



Parked in the Past

1880s Park County wildfires spur creation of Pike National Forest

Fires advanced concern for timber protection, water conservation

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June 28, 2013

Lime Gulch, Lower North Fork, Hayman, Waldo Canyon, and – most recently – the Black Canyon fire in the Lost Creek Wilderness.

The names are representative of wildfires that fairly recently have affected Park County and its neighbors.

It's nothing new.

“The whole atmosphere is hazy with the smoke constantly rising from neighboring forest fires,” a clip from the June 23, 1881, Flume, said.

It could be a headline in today's news.

Devastating and destructive wildfires, burning countless acres of timber, have been recorded in Park County since the 1860s gold rush days.

Colorado State Forestry

In response to forest fires burning throughout the state, the Colorado State Forestry Association was established in November 1884. Its purpose was to “prevent or diminish the reckless waste and destruction of our mountain forests,

and to encourage, as far as practicable, forest tree planting,” said the Aspen Daily Chronicle on Feb. 16, 1891.

The group fought to make it a criminal offense “to carelessly or willfully set prairie or timber fires” or “to set campfires and fail to extinguish them.”

It supported the creation of forest reserves, the predecessor to national forests. By coincidence or not, two of the first four national forest reserves were established in Colorado; they later became parts of the White River and Pike national forests.

Early fires

The years of 1879 and 1884 were particularly prolific for fires, according to newspaper stories.

The fires typically reported in The Flume were fires burning outside of the county. They affected county residents when they produced large plumes of smoke blowing in with the wind, primarily in the South Park and Mosquito Range areas. No

mention was found of fires in Platte Canyon until 1899.

The June 26, 1879, Flume said that “smoke from an extensive and disastrous forest fire in Iowa Gulch, near Leadville, hung over [Fairplay] all day” for two days.

Iowa Gulch is a few miles south of Leadville and was the site of the Black Cloud Mine.

But fires were just barely newsworthy. When they were reported, it was limited to a sentence or two between paragraphs of more important news.

An example is from the July 3, 1879, issue, “Forest fires are on every gulch and hill.”

If that were true, it seems unlikely that the news would be hidden at the bottom of a column on page three of the four-page edition.

Most concern

Judging from newspaper stories of the day, residents of the late 1800s seemed most concerned with the loss of timber in forests and the resultant erosion from rain and snow, and not as concerned about fire itself. Without timber in the mountains the worry was that there would be flooding and drought and “other evils attendant upon forest destruction,” said a notice regarding the proposed Lost Park Forest Reserve in The Flume of Feb. 18, 1892.

In 1884, after a summer season that included five forest fires statewide within a three-week period, the Colorado State Forestry Association was formed on Nov. 19 of that year. It encouraged all “who believe that the necessity exists for active measures in behalf of our forests, and, indirectly, the water supply of our state” to join the association by paying the dues of

\$1 per year, reported the Jan. 1, 1885, Flume.

Forest Reserves

The state forestry association worked quietly in the years between 1885 and 1891 in organization of the group and education of the public on their goal of forest protection. And on Feb. 10, 1891, a letter was published in several state newspapers, “To the People of Colorado.” It outlined the association’s past accomplishments and urged “more stringent forest laws, both state and national.”

The hard work paid off for the Colorado State Forestry Association. On March 3, 1891, the Forest Reserve Act was passed by Congress. It “set apart and reserved public land bearing forests or in part covered by timber or undergrowth, whether of commercial value or not, as public reservations.”

Ranchmen vote

There were skeptics about what some saw as government takeover of prime grazing and timber lands.

In February 1892 the South Park Ranchmen’s Protective Association met to discuss the proposed South Park Forest Reservation and to vote on accepting or rejecting it.

The ranchmen discussed timber in the forests surrounding South Park. They acknowledged that most of the timber was cut and shipped out of the county. Some sections were left completely bare of trees, which they said, “impoverished [their] water supply.”

The ranchmen thought, however, that miners should be able to go into the forest undisturbed and be able to

prospect and obtain title to any portion of land in the reservation.

When the meeting moderator suggested the association vote in approval of the South Park Forest Reserve, it prompted a “lively debate.”

Sam Hartsel, prominent South Park cattleman, was opposed to the plan. A forest reserve could not be homesteaded and, “what we want is more settlers, more industries, more people to help us pay taxes,” said Hartsel, as recorded in the Feb. 18, 1892, Flume.

Another rancher, S. M. Lasell, disagreed. He said the Park was not capable of supporting a large population.

