

RIFLE'S BLAST FROM THE PAST

RIFLE HERITAGE CENTER

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Museum Address: 337 East Avenue, Rifle

Museum Phone: 625-4862

The last few months have been a busy for the Heritage Center, starting with Heritage Days and then the full operation of the museum. Lots of volunteer hours have been worked and we thank everyone for their time and effort. Since this was my first Heritage Days, I was in awe of the fashion show. It was really great! Summer has almost come and gone and I have been busy producing crops for our local Farmers Market (held at the lot on the corner of Railroad Ave & Second Street on Thursdays from 4:00 PM to 8:00 PM). I decided to look into the history of local farming in this issue of the newsletter and hope you find it interesting. *Newsletter Editor, George Pearson*

The Grand Valley (Colorado River Valley) is unique in Colorado in that it is a product of sandstone erosion and volcanic ash. These two items create rich, medium to moderately coarse soils that are capable of producing crops under irrigation. However, it is not enough to have rich soils and water in order to grow crops. At a mile high in elevation, you have to have a climate that allows for a long enough growing season. Due to the surrounding mountains protection, the valley has a long growing season in most years.

Growing seasons vary all over the state, but if you look at the Colorado State University website you will find the information for Rifle. Starting in early May, cool season crops can be planted. These include spinach and lettuce, which are 40 to 45 day crops; kohlrabi at 50 to 55 day crops; and beets, broccoli, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, chard, and peas, which are a 60 to 70 day crops. Rifle's cool season in May means an average daytime high of 73 and an average daytime low of 39. We can still get killing frost as late as May 19th, but that is less than 10% of the time.

Next come semi-tender, warm season crops such as summer squash which is a 50 day plant, then cucumbers a 55-60 day plant, beans a 65-70 day plant and the last is corn, a 75-80 day plant. These crops can be planted in late May usually after the 19th.

Following the semi-tender plants come the tender, warm season crops. Tomatoes, peppers, and eggplant are all 70 day crops that can be planted in early June. Then the 75-80 day plants, which are cantaloupe and watermelon. The last of the tender, warm plants are the winter squash, which are 85 day plants.

If you are interested in extending your garden out, you can start again in mid-July and plant cool season crops again and harvest them up to the normal date of killing frost which occurs 90% of the time around October 19th. Overall, we have a growing season that 90% of the time is 128 days long, with some years having up to 152 days, and about 10% of the time 173 days. So far this year we are looking at around a 170 day season, but we will have to wait until fall to see what happens.

When our early settlers came to the valley in 1881 it was important to them to grow crops that they could eat. The valley was full of grass for livestock grazing, but eating grass was not great for dinner. The settlers started off with cool season crops such as spinach, lettuce, radishes, and carrots. A small

garden plot was not too hard to clear, cultivate, plant, and water. Once it was up, weeding started, along with keeping the local livestock and critters out. This was a lot of work, but not impossible. Most early settlers had gardens, but the next step required a different type of settler, the farmer.

Rich volcanic soils were not sitting around waiting for someone to come along and plant seeds in them; they were covered with ten thousand years of native vegetation. Since the ice age, this vegetation evolved depending on the amount of moisture each area got. Most of the valley was covered in sage brush, rabbit brush, and skunk brush. At higher elevations, there was pinon, juniper, and oak brush; and then aspen, spruce, and fir. Fields had to be cleared, ice age boulders and rocks removed, and then plowed. All this was done by hand or by using teams of mules or horses. Once the fields were ready, irrigation canals had to be built to provide the water from the streams, creeks, and the Grand River (Colorado) when possible. It did not happen overnight, but it did happen, acre after acre. By 1884, Cache Creek near Rulison was providing water in the Camp Bird, Harding, Sinnerl, and Holmes ditches.

The farmers not only came to the valley, so did the orchard keepers. The first apple trees arrived in the valley in 1885 and were followed in the thousands by peaches, plums, pears, apricots, cherry, and almond trees. Many of these old orchards survive today, and some still in cultivation, but most are one-hundred-year old trees that have been left on their own to survive. By the 1890's, the cash crops being grown in the valley included watermelon, cantaloupe, grain, potatoes, lettuce, and strawberries.

