



Historic Tourism in Jefferson County

Tourism has played an important role in the development of the Colorado mountains since the first days of settlement and exploration. Early reports by trappers, explorers, and adventurers stimulated interest in the area. The 1859–1861 Gold Rush created tremendous publicity for the region. Early travelers venturing into the territory camped in tents, rented rooms at boomtown hotels, or stayed at private residences or ranches. Easterners afflicted with tuberculosis flocked to the area, seeking the cool, dry climate as a cure for their disease.

The railroads boosted tourism in the Rocky Mountain West by the 1870s by offering efficient transportation. Railroad companies aggressively advertised the region’s scenic attractions and health benefits. Railroad accessibility allowed formerly remote places to market their appeal, and investors developed new resorts throughout the Colorado mountains.

In the 1900s, the automobile

gave travelers even greater mobility and flexibility. Cottage camps, auto courts, souvenir shops, and an array of camps sprang up to serve motoring tourists. Coast-to-coast highways developed in the 1920s, inviting more tourists into the state to enjoy the abundant national forests and diverse outdoor recreation.

Early tourism

The tourism potential of Jefferson County’s western mountains was first hampered by inefficient transportation. Evergreen became one of the earliest tourist areas. By 1880, summer visitors began arriving via the Abbo and Lewis stagecoach that ran up Bear Creek Canyon from the railhead at Morrison. They stayed in rustic hotels or primitive tourist cabins. Summer residents also included affluent Denverites who bought leisure ranches in Upper Bear Creek Canyon.

Railroad resorts

The Denver, South Park, & Pacific Railroad (DSP&P) spurred development of summer resorts along the North Fork of the South Platte River. People arrived by train to stay in summer hotels at Pine Grove or Buffalo Creek or in rented cabins and cottages. Many families constructed their own summer homes in resorts scattered along the river.



Excursionists at Dome Rock along the North Fork circa 1910
-Denver Public Library



The Denver Motor Club promoted improvement of mountain roads. This clubhouse at Idledale burned in the 1930s.
-Denver Public Library

Day excursionists rode the railroad up the canyon to enjoy sightseeing, fishing, picnicking, taking photographs, and picking wildflowers. Pine Grove, Buffalo Creek, Foxton, Ferndale, Dome Rock, and South Platte were all popular railroad resorts in the late 1800s and 1900s.

Automobile tourism

The automobile boosted the popularity of the county’s western mountains as a summer resort in the early twentieth century. Construction of the paved Lariat Trail road up Lookout Mountain in 1913 made the mountains more accessible for

motorists. City folks drove up from Denver and tourists arrived from the Midwest to escape the sweltering summer heat in the cool, forested mountains.

“Colorado is essentially a touring state,” proclaimed William J. Barker, president of the Denver Motor Club, in 1916. Popularity of the automobile, road improvements, and development of the Denver Mountain Parks contributed to real estate sales and the ensuing boom in mountain homes. Hundreds of summer residences were constructed in the 1920s and 1930s, ranging from elaborate stone lodges to rustic cabins and picturesque cottages.



The Marshdale Lodge, now a bed and breakfast, is one of the few lodges remaining in the Evergreen vicinity. -Denver Public Library

Tourism peaked in the 1920s (although Evergreen remained a summer destination until around 1950). The Great Depression and World War II curtailed pleasure travel. By 1950, ski resorts in the central mountains beyond Jefferson County attracted visitors who had previously vacationed in mountain cabins. Tourism continues as an important county industry. Coors Brewery, Mother Cabrini Shrine, Buffalo Bill's Grave, and Red Rocks Park and Amphitheatre are major attractions.

Today, tourism remains a major industry in Colorado and Jefferson County.



The Foxton Post Office and South Platte Hotel along the North Fork are associated with the DSP&P and railroad tourism.



Northern Mountains

Coal Creek Canyon attracted a few summer visitors, some riding up on the train. Twin Spruce Park subdivision developed nearby in the 1920s and 1930s with 20 or so rustic log cabins.

On Lookout Mountain, Mount Vernon subdivision with its country club, small golf course, and riding stables became a premier summer resort. Scores of cabins were built, nearly all of which are now enlarged or replaced by large year-round homes.

Evergreen area

Evergreen gained a national reputation as a summer resort during the 1920s and 1930s. Troutdale-in-the-Pines and other commercial lodges attracted wealthy vacationers. Less well-to-do visitors stayed in rustic cabins.

Evergreen was ringed by dozens of summer home subdivisions, interspersed with the Denver Mountain Parks. Kittredge and Idle Dale developed downstream in the 1920s. Bear Creek was dammed to create Evergreen Lake, and a golf course was developed to the west. A number of lodges, motels, and dude ranches accommodated summer visitors. Few of these remain today.

Southern Mountains/North Fork

At the southern tip of the county, Pike National Forest encompasses portions of Jefferson, Park, Douglas, and Teller counties. The forest attracts campers, hikers, backpackers, horseback riders, boaters, and fishermen. The DSP&P ceased operation in 1937, but tourism continued in the mountains along the North Fork.

Located at the north edge of the National Forest, Pine Grove and Buffalo Creek continued expanding with cottages and cabins in the 1920s and 1930s. Two miles north of Pine Grove, the Sphinx Park subdivision was developed, especially known today for its Bucksnot Saloon. Private summer cabins are scattered elsewhere through the area.



Summer cabin at Indian Hills
-Richard Peterson

Central Mountains

Indian Hills, accessed by U.S. 285 in Turkey Creek Canyon, was developed by George Olinger in the 1920s. A clubhouse, small golf course, rodeo grounds, and art colony helped Indian Hills compete with Mount Vernon. To the south, the miniature village of Tiny Town attracted many tourists from across the country.

Summer subdivisions, developed in the 1920s and 1930s, are scattered in the Conifer vicinity and as far west as Wandcrest, located on the Jefferson-Park County line south of Pine Junction at U.S. 285. Most summer cabins have been converted to year-round residences.

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