HISTORY OF THE COLORADO RIVER RANCH

By Susie Kincade

After a chaotic plunge through the granite Gore Canyon, the mighty Colorado River begins a peaceable stretch through the fertile cattle lands of northern Eagle County. Braiding its way along a southwesterly course, the river weaves together the lives and livelihoods of people living in many small valleys on its course. In one such valley is the Colorado River Ranch, one of the older historic working ranches in Eagle County.

The breathtaking 1040-acre ranch is embraced on the west by pastel sandstone mountains of purple and rose hues and backed by the Flattops Wilderness.

Three thoroughfares bisect the ranch's lush hay meadows. Running for two and half miles through the heart of the ranch is the Colorado River, paralleled to the east by the tracks of the Denver & Rio Grande railroad and then the Colorado River Road. Each bespeaks a part of the ranch's rich history.

The first evidence of human activity in Eagle County dates to 11,000 years ago. Spear points found suggest that people came here, if not to live, then at least to hunt big game.

About 7000 years ago a small band of people probably passed through lands of the Colorado River Ranch as they followed the winding Colorado River in search of a summer home. About 30 miles farther up-river they set up camp on a sagebrush and juniper bench near the base of Yarmony Mountain. This became the regular summer home for the small clan and its descendants for close to 600 years.

Eventually, one band built a sturdy pit house dug into the ground and roofed with sticks and mud, and decided to spend the winter. Thus, they became the first known year-round residents of Eagle County.

These people knew the cycles of mountain life and weather. They survived off the abundant resources the land provided, no doubt roaming as far as the Colorado River Ranch to hunt. This band gave up its year-round mountain home when a fire destroyed the pit house and stores. For the next several thousand years, the lands along the Colorado River in Eagle County were used mainly as the summer hunting grounds for small bands of people who resided elsewhere.

Around 700 years ago the Ute Indians began concentrating in the high plateaus of eastern Utah and Colorado. They came to the Colorado River and her tributaries each summer to camp, hunt, and gather stores for the winters, much as their ancestors had at Yarmony Mountain.





Natural horsemen, the Utes used their horses to their fullest advantage, for hunting, trading, racing, and working. Within a few generations the Utes bred a fine stock of strong pinto ponies, fattened by the protein-rich mountain grasses. A peaceful people, they shared the mountains with the strange looking white men, little knowing that their world was soon to change irrevocably.

When gold was discovered in Colorado in 1859, the territory's future was cast. During the heady days of the mining boom, Leadville attracted every kind of fortune seeker imaginable.

One such eighteen-year-old was Sam Doll. An adventurer, gambler, and entrepreneur, he followed his instinct to his fortune. Doll arrived in Leadville in the late-1870's and quickly made a name for himself as a professional gambler. It wasn't long, however, before his more adventurous nature took hold and he began to wander from the chaotic mining camp. He rode to Gypsum, where he met another adventurer, James Borah, who knew the terrain and loved to hunt. Borah and Doll partnered up and guided hunting trips, often setting out together to track a troublesome bear or cougar.

Doll's younger brother, Frank, joined him in 1885 and together they set out to secure their future prosperity in the land and growing communities of Colorado's central mountains. The Doll brothers set up business in Gypsum, homesteading 160 acres along Gypsum Creek, and opened the first flour mill and general store in town. However, their land holdings were even more extensive.

Using his knowledge of the surrounding mountain valleys from his hunting days with James Borah, Sam purchased prime land throughout three counties. In 1923, Sam Doll bought the Colorado River Ranch at a sheriff's sale. They called it the Grand River Ranch, after the former name of the Colorado. The Dolls built onto a one-room shack put up by an early homesteader, making a decent bunkhouse for a cowhand or two, but no one lived on the ranch full time.

Around the same time a young couple, Herman and Alice Schultz, were eking out a meager existence, homesteading on 160 acres, eighty miles north of the Grand River Ranch. They lived in a one-room dug out cabin up Red Dirt Creek where Alice gave birth to ten children in sixteen years. Herman supported the family with a lumber mill he built on Sugarloaf Mountain, a few miles above the Grand River Ranch.

In 1916, Herman donated lumber from the mill to build the schoolhouse that still stands on the Colorado River Ranch. When the littlest boy, Elbert, arrived home from school nearly frozen on more than one occasion, Alice Schultz finally put her foot down and insisted that the family move forty miles west to the town of Silt where the children could easily go to school.

Three years later, while tending his mill on Sugarloaf Mountain, Schultz learned that Sam and Frank Doll were selling the western section of their Grand River ranch. Without a second thought, he snatched it up and returned his family to the Colorado River area that he loved.

The Schultz family settled into a one-room cabin under the cottonwood trees where Willow Creek met the Colorado. Life on Willow Creek Ranch, as they called it, was never easy, but it was good.

