ARAPAHOE at 150

Colorado's first county was central to state's history

BY PETER JONES

Arapahoe County, whose very name conjures the Old West, was not always a major center for business, technology and suburban sprawl on the south end of metro Denver.

Some recollections suggest the romance of a dime novel or the paintings of Norman Rockwell.

"There was a little park called Grandpa's Acres. I'd walk out there and I thought I could see forever," said Brian Vogt, a longtime resident whose father once served as the county sheriff. "There was a rickety set of stairs that went up to my dad's office. The law enforcement was largely done by posse."

Vogt is no centenarian on a front porch. The 53-year-old baby boomer was a co-founder of the county's newest city and a former president of the South Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce, but he was also a long-ago fixture at Arapahoe County's Little Britches children's rodeo.

"I thought it was the coolest thing in the world to be out in the middle of nowhere in Deer Trail," said Vogt, who still lives in south Littleton, where he was raised.

Although Arapahoe County began life as a barren 19th century territory that some thought best left to Indian tribes, much of the county's most significant and noticeable change has arguably occurred during the last third of its 150-year history.

Even as the county's teens screamed for the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, a dirt road called South Broadway took travelers north from Littleton to Ridge Road where the street turned to pavement and led to the not so nearby city of Denver.

Dry Creek remained a dirt road for years.

Such "city streets" had been designed for horses – and even stagecoaches when the Cherry Creek Trail, which ran through present-day Centennial, intersected with the Santa Fe and Smoky Hill trails in a sort of 19th century mousetrap.

The story of Arapahoe County, which marks its 150th anniversary in November, is one of risk, conflict and change born of economic development. From its genesis as an untamed center of Gold Rush fervor, through its post-war growth period and today's 21st century commercial hub, Arapahoe has always been driven by a pioneer spirit, replete with triumph and tragedy.

Mike Rosser, an amateur historian, a longtime resident and a passionate advocate for preserving Arapahoe County's open space, thinks the county that once attracted a range of colorful characters and 19th century prospectors has reason to celebrate its history.

"It was the original Colorado," he said.

Officials cut the ribbon as Arapahoe County Airport takes off in 1968. The facility, built to serve the burgeoning Denver Tech Center, was renamed Centennial Airport in 1984. From left, Commissioners Howard Abbott, Lou Clinton, John Christensen, John Nicholl, an unidentified Federal Aviation Administration official and airport designer Greg Isbill.

ARAPAHO, ARAPAHOE, ARRAPPAHOE

Arapahoe County was an expansive and untamed wilderness before being resized as a smaller county that now stretches from Denver's western suburbs to small towns on the eastern plains.

The original Arapahoe County was not in Colorado per se. In 1855, the Kansas Territorial Legislature created a decidedly large Arapahoe County to govern the western end of an expanding territory that included parts of what later became Colorado.

"Today's county is a shrunken piece of a huge county that stretched all the way to the Continental Divide," said Colorado historian Tom Noel, author of *Denver: Mining Camp to Metropolis* and other books. "Of course, in those days, they didn't have it well measured. There weren't precise boundaries."

They weren't so sure of spelling, either. The county, which was named for one of the region's leading native tribes, the Arapaho, was sometimes spelled "Arrappahoe" before settlers settled on "Arapahoe," utilizing a final "e" not used by the tribe.

Tom Overton, president of the Rocky Mountain Map Society and lead author of *Atlas of Colorado Counties*, has done extensive research into the state's early documents and has found little rhyme or reason for the various versions of the county's name.

"Spellings were all over the board at that point," Overton said. "There were inconsistent spellings from map to map. Colorado was a wild and wooly territory at that point."

According to some interpretations, the name "Arapaho" was derived from either a Pawnee word for "trader" or a Crow term for "tattooed people." The Arapaho, themselves, originally called their tribe "Hiinono'ei," a word that has been variously translated as "our people," "wrong rooters" and "cloud people."

More puzzling than the linguistic derivations was the decision to name the county for the Arapaho people in the first place, given the European settlers' rocky relationship with natives.

Within a decade of the original county's founding, the *Rocky Mountain News* spoke for many when it began calling for the eradication of Indians.

"Ironic is the word," Noel said. "The names came early. It's ironic that after [public opinion] turned them into 'red devils' that they didn't rename the county. But they named it in '55 before the Gold Rush. Before they knew there was gold here, they might well have been happy to leave it to the Arapaho."

