History
of Arapahoe County

Arapahoe County was named for the Arapaho Indians, one of the larger tribes of plains Indians, who along with the Cheyenne occupied Arapahoe County east of the foothills running into what is now western Kansas. Arapahoe County is Colorado's first county, since almost half of the entire area now Colorado was Arapahoe County of the Kansas territory. In 1861, when Kansas was made a state, Colorado was made a territory with Arapahoe County as one of the 17 original counties.

The original Arapahoe County was 30 miles wide and extended from Sheridan Boulevard, the present western boundary of Denver, Adams and Arapahoe counties to the Kansas border. This peculiar shape was due to the practice of giving counties with large amounts of plains territory at least some of the foothill territory where there was water for mining and irrigation. Even though Arapahoe County did not reach the foothills, the streams running from the mountains supplied water. As settlers came in and took up lands on the eastern portions of the state, new counties were created and cut down to their present size.

Arapahoe County Courthouse downtown Denver, when Denver was the county seat, circa 1896.

In the late 1820s, trappers searched this region for beavers to supply the great demand for mens beaver hats. In the late 1830s and 1840s, the demand shifted to buffalo skins. In 1832, the first trading post on the South Platte River was built on Cherry Creek, which was then part of Arapahoe County.

In 1848, gold prospectors on their way to California stopped in Colorado long enough to pan its streams. They found gold on West Dartmouth Avenue, just west of Englewood where Dry Creek flows into the Platte River. This was the first important discovery of gold in Colorado and was called Placer Camp or The Mexican Diggings. The Russell party found more gold down the river where it joined Cherry Creek. Here, they established a camp later called Denver. Denver became the seat of Arapahoe County, remaining so until 1902, when the County was divided into several counties that make up the Denver metro area today.

Other discoveries were made besides mining. Cattle grazing on the prairie supplied meat for the growing settlements. During the 1860s, farmers took up claims along the streams because of the ample irrigation for their land.

Arapahoe County Offices in Littleton, circa 1904.

The Town of Deer Trail grew up where a trading post and campsite served the wagon trains heading for the gold fields. The Leavenworth to Pikes Peak stage followed this trail to Denver from about late 1858 through 1860. The Kansas Pacific Railroad followed roughly the same trail. The railroad built a station at the site and platted the town in 1875. Deer Trail holds the distinction of staging the first organized rodeo in 1869. Many of the ranches homesteaded during the 1870s through the 1900s are still in the ownership and operation of the descendents of the early pioneers. Deer Trail incorporated in 1920.

The Town of Bijou was founded in 1870 and was the forerunner to the Town of Byers. It consisted of a general store. In 1873, a post office was established and in May 1889, Leonard McDonnell and John L. Fitzer created the town of Byers on the Kansas Pacific. The town was named in honor of William N. Byers, editor of the *Rocky Mountain News*. In 1899, Byers consisted of a one-room schoolhouse, a store/post office, blacksmith shop, livery barn, depot and a wool loading dock. There were the usual saloons and unpretentious hotels and only a dozen residences.

The Leavenworth and Pikes Peak Express, the first stagecoaches arriving in Denver in May 1859, supplied early transportation for gold seekers and other pioneers. Butterfield's Overland dispatch ran from Atkinson to Topeka to Denver, the first stagecoach reaching Denver in September 1865 by the way of the new Smoky Hill Route. In the 1870s, the Kansas Pacific Railroad, which later became the Union Pacific Railroad, was built across the plains from the Missouri River to Denver.

In the eastern portion of the County, the area was comprised mainly of sheep and cattle ranches. One of the largest ranches was owned by G.A. Snow, who came from New York and accumulated 25,000 acres of land - 12,000 of which were in Arapahoe County. The same family operated the Snow Ranch for 86 years until 1957. Other big spreads were the Parrett Ranch, the Owens Ranch and the Price Ranch.

Today, Arapahoe County is a land of contrast. The County spans 806 square miles, has a population of more than 530,000 and is one of Denver's fastest growing neighbors. While three-fourths of the County is rural, the western part of the County is largely urban with wonderful communities that have accommodated the influx of latter day settlers. Industrial growth included the Martin Marietta plant. The Denver Technological Center, Centennial Airport and Greenwood Plaza are huge complexes, which house offices of world famous corporations. The eastern end of the county remains largely rural with wheat farms and a few cattle and sheep ranches.
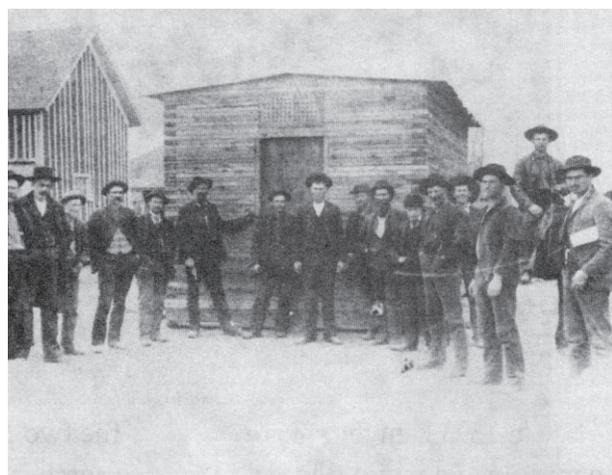
Arapahoe County Jail, circa 1902.