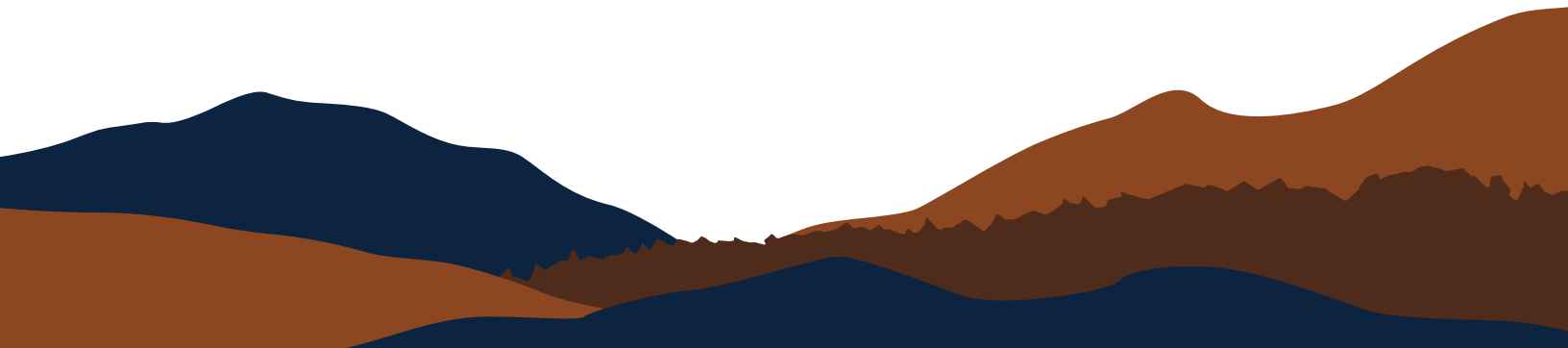
To Alice's delight, the schoolhouse built in 1916 directly across the river from Willow Creek Ranch was put back into service with the arrival of the Schultz clan. The school stayed in use until 1946, and also served as a community center.

The Schultzes' good neighbor, Burr Fuller, lived across the river and to the south. Ruth Schultz Jacox recollected that later several other people lived in that log house at the south end of the Colorado River ranch. For a while a man named Jim Ross lived there and grew potatoes. He constructed the potato cellar that remains today.

To the north and east, the Dolls rented out another portion of their Grand River Ranch to the Stout family. They raised stock and farmed wheat, oats, alfalfa, and potatoes. Eighty-year-old Myrtle Stout Price called to mind that, as the oldest girl, she did all the housework and that the boys hunted coyote for bounty to help support the family.

In 1934 a big change came to the peaceful river valley. The Denver & Rio Grande railroad completed a line from the Moffat Tunnel to Dotsero. The D&RG built a siding directly across the river from Willow Creek Ranch. Overnight, transporting the family's lumber, cattle and sheep became far easier. Within a year of its completion, the Dotsero Cut Off, as it was known, saw heavy freight and high-speed passenger train traffic. The freight and passenger trains continue to run to this day.

In the mid-1940's, the winding Colorado River Road between Sweetwater and Dotsero was finally completed. It has been a delight for leisurely travelers and locals since its completion. However, when the beautiful passageway was nominated for "Scenic Byway" designation in the late 1980's, local folk strongly objected to the improvements necessary and the potential increase in traffic on the road. They won their fight to keep the Colorado River Road a quiet, ambling, country road.



The opening of the Vail Ski Area in 1962, nearly 50 miles from the ranch would eventually have a profound impact on the entire county. But when a Denver philanthropist named William F. Stevens purchased the Willow Creek Ranch from Herman Schultz's son, Bill, in 1964, that part of the county remained fully based in ranching and agriculture. Stevens also bought adjacent lands where Burr Fuller and the Stouts had lived, consolidating the parcels that today make up the Colorado River Ranch.

Bill and Neva Nottingham bought the ranch in 1985. Neva recalls that it was very rundown and neglected when they first moved there. Nottingham set about making it into a profitable working ranch. He added on to existing buildings and built new ones at the north end of the property. Though he bulldozed the old Schultz cabin and bunkhouse, he made use of the schoolhouse as a hog shelter.

Nottingham ran a successful cattle operation for many years before deciding to reduce his land holdings. In 1998, he sold the ranch to Cordillera, a land development company that had seen great success in Edwards. The Nottingham family had owned land throughout the county and had witnessed and benefitted from the transformation. Yet they held tight to a reverence of the land; Bill's wife, Neva, explained that they sold the land to Cordillera "because we knew they'd do a good job taking care of it."

To its credit, Cordillera kept the ranch as a working ranch. Development plans for the ranch never materialized, and in 2008, it was purchased by River Ranch LLC, a partnership based in Jackson and Cape Girardo, Missouri. Since then, River Ranch LLC has returned the ranch to working status while focusing on protecting it as a natural resource and preserving its agricultural heritage.

Today, the river, tamed by multiple dams upstream, runs peacefully in its course. Passenger and freight trains lumber through daily while cattle placidly graze the fertile bottom lands that await the next chapter in the ranch's history. Colorado River Ranch remains spectacularly bucolic, tucked into its high mountain valley, a place that speaks of heritage and history and the continual promise of river and earth.

