

Red Feather Lakes Area; An Historical Review

By Mary. E. Dressler, written circa 1988

The History of Red Feather Lakes is difficult to write without considering the quality of life that has evolved in the area.

The mountainous terrain has been here for many, many years providing scenic views. The ice age left the area with basins where lakes were developed by a ditching technique. With the receding ice, the trees grew and a mighty forest developed as well as a snowshed that slowly melts into cold, clear streams and where plant life grows.

This habitat provided for the growth of bountiful herds of wildlife and many species of small game and birds. Life was “purely natural and peaceful” even with the bolts of lightning! Most of this is on-going today and is the quality of life many seek who have and are living in the area.

This area was known to be used for hunting and gathering by the Native Americans. The Utah Utes held rights to the parks and valleys of the mountains and the Arapahoe and Cheyenne and many other tribes had right to the plains, although they overlapped areas. [Also, in 1849, the Cherokee tribes left mounds showing their presence as they traveled to and from the West Coast seeking a better quality of life for their tribe.]*

The first known early settler activities were fur trapping and fishing. In 1843 when John C. Frémont, the explorer, on his 2nd expedition came to the lower valley, he hoped to find some trappers to give him information of the way westward, but the trappers had disappeared. Stories of some who knew their whereabouts tell that the Indian resisted the trappers’ presence and use of their hunting grounds. Frémont then went on northward and then west, leaving the area unexplored.

As the Territory of Colorado was created by an Act of Congress, and approved in February 1861, it is also known that Larimer County was created by an Act of the First Territorial Legislature, on November 1, 1861, one of 17 counties created at that time. This county was named in honor of General William Larimer, one of Denver’s early settlers.

As the territory was being explored and developed on the plains and in parts of the mountains, two particular events had an important effect on our transition to the present form of living. The Overland Stage route changed from the North Platte to the South Platte and brought settlers to LaPorte and Fort Collins, and later into this area. Also on July 1, 1862, the government made Land Grants to the railroad to assist them with economic support for the development of the country in the west. One particular land grant was made on July 2, 1864, to the Union Pacific Railroad for sections 9, 17, 21, 23 and the north half of 27 which was located in the Red Feather Lakes area. These were later transferred to George. W. Bond, and then to Myron Akin, a former mayor of Fort Collins. This land borders the three original Mitchell Reservoirs and these and the ditch to them were funded by Frank Stover of Fort Collins, a city businessman. Water was

considered important for storage and use for irrigation on the plains, as the mountain areas were considered unsuitable for agriculture. However, the first settler brought in cattle and grazed them on grasses near his homestead and water was needed for both to grow.

Water and land became an asset in developing the area as a resort for guests in a ranch-type setting. Promotion and exploitation of the area began with other Fort Collins business people building (summer) homes here. Forming and naming the new resort company and the resort area was selected to honor a charming Indian singer whose name was interpreted as Redfeather plus her theme song "Land of Sky Blue Water." Endeavoring to keep these assets and develop the area, brought a series of land and water rights transfers. Then they began the selling of lots to finance projected buildings and recreation areas, which only produced partial success. Ultimately, the idea of separation of irrigation water rights and recreation water was considered and through negotiations with the State Game and Fish Department, public recreation lakes were sold to them, as well as keeping private recreation lakes for land-owners in the area.

Water was the first quality of life necessary to develop the area. But accessibility still had limitations and the State had already changed from horseback, to wagon, to stage, to rails and improved roads. The transportation means to get to the Red Feather Lakes area had yet to go through these sequence of changes.

The transportation era began here with the tie cutters sent in by railroad contractors after the Civil War. By horseback, the tie cutter gangs came and cut trees and by wagons the trees were hauled out, so trails in and out of the area were made. One such trail became "Carter's Tie Road" and was recorded on an early map. Whether by this road or another, John Hardin came and settled on the South Lone Pine as the first permanent settler here, with others following. He hauled timber to Fort Collins to provide income for himself and his family. He had to discover for himself a means to give monetary support for extra "necessities of life."

The area roads began as mere trails, and then to dusty-dirt or muddy roads, then for many years graveled roadways. In 1973, the forming of a graded and paved roadway into the Red Feather Lakes area began and building and rebuilding continues today. This gave the area the greatest change in the mobility of people here and another quality of life with tourists coming in great number and residents having freedom to move about the have greater services plus other pleasure activities, such as having a summer recreational home.