Hartsel was also concerned that it would be a “closed reservation” with no public access.

Rancher Joseph Rogers said it would be impossible to keep the sawmill operators out of the forest, whether it was a reserve or not. He said that with the current laws, sawmill men have “cursed the country, they have evaded the law, and when they had got all there was to be had (specifically in the town of Howbert), they jumped the country.”

In the end, the majority of the ranchmen’s association members voted in favor of the South Park Forest Reserve.

South Platte

There were three contiguous areas proposed as possibilities for forest reserves in the South Park area, all situated at the headwaters of the South Platte River, said a story in the May 5, 1892, Greeley Tribune. It was recommended by Edgar T. Ensign, founder of the Colorado State Forestry Association, that the three – South Park,

Lost Park and Douglas – be combined into the South Platte Forest Reserve.

But plans and proposals change, and when the South Platte Forest Reserve was finally declared by presidential proclamation in January 1893, only certain portions of the South Park and Lost Park reservations became part of the new South Platte Forest Reserve. It consisted of 160,000 acres of land, partially in Jefferson and partially in Park County.

Its boundaries were: “Beginning at the junction of the North Fork of the South Platte and the South Platte, the boundary of the new park follows the course of the North Platte to the summit of the Snowy Range, from there southward to South Park and, rounding this on the north and east, to the South Platte River and down this to the place of beginning.” (Flume, Jan. 12, 1893.)

When President Theodore Roosevelt transferred jurisdiction of the forest reserves from the Department of the Interior to the Department of Agriculture on Feb. 1, 1905, he also created the U.S. Forest Service. The former forest reserves were converted to national forests. The Pike National Forest was formed by combining the South Platte, Pikes Peak and Plum Creek forest reserves.

Reserve purpose

As reserves became more common and accepted by 1898, the forest supervisor of the South Platte Forest Reserve, S. H. Standart, recapped the purpose of Forest Reserves for the Aug. 19, 1898, Flume.

He said the object was to preserve the forest to maintain the present water supply. Anything that tends to destroy timber was strictly prohibited and would

be enforced “by the strong arm of the law.”

“Sawmill and tie men (men who cut timber for railroad ties) will positively have to cease operations, and the most destructive agent, fire, will be looked after as thoroughly as possible,” said Standart.

In 1898, patrols were out watching for fire. It was thought that when tourists, prospectors and others using the forest reserve realized that patrols were out there, forest fires would be “reduced to the minimum.”

But forest fires were still an issue.

More fires

Fires were now becoming common in the Platte Canyon area. In August 1901, fires were reported on Mount Evans and in the forest between Evergreen and Pine Grove.

A forest fire near Bailey, reported in September 1902, was “so hot and smoke so dense” that nobody could get near enough to fight it. Burned pine needles were falling all over town.

And on May 30, 1902, The Flume reported “the worst forest fire in the history of the mountains.” It was burning in southwest Colorado and, the story said, “more than a dozen fires [could] be seen from [Salida].” The fire had been burning for a month and the cause was unknown.

Surpassed

The number of acres destroyed and the dollar value of damage in the 1902 “worst forest fire” was not reported in the May 30, 1902 Flume, but its placing as worst has apparently been surpassed three times.

The Hayman fire in 2002 claims the record for the most acreage destroyed in

a forest fire in Colorado. It burned 138,114 acres, much of it in the Pike National Forest.

The Black Forest fire in 2013 burned in a residential community of \$1 million-plus homes east of Colorado Springs, Colo. It claims the record for the highest dollar amount of damage in a Colorado wildfire. At least 360 homes were destroyed.

The Waldo Canyon fire in 2012, which burned part of the Pike National Forest, held the record for the highest dollar amount of damage, at \$353 million, until it was surpassed by the Black Forest fire.

Images on the following page.



Forest officers

In 1906 forest officers had a meeting in Leadville. This was taken on the courthouse steps. (Photo courtesy of Park County Local History Archives) (Photo by /The Flume)



Hayman memories

In 2002 the Hayman fire slowed traffic along U.S. 24 near Lake George. (Flume file photo by Lora Abacarian)



Smoke

“The whole atmosphere is hazy with the smoke constantly rising from neighboring forest fires.” The quote from the June 23, 1881, Flume, is just as applicable on June 20, 2013 when this photo was taken. The smoke is hiding the mountains west of Jefferson. (Photo by Laura Van Dusen/The Flume)



Fighting fire

In 1882, the fire wagon was the best defense against fire in the town of Alma. (Photo courtesy Park County Local History Archives, Source: Burton Osborne Family)