful.

Rush to Pike's Peak

For more than half a century South Park remained an uninhabited wilderness. The discovery of gold in the summer of 1858 set the land afire. The following year saw an immigration of a hundred thousand men to the Pike's Peak gold-fields. A handful of surviving pioneers retain vivid memories of the rush to Pike's Peak in 1859. They recall the first discoveries of placers near Boulder, Idaho Springs, and in Gregory Gulch. An army of miners and prospectors overran the foothills; then they pressed on farther west into the mountain ranges, looking for pay dirt.

Prospecting in South Park

The story is told of a party of men – W. J. Holmes, Earl Hamilton, and others – who left the Gregory Diggings and crossed Front Range in July, 1859. Says Hall: "They descended into the magnificent basin of the South Park, as beautiful a vision, seen from the summit of the Kenosha Range, as ever mortal eye beheld in the Rocky Mountains, a broad, smooth and comparatively level plain, surrounded by mountains and threaded by numerous of affluents of the Platte River, debouching from the lofty ranges on either side. Skirting the northwestern rim of the Park, after two days spent in prospecting without satisfactory results, they came to a creek. . . . A member of the party, weary and footsore, perhaps a little discouraged withal from the long tramp, as he threw himself upon the ground exclaimed: 'We have traveled far enough; let us tarry here.' 'Yes,' said Mr. Holman, 'we'll tarry all,' and by unanimous consent the stream and the district were christened 'Tarryall.' "

Gold Camps

Two members of the party had had experience at placering in California. The others knew nothing about mining and "went it blind." By luck they stumbled upon rich gold-bearing ground. The stream bed of Tarryall Creek yielded colors in abundance; reports of the find spread, and soon a multitude of pilgrims poured into the camp. At that time all the placer ground had been staked off into claims, and the owners would not divide. So the newcomers moved on 30 miles or so and uncovered gold in the deep gravel bars of the Platte; they named the new camp Fairplay, thus expressing their unflattering opinion of the men who refused them admittance at Tarryall. Ere long other districts were opened and worked profitably, the most noted being the Buckskin Joe, discovered in 1860 by an old frontiersman of that name.

Park County

These were the beginnings of Park County, one of the original 17 counties of Colorado Territory in 1861. It was named after the beautiful region called South Park, which is formed by an amphitheater of mountain ranges. This plateau or valley was once the bed of an inland lake. It has an elevation of from 8,000 or 10,000 feet. It is some 50 miles long and from 10 to 40 miles wide. The park is a fine grazing section, where run countless thousands of cattle.

Surface

Park County is bounded on the east by Jefferson and Teller Counties, on the south by Fremont County, on the west by Chaffee and Lake Counties, and on the north by Summit and Clear Creek Counties. The crest of Park Range is the western boundary. The county has a variegated surface. It is a vast amphitheater rimmed by giant mountains. Among the sentinel peaks on its borders are Mount Lincoln (altitude. 14,297 feet), Buckskin (14,206), Bross (14,100) Horseshoe (13,912), Silverheel (13,835), Hamilton (13,800), and Evans (13,590). The mean annual rainfall is 15 inches, and the average temperature about 40°. In 1900 the county had 2,998 inhabitants; the population in 1910 was 2,492.

Area

The area of Park County is 2,084 square miles, of which 40,258 acres, or 3 per cent were under cultivation in 1900. The cultivated area in 1909 was 45,000 acres. Stock-raising is the most important industry after mining.

Fairplay

The county seat is Fairplay, on the Colorado and Southern Railway, 114 miles southwest of Denver. Its elevation is 9,896 feet. In 1900 it had 319 inhabitants; the population in 1910 had dwindled to 265.

Mines

Park is an important mining county, having \$18,000,000 to its credit. During the decade 1899-1908, the annual yield of gold averaged about a quarter of a million. On the top of an auriferous peak of Mosquito Range, overlooking South Park, is the London Mine, which has for many years poured forth a stream of metallic wealth. It is situated about 6 miles from Alma. Of late years only a small amount of silver has been mined in this county. In 1908 the production of the precious metals was as follows: Gold, \$417,826; silver, \$15,080; lead, \$23,328; copper, \$6,055; and zinc, \$86,279. The gold output of 1909 amounted to \$555,815.

Resorts

At Wellington Lake, 6 miles from South Platte Station, the sportsman can have the time of his life fishing. He can vary the program by shooting grouse and sage-hens; or he may tramp afield botanizing, or taking snap-shots with the camera. All around and above him is a beatific vision of valleys and heights domed by the blue sky. The sun beats down with a tropical splendor by day, while the nights are cold (even in July). There is many another picturesque retreat in South Park – Lake George, Glen Isle, Insmont, Chase, Shawnee, Cassell's, Hartsel's, Bailey's, etc. – where the pleasure seeker may put in a restful vacation.

EXTRACTION OF PRECIOUS METALS

“In the first place, we find the gold and silver in very small quantities in the ore so that it is rarely visible to the eye. The ore is often composed of iron with a small per cent of lead, zinc, and sometimes copper. All ore has more or less rock (gangue) mixed with it. The average pay ore runs from two to five ounces of gold and from fifteen to forty ounces of silver to the ton; so the parts of value are very small. Sometimes richer ore is found, but more often ore that will not pay to ship to the smelter. “Ore is sometimes found many feet below the surface of the earth in small streaks running through the rock. Before it can be taken out the miner has to drill holes in the hard rock, which requires much labor, then he puts in giant powder and blasts it to pieces... “After the hard rock is blasted out, the ore can then be ‘knocked down,’ and put into sacks and sent up out of the mine to the light of the sun.... “The ore still has some rock clinging to it which must be knocked off with a hammer. This process is called ‘sorting.’ Some rich ore in thin streaks clings close to the rock and refuses to separate and crumbles into dust and small pieces, so the sorter has to give it up and throw it in with the waste....“After a pile of ore has been separated from the rock, it is shipped to the smelter. There it is crushed, then put into furnaces and brought to a great heat so it will run like water. While the ore is hot the metals settle to the bottom, and when it is cooled off the hammer is used to break the rock (slag) from the metal. After this it is treated again, and the metals separate. The small quantity of gold that is obtained from each ton is sent to the mint and has to be purified and brought to a certain test before it is stamped into currency and bears the image and superscription of the Government.” (F. B. Boyd.)

Eugene Parsons, *A Guide Book to Colorado* (Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1911) 253–258.