Arapahoe County was not alone in its decision to "honor" tribal culture. Of Colorado's original 17 counties, 10 were named for tribes or individual Native Americans.

Such designations were in stark contrast to emerging U.S. policies that generally advocated moving tribes westward, displacing them from their ancestral homelands.

Tensions culminated in 1864 in what is now Kiowa County when the Colorado Territory militia killed as many as 160 Arapaho and Cheyenne at what became known as the Sand Creek Massacre.
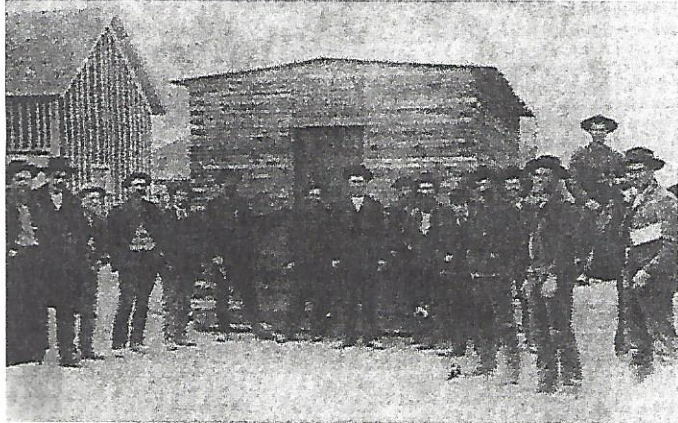
COLORADO'S FIRST

By the late 1850s, people could call Arapahoe whatever they wanted – as long as they didn't call it late for the Gold Rush.

In July 1858, gold was discovered along the South Platte River in present-day Englewood leading to a massive influx of 100,000 prospectors seeking their share of the rumored bounty.
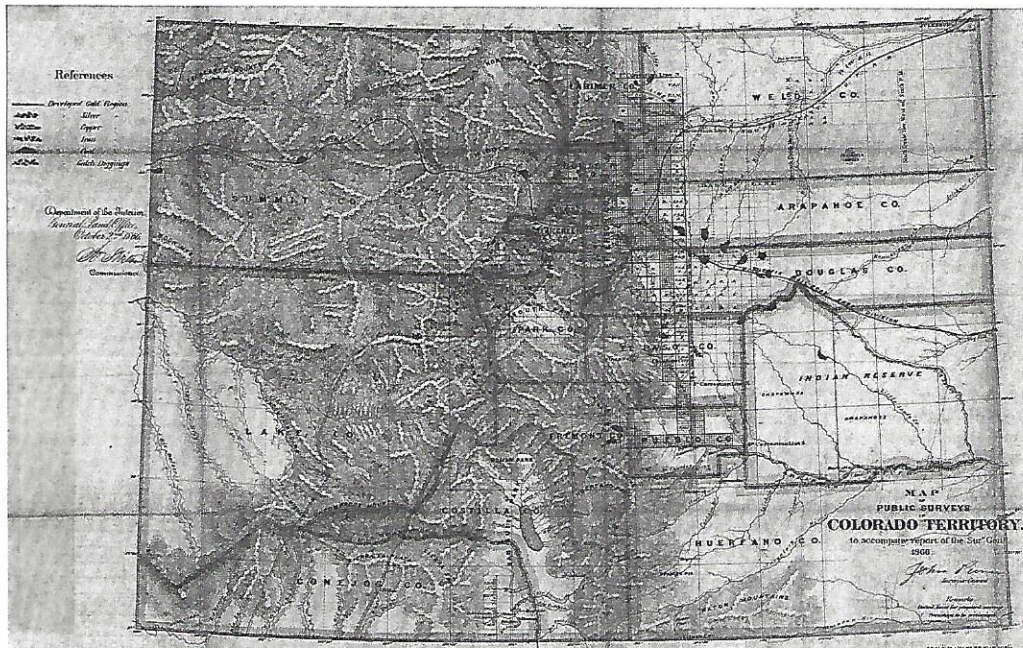
"People believed in gold," Noel said. "You didn't have to work for a living. You could rush out strike gold and retire."

As the population grew, Arapahoe County residents sought increased government representation. As part of a planned separation from the increasingly remote Kansas territory, locals proposed a new Jefferson territory, an ill-fated idea that fell prey to Civil War politics and disinterest in Washington, D.C.

