



Parked in the Past

46 years in Howbert, 1887-1933

Former ranching, railroading community covered by Eleven Mile Reservoir

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There's not much left of Howbert, Colo., except fading memories and a few photographs.

The town and its two nearest neighboring communities – Idlewild and Freshwater Station – have been submerged for 46 years under the 117-foot depth and 3,405-acre expanse of Eleven Mile Reservoir at Eleven Mile State Park in southeastern Park County.

But before the abandoned towns were covered by the reservoir, they were the nucleus of a ranching community where people lived, worked, played and eventually died. After the railroad was established, Howbert was also a loading point for livestock and had a 42-car-capacity passing track.

Those facilities were used to ship the “largest cattle deal every made in Park County,” said the Aug. 9, 1907 Flume. The Witcher ranching family sold 8,000 head in August 1907. “The cattle are to be gathered and shipped from Howbert on the Colorado Midland by Dec. 1,” it said.

Beginnings

The Colorado Midland Railroad began operating from Colorado City (near the present-day intersection of U. S. 24 and 21st Street in Colorado Springs) to Leadville in 1887. As the track crossed South Park, the Midland established stations along the route, including Howbert at mile 52.1. It was named after the prominent Pikes Peak pioneer, Irving Howbert.

The site was originally called Dell's Camp, probably for B. R. Dell, the proprietor of Dell's Store, which had been established at that site before the railroad came through.

The post office at Howbert was started in December 1887. A survey of the new town of 125 lots was completed in June 1888 and approved by the man who owned the property, James M. Petty. Streets were aptly named Dell, Midland and Petty.

Business

By September 1888, Dell was building a new store, “the largest building of its kind

in the county,” according to the Sept. 27, 1888, Flume. He planned to use the upper floor for a church and meeting hall, the main floor for the store, and the basement for storage. Construction was completed quickly. Less than a month later, the Oct. 18, 1888, Flume reported the store was done, and Dell was moving his stock into the new location. The post office was also moved to Dell’s new store.

Also in September 1888, Hardy Epperson was building the South Park Hotel and its adjoining shoemaker shop. He and his wife, Josephine, managed the Howbert Restaurant, likely inside the hotel. The Hardy Eppersons were residents of South Park as early as 1880.

A butcher shop was under construction, the Howbert Saloon sold “choice cigars and liquors,” and a sawmill was turning out “lath in large quantities, as well as other lumber,” according to 1888 issues of The Flume.

Howbert had a telegraph office, drugstore, two more saloons, a depot, a schoolhouse, blacksmith shop and “about 25 tar-papered houses,” according to Harry C. Epperson in his 1944 book, “Colorado As I Saw It.”

The town also had a cemetery, believed to be on dry land, according to the Colorado Parks and Wildlife website. Its location is unknown.

Life in Howbert

The Flume reported in the Sept. 27, 1888, edition that “Howbert is the liveliest town in the county for its size.”

And its size was small. The U.S. census of 1910 shows 35 households in Howbert and a population of 73; 10 years later there wasn’t much change. There were 29 households with a population of 70.

Even though the trains were long gone, the population grew in 1930 to 107 residents in 31 households.

But maybe it was lively. In Harry C. Epperson’s book, he wrote about growing up in Howbert. A son of Hardy and Josephine Epperson, he was born about 1880. He said, “Two women lived down by the railroad bridge, their cheeks were painted red and their hair was died yellow.”

As a child, Harry Epperson was curious about the two women. He said, “I often wondered, as a boy, why all of the other women went into a whispering huddle whenever these women entered the stores, and why they didn’t attend any of the neighborhood dances or parties.”

Parties

And there were parties in Howbert. One was after the November 1888 election. The citizens of Howbert “enjoyed a grand barbecue at which whole beeves and mutton were served and consumed and the whole neighborhood participated in a grand dance in the evening,” the Nov. 22, 1888, Flume reported. The reason for the celebration was the result of an election bet.