With the arrival of the railroad, production really started to kick in. The records show that in 1904 the following produce was shipped from Rifle:

- 50,000 baskets of apples. A basket of apples weighs between 80 & 100 lbs., so on the low side that would be around four million pounds of apples.
- 6,000 boxes of pears. A standard box of pears weighs between 36 to 46 lbs., so on the low side that would be 144,000 lbs. of pears.
- 15,000 boxes of peaches. A standard box of peaches weighs between 25 to 30 lbs., so on the low side that would be 375,000 lbs. of peaches.
- 20,000 boxes of plums. A standard box of plums weighs 25 to 30 lbs., so on the low side that would be 500,000 lbs. of plums.
- 2,000 boxes of apricots. A standard box of apricots weighs 25 to 30 lbs., so on the low side that would be 50,000 lbs. of apricots.
- 2,000 baskets of grapes. A standard basket of grapes weighs 80 to 100 lbs., so on the low side that would be 160,000 lbs. of grapes.
- 50,000 pounds of honey. The current wholesale price of honey is around \$4.00 per lb., so in today's dollars this would be \$200,000 worth of honey.
- 60 train cars of potatoes. A standard box car held, at that time, 450 sacks of potatoes. Each sack weighs 100 lbs. This equates to 45,000 lbs. per car for a total of 2,700,000 lbs. of potatoes.

In 1904, local growers sent a box car load of produce to the World's Fair in St. Louis, MO and came back winners. First prize was awarded for peaches and apples from the Silt area. Awards were given for potatoes and the largest sugar beet at the Fair.

By 1905, reports of income averaging \$3,200 from eight acres of peaches were common throughout the valley from New Castle to Loma. The majority of the fruit farms were small due to the large amount of up front capital to buy and plant the trees, and the several years waiting time before production started. There was also a high cost of labor to harvest the fruit. In today's dollars on a commodity basis, the value of the crop on eight acres would have been about \$515,000.

The hog back area was planted in strawberries, apples, grapes, and pears. One area is still known today as Peach Valley, named for all of the peach orchards in the area.



As early as 1898, sugar beets appear as a local cash crop. According to the Colorado State University research, the average cost per acre in 1898 to grow sugar beets was \$30.00, and the average factory price of the beets was \$76.07 per acre. As a result a profit of \$46.07 per acre was expected. In today's dollars on a commodity basis, this would be about \$11,400 per acre. The only crops exceeding this amount per acre in 1898 were some of the fruit crops in Mesa County and melon crops in the Rocky Ford area.

The first sugar beet processing mill in the state was built in Grand Junction in 1899 by the Colorado Sugar

Manufacturing Company. The need for more beets to supply the mill drove the prices higher. Soon the rush was on to change crops over to sugar beets, and beets were planted between the rows of fruit trees in many areas, but this was found to be unworkable at harvest time. Before the sugar beet rush ends, over 3000 acres of land from Silt to Rifle were planted in sugar beets. Many local families were involved and can speak of hot, back-breaking long days of hand weeding the sugar beets, thinning the beets, and harvesting the beets. School was let out in late October for the beet harvest.

Special sugar beet knives are on display in the museum. They have a three-inch-long hook on the end of the blade that was used to pick up the beet, and then the top was cut off by the knife blade. The tops were good cattle feed so they were saved and fed when the beets went to the mill. Harvest amounts and quality were very high in the area. C.H. Harris of the Catherine Store



area in Garfield County produced 37.98 tons of beets per acre with a 17% sugar content in the beets and 80.1% purity. The average statewide was 10 to 13 tons per acre, 12% sugar content, with 78% purity. Mr. Harris was producing almost four times the average yield. Other farmers in the 1898 report were Harry Brenton of Rifle, and Charles H. Miller of the Antlers area between Rifle and Silt.

