

Colorado history - territorial prisons - Part II

Riots, madness and reforms

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With the explosion of the population in Colorado Territory, the prison inmate population swelled as well, necessitating several wall expansions and new cell houses being built. The original prison wall was started in 1875 and was completed in 1878.

According to Stacey Cline, administrator of the Museum of Colorado Prison in Canon City, there were three major wall expansions, 1884 – 1885; 1888 – 1889; and 1900.

The expansions went east toward the city and north along the east side of the hogbacks, west of the city.

In the early 1890s, the famous Fremont House at 105 Main Street was torn down to make way for the 1900 prison expansion. The Fremont House was a stage stop and also housed the post office, school and general store in the basement. The Fremont was one of Canon City's leading hotels in the 1870s.

According to the "Self Guided Tour of Downtown Canon City, by the Fremont County Heritage Tours," the deputy warden's house was built on the site of the Fremont House in 1901. Considering all the amenities the house had, it only cost \$7,500 to build, using local materials and prison labor. The house was heated by steam from the prison boilers and included hot and cold running water as well as electricity.

The deputy warden's house was in use for almost 100 years, 70 years by prison officials and then as offices, before Department of Corrections vacated the building in 2007.

In 2003, an historical structural assessment of the building found at least \$1/2 million in rehabilitation work that needed to be done.

With no money, the DOC has left the house vacant since 2007 until now, that

is. Cline said that prison officials and prison museum officials were in negotiations for the museum to take over, refurbish and restore the historic building as part of the museum. Things could be happening after the first of the year, said Cline.

The house was designed by popular Canon City architect Charles C. Rittenhouse as a residence in the Queen Anne style, with an unusual combination of elements, especially the large tower in front.

In the book "Memories From the Foot of the Gorge," by Donna Taylor, in the early days, wardens were short-lived because of delinquency, neglect of prisoners, breach of trust and neglect of duty; The wardens ruled, though, with almost as much power as the governor.

With Prohibition (1920 – 1933) swelling the prison ranks, then, Warden Crawford begged for money for the prison before the 1929 riot in which three cell houses were lost, according to Cline.

After the 1929 riot, the youngest warden, Roy Best, was appointed interim warden and then warden in 1932 at 32-years of age.

After the riot, money flowed into the prison, and Best rebuilt the destroyed cell houses as well as the Women's Correctional Facility in 1935, which now houses the Museum of Colorado Prisons. Best, the son of a warden, ruled as warden for more than three decades and was quite a character in his own right.

The prison used the barns located at the current Pueblo Community College campus. They had gardens there, which furnished vegetables and fruit for the prison. The male inmates tended the gardens until 1980, said Cline.

The work was then turned over to the female inmates. Since there were never as many women as men, the work was too much for the women and was turned back over to the male inmates.

In 1905, famous Skyline Drive was built by prison inmates. The drive follows the spine of the hogbacks east of Canon City with steep drops on both sides of the road. The drive, which is one-way, starts State Highway 50 west of Canon City, goes up and along the hogback spine past the dinosaur tracks, and drops down into Canon City on the other side north of the prison.

In the first one hundred years of operation, the prison saw over 40,000 inmates before the numbering system was changed in 1970, said Cline. Today, there are about 890 inmates.

There have been some very famous and infamous inmates, including cannibal Alferd Packer, who was in for manslaughter, not murder due to a loophole when the Territorial Prison was turned over to Colorado State. The museum sponsors an annual fundraising event called "Alferd Packer Wants You For Dinner."

One of the younger inmates was 11-year-old Anton Wood, who was incarcerated for stealing a watch. Wood may have taken the fall for his father, said Cline, but he was imprisoned with the men by the judge's order, even though twelve was the age limit.

Otherwise Wood would have gone to a juvenile detention facility. Wood used his prison time well, though, and was fluent in three languages and played the violin and piano when he was paroled at age twenty-three.

One Park County inmate was Peter Allstrum (some spellings show "Alstrum"), who was incarcerated for

murder. Allstrum homesteaded the area where Thirtyone Mile Creek joins Currant Creek just north of the Guffey turnoff from Colorado Highway 9, in the 1880s.

Allstrum was the mail carrier in the Currant Creek area and the Kester postmaster, as well as a farmer raising crops.

Christina, Allstrum's wife, raised hogs. These hogs sometimes rooted in their neighbor Horace Voss' garden. Voss was squatting on the neighboring homestead and was not of upstanding character in the community.

On a June day in 1884, Voss confronted Allstrum about the damage to his garden by Allstrum's wife's hogs and demanded payment, according to an article in The Fairplay Flume newspaper, whereupon Mrs. Allstrum came by with the hogs. In the ensuing argument, Voss struck Mrs. Allstrum with a piece of two-inch by four-inch fence railing, and Allstrum shot and killed Voss.

Allstrum was sentenced to the Territorial Prison for two years at hard labor in 1885, leaving his wife and seven children to manage the homestead. Shortly after Allstrum was incarcerated, Mrs. Allstrum gave birth to twins, increasing the family to nine children.

Bad luck seemed to follow the Allstrum family, when in February 1886, all the ranch buildings burned to the ground and Mrs. Allstrum broke her arm.

One horse of their team of horses died, too. Mrs. Allstrum's friends and many others petitioned Governor Benjamin Eaton to grant Allstrum clemency because Mrs. Allstrum was destitute.

Governor Eaton granted Allstrum a full pardon in 1886. (For a more complete account, see South Park Perils, by Christie Wright.)

Another Park County Territorial Prison inmate was Harry L. Beeler. Beeler, his parents Joe and Annie, and his sister Beulah lived, homesteaded and mined at Black Mountain, west of Guffey, in the late 1890s.

In 1913, when times were rough for the Beelers and Harry was 30 years old, he was arrested, tried and convicted of cattle rustling and was sentenced to one and a half to three years in prison in Canon City in 1914.

Whether Harry was framed by the local ranchers, as his mother claimed, took the fall for a family member, or was guilty himself, he shortly went insane in prison, and in October, 1915, he was transferred to the insane asylum in Pueblo.

In 1916, Harry's mother got him paroled by the governor to her custody and took Harry home to Black Mountain, where he spent twelve years chained, naked and starving in a remote, isolated cabin.

Finally in 1928, when his sister died, Harry was taken back to the Pueblo Asylum where he died in 1943.

So, for a one and a half to three year sentence, poor Harry spent thirty-one years confined, but the Beelers are another story.

The Territorial Prison, built in 1868, has seen riots, escapes and executions, and led the way to prison reform within the Colorado prison system, according to the museum pamphlet.

The first meeting of the Colorado prison committee was in 1983. This led to the establishment of the Museum of Colorado Prisons, which opened in June of 1988. (to be continued)