The story didn’t say who lost the bet and paid for the town party, and one can only speculate on what the election bet may have been. But it could have had something to do with the close race in the presidential election. In 1888, Grover Cleveland, the Democratic incumbent, won the popular vote by a slim margin yet lost the election in the Electoral College to his Republican opponent, Benjamin Harrison. (Ironically, four years later, the tables were turned and Cleveland was elected over Harrison.)

The town also had an annual ball. A photo donated to the Park County Local History Archives from the Harry C. Epperson Estate has a caption: "Howbert, 1899, Epperson annual ball." The photo shows a group of about 50 people, outside on a porch dressed in their best. It appears the "annual ball" was attended by just about everyone in town.

Mining

Not all of the mining in Park County was along the Continental Divide. The March 17, 1892, Flume said there "seems to be quite a mining boom" in the foothills south of Howbert and Spinney (a town 5.5 miles west of Howbert, now gone).

It said that "there is a mysterious whisper going of valuable discoveries already made, but we have no authentic intelligence." But it did report an increased interest in picking up area property on delinquent tax liens.

The Flume may have been referring to a boom at the Freshwater Mining District (now Guffey), 16 miles south of Freshwater Station.

Later that year – in July – The Flume reported three placer claims had been filed "on ground lying between Howbert and the Eleven Mile Canon."

(When trains were the primary source transportation in the county, printed literature and newspapers frequently used the spelling "canon" instead of "canyon." After the railroading era, spelling was typically "canyon." Examples are Platte and Eleven Mile – both previously spelled "canon" and today spelled "canyon." A reason was not found.)

One wonders if that was the reason why "the Cripple Creek people" were "agitating strongly" to form a new county

by merging parts of Park, Fremont and El Paso counties, as reported in the Jan. 12, 1893, Flume. For Park County, the deal would have cut about 270 square miles from its southeastern corner.

That takeover would have included the area around Howbert, Eleven Mile Canyon, the future site of Eleven Mile Reservoir State Park, a small portion of the future Lost Creek Wilderness and a portion of Tarryall Road from U. S. 24 up to a point midway between the Ute Creek Trailhead and Twin Eagles Campground, where Allen Creek crosses the road, or all points "east of Range 73 and south of Township 10," The Flume said.

It would have taken 12.5 miles of Midland Railroad track. That property alone, worth \$9,124 per mile, would have resulted in a loss of \$114,050 to Park County.

The Flume reported that "probably one-tenth of our taxable property would be taken from us, and that is a matter that interests everyone in the county."

But it didn't happen. When Teller County was finally formed in March 1899, Park County did not give up any land, and Teller was formed from parts of El Paso and Fremont counties.

Not all good

It may have been a good life at Howbert, but it wasn't all good. The nearest doctors and law enforcement were 40 miles away at Fairplay. People in the vicinity of Howbert had to take care of things on their own.

In December 1889, The Flume reported "eight cases of typhus fever and pneumonia in Howbert." Three of the eight were reported to be severely ill, and one, a Mr. Hunter, also had suffered a "paralytic stroke."

(Typhus fever is a bacterial infection and is spread by the bites of lice, fleas and ticks. The most common in Colorado is tick-borne typhus fever, or Rocky Mountain spotted fever. But a person is unlikely to be bitten by a tick during a South Park winter. Another form of typhus fever is spread by lice in winter months, when people are mostly indoors, living in close proximity.)

In September 1890, a gunfight in Hammond's Saloon in Howbert left one man, William Langley, seriously wounded. The Flume reported, "(He) is said to have a fair chance of recovery." Langley's brother, George Langley, came up from Colorado Springs to attend to his wounded brother.

But soon after arriving in Howbert, George Langley was fatally injured when he ran directly at a Midland train engine that was speeding through Howbert and was "horribly mangled." He died within an hour.

A newspaper story in September 1890 reported, "The theory is that he had become insane from excitement and deliberately committed suicide."

In May 1894, Father John Dyer, then age 82, was accidentally thrown from a vehicle while traveling from religious services at Balfour. He was cared for at the Robbins family home at Howbert. Dyer recovered and lived another seven years; he died June 16, 1901, at age 89.