When the Spanish-American War broke out and Cuba was disrupting the United States sugar supply, investment opportunities in beet production seemed to be the way to go in the Rifle area. Arthur Havemeyer of the American Sugar Company was one of the interested investors. He and his family were leaders in the United States sugar industry and had vast sums of money to invest. Having visited the Rifle area, Havemeyer envisioned sugar beet fields from Rifle to Parachute along the northern banks of the Colorado River, with a sugar beet mill in Parachute. Arthur and his family invested

heavily in the Wilcox Canal Company with plans to irrigate 8,000 acres around the Sharrard Park area west of Rifle, as this land was not farmed. To reach the park, twenty-seven miles of ditches had to be constructed, a tunnel had to be bored through Webster Mesa just west of Rifle, and large pumps had to be installed at the intake area near Rifle. Other facilities included a pumphouse, a forebay on the river, siphons, head gates and protectors, as well as large areas of concrete lining for the ditch.

A new boom was on in the Rifle area, but this time it was fueled not by oil shale, but another natural resource...irrigated farm land. The Havemeyer-Wilcox project total estimated construction cost for the irrigation system and the land was about \$500,000. Yes that is a half a million dollars in 1912 which today would be \$24,800,000 measured by an income or wealth standard. The project was dedicated by the Colorado Governor John P. Shaforth on May 10, 1912 with considerable celebration. Banquets were held, speeches made, and promises of great new days flowed. Sound familiar? Unfortunately, the Colorado River would flood in June of 1912, washing away the head gate, flooding the entire system, and doing permanent damage to the intake pumps. Others tried, but in the end the tunnel caved in and the project failed. No sugar beets were ever grown in the Sharrard Park area and even today it remains sparsely settled. The ditch and some of the head gates are still visible on the north side of the interstate between Rifle and Parachute.

With the advent of World War One in 1915, a greater demand was placed on farmers which ushered in a new era of mechanized farming. Steam tractors replaced mules and horses, and not much later those were replaced with gasoline powered tractors.

Local celebrations in Rifle started out as Watermelon Days in 1891, but soon change to Apple Pie Days in 1909, when the local apple trees start major production.

Today Triangle Park is known for its snowmobiling, but in the 1920's lettuce was a crop produced at Triangle Park grown in fields where the weather was cooler than the valley floor. The lettuce was transported first by wagon, then later by truck to New Castle where it was processed, packaged, and shipped out on the railroad to market.

The years from 1915 to 1920 were the peak years for fruit and beet growers in the area, adding millions a year to the local economy, and establishing local communities that still exist day. But the post war depression was especially hard on the local farmers and the boom in farming slowly faded, orchards and beet fields changed over to hay and potatoes, and then almost completely to hay. Farming still is an important part of our local economy and as we celebrate the farming season, let us not forget the role farming played in development of our community.

UPCOMING EVENTS

2016 MEMBERS LIST

Businesses:

ALPINE BANK
GRAND RIVER HEALTH
MILLERS DRY GOODS
NEW UTE THEATER SOCIETY
TOWN & COUNTRY VETERINARY HOSPITAL
WEISS & ASSOCIATES
JEANS PRINTING
SPORTSMANS' S BARN TAXIDERMY
DEE MCCOWN INSURANCE AGENCY
EAST AVENUE CARPET AND TILE
MOUNTAIN HIGH PAINTS LLC

Individuals/Seniors/Families:

BETTY CLIFFORD
JAN AND ROGER DAY
CECIL AND BETTY WALDRON
ALAN AND PATTY LAMBERT
JAMES AND ALBERTA LANGSTAFF
JAY ROCKWELL
JAY MILLER
LINDA KNAPP
BEN AND NANCY LEMON
DAVE AND SHIRLEY LAWSON
GAIL COOMBS
MARY ELDER
KEVIN AND KATHY RUNIA
JUDY BUILTEMAN
LORI BABCOCK-WARGO
DICK RHOADES
MARCIA ANTES
MARLEA AND PHIL ANTES
JAKE AND BECKY MALL
HARRY HUTTON
MARYHANNAH THROM
KIM FAZZI – Lifetime Member
DAVID CAYTON – Lifetime Member
TRAVIS AND DIANA CASEY – Lifetime Member