Arapahoe County's first jail was state of the art in the 1890s. The county celebrates its 150th anniversary on Nov. 1.
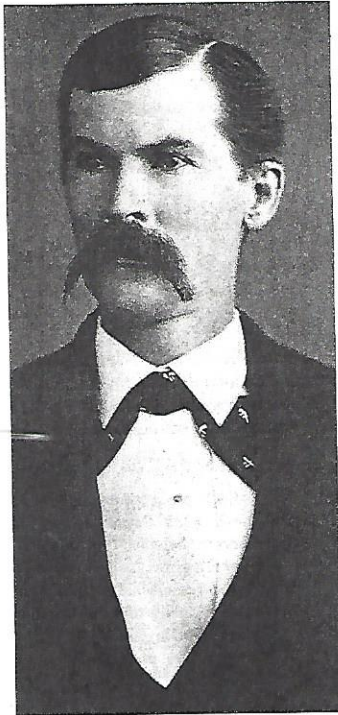
Photos courtesy of Arapahoe County

An official Colorado state map from 1866 shows Colorado's original 17 counties. A larger version of Arapahoe County dates back to 1855 as part of the expansive Kansas territory.

LOOKING FORWARD TO 150 MORE

Charles Patterson was a member of the first Arapahoe County Board of Commissioners to be elected after Denver became its own city and county. He served from 1901 until 1905. Judging by period photos, Patterson's distinctive mustache was a virtual requirement among elected officials of his day.

Although the idea of a Jefferson territory never caught fire on the 19th century beltway, the county eventually saw new political life and was reconfigured again in 1861 when President Buchanan signed legislation creating the Colorado territory.

Arapahoe – now stretching from present-day Sheridan Boulevard to the Kansas border – was declared one of Colorado's original 17 counties. It included parts of what later became Denver, Adams, Washington and Yuma counties.

Denver was the county seat, but by the turn of the century, the city was more than a day's horseback ride from many areas of the county, leading to political issues and problems with law enforcement and delivery of government services.

In 1901, the Colorado General Assembly voted to again rework the county's boundaries, thereby creating a new City and County of Denver, a new Adams County and an entity that would briefly be called South Arapahoe County.

"It was the usual rural vs. urban," Noel said of the political dynamics that split the county into three jurisdictions. "The county commissioners were controlling Denver and the city wanted more power. It's the same issue that goes on today."

In 1903, "South" was dropped from Arapahoe's name.

On Nov. 8, 1904, county voters chose Littleton over Englewood to become the new county seat by a vote of 1,310 to 829.

Ironically, the "gold" that launched the massive emigration that preceded Arapahoe County's growth and eventual statehood for Colorado was largely a "fool's gold rush," according to some.

"They came out and expected to see mountains of gold and they didn't find it," Rosser said. "The gold they found in the rivers and streams around here was pretty modest. Little did they know that the biggest gold deposit in the world at the time was just over the hill in Cripple Creek."

A CHANGING COUNTY

Arapahoe, which once formed the nucleus of Colorado, is now the state's third largest county. At 806 square miles, Arapahoe is also one of the state's most demographically diverse with a population of more than 572,000.

The western end of the county remains largely urban, constituting such Denver suburbs as Littleton, Englewood, Centennial, Aurora, Glendale and Greenwood Village.

The eastern side, including the town of Deer Trail, remains a testament to Arapahoe's rural history, of which the county fair, now based in Aurora, has been central for decades.

"The fair was a big deal," Rosser said. "It was a time to get together. It was the end of the summer before the harvest. It was a time to buy and sell cattle. It was as much a business thing as a social event."

When summer gave way to fall elections, Arapahoe County was a steadfast Republican stronghold for more than a century. A 2008 Democratic registration push and gradual demographic shifts have more recently given a slight edge to Democrats. Unaffiliated voters now constitute the county's largest political segment.

According to Denver pollster Floyd Ciruli, the most crucial demographic variable was so gradual — and inevitable, given the nature of urban sprawl — that neither Republicans nor Democrats paid much attention to it.

"The suburbs got old," Ciruli said of Arapahoe County. "They now have the same problems that old cities have. It's not just low taxes and the issues that have been the main staples of Republican rhetoric for so long. Politicians have had to adapt."

As Arapahoe's population has changed, so has the county's system for representing its various competing political contingencies and geographic areas. In 1996, voters approved increasing the number of county districts from three to five, each one represented by an elected commissioner.