Accidents happen, and one four miles east of Howbert on Aug. 27, 1915, seriously injured 33 passengers on an eastbound Colorado Midland train returning from a "Wildflower Special" excursion. The Midland ran daily summer excursions from Colorado City to the town of Spinney, stopping along the way so passengers could take photographs

and gather wildflowers. The eastbound crew was given orders at the Howbert station to wait at Idlewild (3.5 miles east of Howbert) until a westbound train passed. For whatever reasons, the eastbound didn't wait and the two trains collided a half mile east of Idlewild.

The original investigative report dated Sept. 16, 1915, which said the view of both engineers "was obscured by the almost perpendicular walls of the canon on the south side of the railroad," gives a hint of the accident location.

Midland shuts down

The Colorado Midland had an even shorter life than Howbert. It ran 31 years, until 1918. The tracks were dismantled in 1921 and a highway was built along the old rail bed. That was a blow to Howbert, but by then transportation needs were shifting to motor vehicles, which had been mass produced since 1912.

The town held on for another 15 years, until 1933.

Howbert's end

But population growth in Colorado's capital affected the citizens of Howbert. In the first part of the 20th century, the City and County of Denver began looking for more water sources; that search lingered on South Park. By 1926, its Board of Water Commissioners decided on the Eleven Mile site and started survey work for the Eleven Mile Canyon Dam.

Construction of the dam started in 1930 and was completed in 1932.

The town of Howbert was still alive on April 10, 1933, when a special meeting was called by the Howbert school district. The meeting was to decide where to move the Howbert schoolhouse and "also to authorize the school board to spend

the necessary money to move said building to (a) new location. (And) also to (authorize the school board to) purchase the necessary ground for same," according to a notice posted by the Secretary of Park County School District No. 6, Alice Jones.

Later in 1933, the last of the property that was to become Eleven Mile Reservoir was purchased by Denver. Gradually the South Platte River flooded Howbert, Idlewild, Freshwater Station and some of the nearby ranches. An extension on the dam in 1957 buried more ranch land and brought the reservoir's capacity to its present 97,779 acre feet of water.

See next page for images.



Epperson family

The Hardy Epperson Family was made up of ranchers in the area before the town of Howbert was established. They built the South Park Hotel and managed the Howbert Restaurant. From left are Hardy, Mecia, Albert and Josephine. Harry is in front. This photo is circa 1890. (Photo courtesy Park County Local History Archives, Kathy Cleveringa collection)



Howbert hotel

The South Park Hotel in Howbert was completed in 1888 by Hardy and Josephine Epperson about three months after the town was platted. It later became the Epperson home. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives, Harry C. Epperson Estate)



Annual ball

At the Epperson Annual Ball in 1899 at Howbert, guests dressed in their best clothes for an evening of dinner and dancing. Here the group gathered on a porch to pose for a photo. (Photo courtesy Park County Local History Archives, Harry C. Epperson Estate)



Park County 1895

The Park County map of 1895 showed about 20 towns and settlements that are not on current maps, including Howbert, Spinney and Idlewild. (Map courtesy of the Park County Local History Archives)



Dam

The Eleven Mile Canyon Dam, shown here on Oct. 19, was built from 1930-1932 “upon a series of stair steps cut into the surrounding rock wall rising 147 feet high above the bedrock,” according to the Colorado Parks and Wildlife website. Because of this, it is not the dam that holds the weight of the water, it is the canyon walls. The dam holds 97,779 acre-feet of water over an area of 3,405 acres. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)



Howbert point

This photo, taken on Oct. 19, shows the Howbert Point campground and fishing area on the south side of the reservoir. The name is all that survives of Howbert at Eleven Mile State Park. Other places, named from the Howbert era, are Witcher's Cove Campground, Rogers Mountain Fishing Access and Stoll Mountain Campground at the reservoir (named for early pioneers) and Idlewild Picnic Area in Eleven Mile Canyon. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)