With the development of transportation and the removal of trees during the mining boom of the '1880s brought prospectors seeking wealth from another land resource. The land here, like much of the west, surely appeared limitless and boundaries seemed endless. Man was literally living off the land. In 1875-76 the Congress passed the Timber and Stone Act to reverse land fraud and forest exploitation. However, this Act did not accomplish what it intended and greater concerns of use, overuse, and abuse of the land brought the new word "conservation" to all people. Then on March 1891, the government took action and set aside in reserves the lands bearing forests. By 1892, 15 reserves were named, 4 in Colorado, and 1 just to the north of Red Feather Lakes

was named Medicine Bow Reserve, and in 1905 it was extended into Colorado. In 1910 that section of the Reserve in Colorado became the Colorado Reserve Forest and in 1932 the forest around Red Feather Lakes was named Roosevelt National Forest. [In 1938 through a land exchange, the Rawah Wilderness became property of the State as the Colorado State Forest.]*. (The Wilderness Act was signed into law in 1964.)

Today the Forest Service has authority over land management and works closely with areas like Red Feather Lakes to maintain recreational opportunities, and through permits, conserve the timber, grazing and minerals of the land, plus provide fire control and protection.

In the 1930s we all know of the economic hard-times, personally or from family-life stories. In the Red Feather Lakes area, the Civilian Conservation Corp had a camp to the west of the development. It provided training/work/financial means for some 180 boys and provided development to the area under the supervision of the US Forest Service. Many recreational hikes were made, the ranger station was built and completed in 1938. The landmark of the recreation hall is still on site. The camp was closed in 1942, sending many of the men to service in the armed forces. (During the war it was used as a prisoner of war camp housing Germans and Japanese soldiers.)

It was a gradual recovery economically for our nation and the Red Feather Lakes area, and after WWII changes came faster in the quality of life as a result of many individual actions, county action and group efforts.

The postal service to the area was originally just a summer Post Office established in 1924 by Jim Esterbrook. Following him was George Wallace, Goldie Hastings, Ted Dunning and the present postmaster, Georgia Hurd. In 1986 a new post office was built on Main Street.

The educational life was begun in 1894 at the Westlake School on the Hardin Ranch. In 1950 a school was built at the east end of Main Street in the village. In 1986 a new facility was finished at the western edge of the community and is part of the Mountain School System.

The site of a silver fox farm, incorporated in 1925, is now the Fox Acres County Club. The development of this beautiful but private facility is a dream fulfillment of Ray Stenzel, who married a girl, Mary Stenzel, whose family had a summer home here. Through Ray's dream, Red Feather Lakes has another quality of life which includes full or seasonal employment for many residents of the area.

In 1942, the telephone service was connected to one telephone in the village, at the Red Feather Trading Post operated by Ted Dunning. The expansion of this service is now widespread and includes a switching-house located in the village.

In 1950 the Poudre Valley REA brought electricity to the area. There has been line expansion and further expansion is planned for the area. They now have added satellite service as a future local service.

Fire protection was achieved in 1959 with the organization of the Volunteer Fire Department. The legal work, in order to have this service, was in the hands of a few capable people. The local volunteers have provided services including safety talks and encouragement in addition to physically being ready when needed. In addition, the medical service provided by EMTs with a qualified quick response team has provided a special service to the area.

Providing for the religious needs of the community, the Chapel in the Pines was built and dedicated in 1963, with May to October services. The Morning Star Church began services in about 1985 and in 1987 they acquired a building with year-round services held since their inception. Their pastor and his wife, Calvin and Nancy Walters, have offered pastoral help to the entire community.

In 1968 the Property Owner's Association was able to build at a site in the village. Although it is primarily for their meetings, it does provide a facility for community events by agreement.

In 1972 the community gained a library foundation and its books were housed in the basement of the Red Feather Lakes Property Owner's Association building. In 1987 a new library building was begun as a result of the Mary Stenzel Memorial Fund in addition to other local contributions. It is now under construction with a completion projected for late May.

To add to the quality of life in Red Feather Lakes, three civic service organizations were formed and are functioning today. In 1966, the Mountain Gals formed from a previous extension club. In 1975, the Mountain Lions Club was chartered. One of their noted projects was the TV relay for the community on Black Mountain. The Red Feather Historical Society which provides local tours and preservation was formed in 1985.

To review, all the historical life of our community, I cannot name all the people who have contributed, each in their own ways, to the quality of life we have today. We enjoy good foods in our four restaurants, obtain food and related items we need in three markets, have the services of three real estate offices, a motel, lodge, a camping park, two beauty shops, a Christmas wreath business, and until recently a car-towing and repair shop. All of these businesses have histories as well as individuals living here. The quality of life is good but we are still striving to resolve some problems while living in this beautiful setting of nature's handiwork.