

# Arapahoe's historical touchstones

*If the landmarks could talk, would they tell the truth?*

By Peter Jones

Arapahoe County may be the suburbs to some people, but to those with a nose for history, Colorado's first and oldest county is a place with its fair share of eccentric characters. Old West sagas and 20<sup>th</sup> century names.

While Arapahoe may not have the Golden Gate Bridge or even Golden Gate Canyon, the county boasts a range of less conspicuous features — not attractions, exactly — but novelties and odd footnotes of Colorado history.

Last month, *The Villager* delved into the town's ghost stories of Littleton and discovered the ubiquitous nature of Historic Downtown's ghosts while randomly walking into area businesses in search of homegrown apparitions.

This survey of several of the county's touchstones is not meant to be comprehensive or even a cross section of Arapahoe's historical sites. So anyone with suggestions for future tours of the area should email them to peter@villagermediagroup.com.

## Alfred Packer's grave

Although Colorado's infamous cannibal made his teeth marks on history in Gunnison County, Alfred Packer had his last meal closer to Littleton (by which time, he was rumored to be a vegetarian). The Civil War veteran received full military honors when he was buried at Littleton Cemetery in 1907.

Colorado historian Tom Noel has conducted several post-mortem mock trials of Packer — in all of which, the accused was found not guilty.

"He was defended as a holistic backpacker, an environmentalist," Noel said. "If everybody took five people up to the mountains every weekend and came back with only one, we'd have

The 17-Mile House in present-day Centennial served both the Cherokee Trail and the intersecting Smoky Hill Trail. Photo courtesy of Arapahoe County



Once a transportation hub, always a transportation hub: Part of the 19th century Cherokee Trail now constitutes the intersection of Arapahoe and Parker roads. Photo by Peter Jones

less congestion on I-70."

Although often called "Alfred," the military headstone in Littleton confirms Packer's first name was "Alfred," though he went by both names, perhaps due to a misspelled tattoo, illiteracy or both, depending on one's preferred legend.

In 1873, Packer was in a party of 21 men who made an ill-fated trip into gold country. The unlucky prospectors met an intersection of bad luck in weather and inadequate provisions. Although details are sketchy, in part due to Packer's varying testimony, it is clear that someone ate someone. But was it murder?

The trail's route ran from Oklahoma northwest to Kansas. From there, it followed the Santa Fe Trail west, turned north along the base of the Front Range and

sloped along Cherry Creek into the valley of the South Platte River. The Cherokee Trail was one of many in a network of trails that helped move ambitious easterners into the untamed West.

Parts of the trail are still walkable in Arapahoe, Douglas and Larimer counties and divisible on Highway 83 from Parker to Colorado Springs.

The 17-Mile House in present-day Centennial served both the Cherokee Trail and the intersecting Smoky Hill Trail. The 1800s watering hole was so-named because it was 17 miles from the intersection of Broadway and Colfax Avenue in Denver. Of the original houses, only the 17-Mile and the 3-Mile House in Glendale — both in Arapahoe County — still stand.

Despite the name of the Cherokee Trail, there have probably been far more traffic accidents on today's Indian-themed Arapahoe Road than there were Indian attacks on the old Cherokee Trail.

"I can't think of any attacks of record," Noel said. "There were probably a few, but there were far more people killed by accidental gunfire than by Indians. The myth of Indians invading a wagon train happened mostly in Hollywood."

## Gothic Theater

Although Englewood's Gothic Theater is best known today for hosting the likes of Death Cab for Cutie, the Cranberries and Blue

recolled. "The minute I heard the 'zing' I knew something was for real... They took the young man right off the picture, and he was never heard from in pictures again."

By the 1970s, as older stand-alone theaters that had once specialized in such fare fell victim to the multiplex, the Gothic eventually became a favorite spot for low-rent punk and heavy metal concerts. By the 1990s, the theater had more than a few battle scars from the resulting abuse.

The Gothic was on the brink of condemnation in 1998 when several friends purchased the building and renovated it from top to bottom. A premier venue for the Colorado music scene was born

and has welcomed the likes of Jack Nicklaus, Lee Trevino and Phil Mickelson.

But the real question — is this south metro golfing institution really where the celebrated Arnold Palmer drink was first concocted?

Reportedly, Palmer once said that it was on the occasion of one of those all-star U.S. Opens in Cherry Hills that he first ordered

his preferred beverage — the one that famously mixed iced tea with lemonade.

As legend had it, a nearby woman supposedly overheard Palmer ask for the drink, turned to her waiter and asked for "that Palmer drink."

In a more recent documentary for ESPN, the iconic golfer told a variation on the story that moved the setting to a scorching hot day in Palm Springs, Calif.

"All of a sudden, the water went over to another table and the lady at the table said, 'I want an Arnold Palmer...' From that day on, it spread like wildfire."

The world may never know the truth.

But for now, I'll just take an Arnold Palmer, please.

Photo by Peter Jones

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Englewood's own Marshall Reed starred as a black-hatted villain in many of the Westerns to play the Gothic.



Palmer's eponymous drink mixed iced tea with lemonade.

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The Gothic Theater was the first movie theater in the area to show talkies before it became one of metro Denver's leading music venues.

Photo courtesy of City of Englewood

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