"It's emblematic that you have a growing county with a lot of different interests," Rosser said. "You're moving essentially from an agricultural county to a suburban county, and now you have almost a high-tech county."
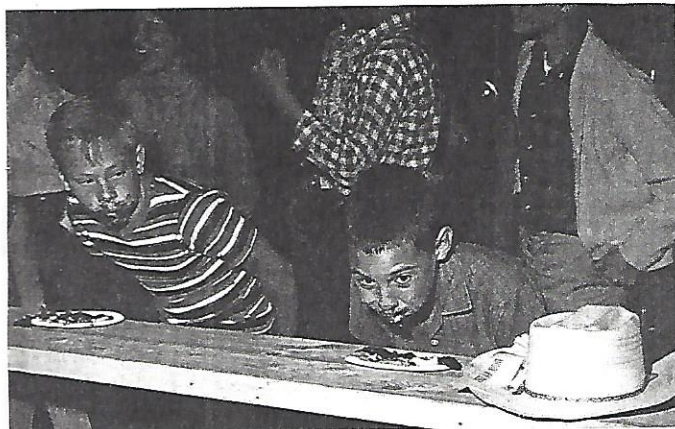
With the rise of the Denver Tech Center in the early 1960s, Arapahoe County was cemented as one of Colorado's chief economic drivers, and many say it is still the perfect blend of urban and rural, with its mix of commerce, suburbs and open space.
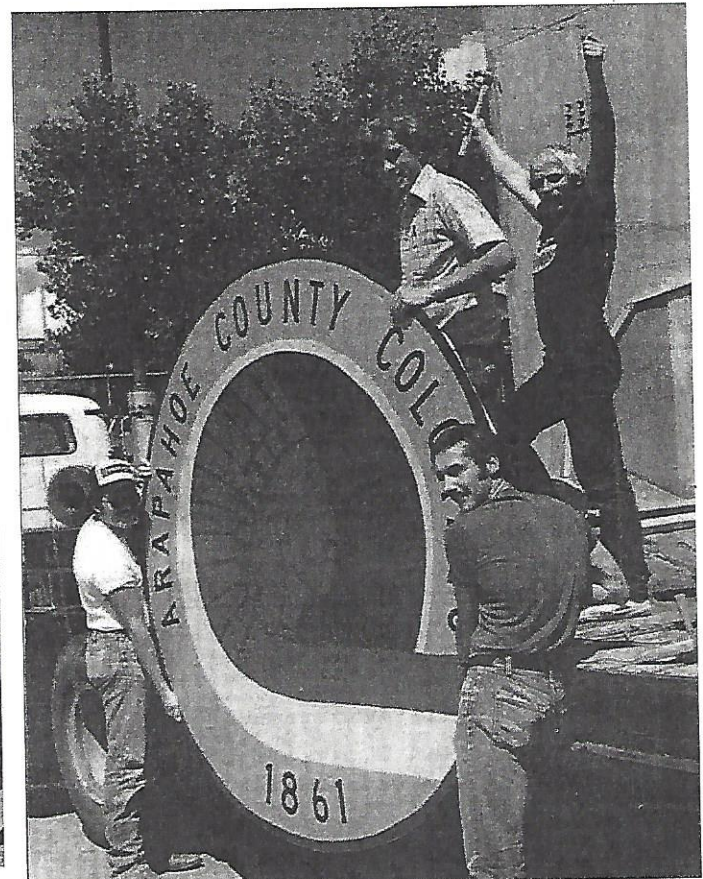
"I've been now to 30 countries and 50 states and I haven't found any place I'd rather be," said civic leader Vogt, who is now CEO of Denver Botanic Gardens.

Rosser, Arapahoe County's Distinguished Citizen of 2010, says the county's legacy is ultimately its quality of life.

"The airplane wasn't invented here. Edison didn't invent the light bulb here, but I have a lot of pride in the people who built the community over the years," the 40-year resident said. "It's a good place to live and a good place to raise a family."

For years, Arapahoe County ran a line of storefront offices in downtown Littleton. In 1977, the offices for the treasurer, assessor and clerk and recorder moved to the new administration building on nearby South Prince Street.

Photos courtesy of Arapahoe County

Volunteers prepare Arapahoe County's float for 1982's Western Welcome Week parade in downtown Littleton. The county celebrates its 150th anniversary on Nov. 1.

The Arapahoe County Fair has been a staple of the county calendar for decades. The event was particularly important to the long-rural county for the first half of the 20th century.