

A History of Law Enforcement in Douglas County, 1858 to 2007

By Lt. Attila C. Denes

The pioneers of Douglas County were among the truest and bravest that came to Colorado; none were so frequently exposed to Indian depredations, horse and cattle thieves. Widely scattered, they became an easy prey to both. But they were generally equal to the emergency. For defense against savages, they built forts and stockades . . . , and with trusty rifles, themselves drove their enemies across the border. As for the white desperadoes, they were pursued and shot, or if captured, hanged to the nearest tree.

- Frank Hall, 1891

Life in the early dawn of the area now known as Douglas County was indeed an on-going struggle. The natural elements were merciless and forbidding. The Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians, still seething over treaties with the white man which relinquished their title to all their lands in the Colorado Territory, attacked white settlers (as well as each other) with some regularity. Even the settlers struggled against one another - crime, then as now, being one of the few universal human constants.

Among the first recorded white settlers in the area was Green Russell, who discovered gold in the east branch of Cherry Creek in June of 1858. The site of his camp has since been known as Russellville.

Other early settlers followed in 1859, establishing a cattle ranch and several small farms just north of the present town of Franktown. Colorado was still 17 years from statehood, and Douglas County had yet to be formally organized. Among these settlers were such prominent figures in local history as James Frank Gardner, Judge P.P. Wilcox, John H. Jones, John Russell, W.W. Cantril, John Gilliland, Joseph Huber, and the Hungate and Deiterman families (who were subsequently killed by Indians).

Criminal justice in these early years was rooted in the "People's Courts," before which the accused was given a "fair" trial by the people. Sentences were carried out immediately, usually by whipping, banishment from camp or hanging. A single appeal could be made to a meeting of district citizens, which acted as "the court of last resort." (Marr, p. 168)

Douglas County was officially created by the Territorial Legislature in 1861. At that time, it extended eastward to the Kansas line and included all of the present counties of Elbert and Kit Carson, as well as portions of Lincoln and Cheyenne Counties. Frankstown, named for James Frank Gardner and known today as Franktown, was declared the first county seat.

Charles Parkinson was elected the first Sheriff of Douglas County in 1862. In the summer of that year, a large band of Arapahoe Indians took up camp near the residence of George M. Chilcott, a local mill owner and member of the Territorial Legislature. Chilcott's cabin was located about four miles east of Frankstown. The Arapahoes had just returned from battle with their ancient enemies, the Utes. They had captured two Ute prisoners, a squaw and a young boy. George Chilcott later described the subsequent events this way:

They were there a week or ten days when Kit Carson came out and camped with me. He called in a number of the head men and held council with them, demanding the captives, but for a long time they refused to give them up. He finally told them that unless they complied with his demands, there would be a great war, which immediately settled the controversy in Carson's favor. The captives were surrendered, and they accompanied Carson to Denver. (Hall, pp. 333)

In 1864, James Frank Gardner bought the California Ranch and 155 acres around it. The ranch was located immediately south of Frankstown. Gardner built a hotel, post office, general store, stage line office, and his residence on the California Ranch, and it quickly became a major way station on the Santa Fe-Denver stage line. The California Ranch also became the hub of activity in Douglas County and served as a refuge for neighbors from Indian attacks. Later that year, the county records and government business moved from Frankstown proper to the California Ranch.

The first courtroom was built on the California Ranch in 1867, and the first District Court assembled in Douglas County met there, with Judge C.S. Eyster presiding. A small jail building stood in the fields, facing the hotel. But in the law of the old west, many violators never made it to the courtroom.

A graphic example of alternative justice occurred in November of 1867 at a place known today as Hangman's Gulch. A young homesteader was found murdered in his home along East Plum Creek, about a mile north of Castle Rock. News of the murder spread quickly among the many homesteaders in the area. A vigilante posse was formed and tracked the two suspected strangers south along East Plum Creek. Albert Dakan, who lived as a boy on one of the original Plum Creek homesteads, and whose neighbors participated in the posse, later described the manhunt this way:

It was learned that the two suspects stayed the night following the crime at the home of an elderly rancher named Dan Hopkins, who then lived about two miles north of Palmer Lake. Hopkins joined the posse, which soon overtook and captured the criminals near the present site of the town of Monument. They had some of the property of their victim in their possession. Their captors had no doubt of their guilt, especially after one of them said to Hopkins, "Old man, if we had thought you would have joined this crowd to follow us, you'd be dead, too."

The posse immediately began the return trip with the prisoners. A mile or two north of Palmer Lake, one of the killers became very abusive. The posse halted in a pine grove and quickly strung him up under a big pine limb. As soon as he was dead, the party rode off leaving his body dangling there to serve a grim warning of what fate lay in store for any strangers who might pass that way with skulduggery in mind.

Many hours later, the posse reached a gulch about a mile north of Castle Rock at a point not far from the murdered homesteader's ranch. Under a very large yellow pine tree which had a stout limb growing at a

convenient place for execution, a trial was held and the second prisoner hanged. After a suitable interval, one of the possemen, L. Z. Stevens, stepped up to the body and felt for the pulse. Then, in a high pitched voice said, "Gentlemen, I'm but a boy, but this makes forty-two carcasses of this kind that I've seen stretched between heaven and earth."

When the second murderer was pronounced dead, his body was cut down and buried in the bank of a nearby sand gulch. Many years passed. The bank of the gulch was eroded by floods and the skeleton of the man was thus exposed. Some enterprising local residents, realizing that it was almost perfectly preserved, had it put together ... and presented it to the public school. For years it was used by the teachers in the study of physiology. The skeleton hung in a closet of the schoolhouse and was taken out and placed before the class as often as the teacher wished to illustrate human framework. When so used, the skeleton was suspended by means of a small metal ring fastened on top of the skull. That old frame school building burned [in 1896], and with it the skeleton turned to ashes." (Schulz, pp. 124-125)

By the early 1870's, Frankstown had reached its peak development. As many as one hundred stage teams per day passed the California Ranch on their way along the Territorial Road.

But on February 2, 1874, a momentous legislation was passed, dividing Douglas County into Douglas and Elbert Counties. Under the new law, Douglas County took on its present day boundaries, while Elbert County was to be divided again in 1887. Eleven days later, the legislature granted the county commissioners the authority to move the Douglas County seat.

Thus began the enormously heated battle over the location of the county seat. Emotion in the county ran high on this issue, which culminated in a vote on March 31, 1874, in which Castle Rock beat Frankstown to become the new seat. The county records and business were quickly moved to their new home.

Tragically, on the cold and windy night of January 20, 1875, the California Ranch in Frankstown burned to the ground. The fire, caused by an overheated chimney, raged out of control and destroyed all of the buildings. No attempt was ever made to rebuild what had been the epicenter of Douglas County for eleven years.

When Castle Rock incorporated in June of 1881, its population was roughly 500, while the entire county's population fell just short of 2,500. The construction of a magnificent stone courthouse was begun in courthouse square in 1889. By 1890, the courthouse was completed at a cost (including furniture) of \$33,000. The new courthouse became the political and social hub of the county, with proceedings of the County Commissioners and the District Court bringing throngs of people to Castle Rock. Judges Webster, Farrell, and Taylor were among several judges presiding at the court during the close of the pioneer era. The Sheriff at the time was lava stone and clay magnate C.C. "Cole" Briscoe.

When the clock turned over to January 1, 1900, the Douglas County Sheriff's Office had much more in common with its pioneer-era roots than with the cutting-edge

metropolitan law enforcement agency that it is today. Douglas County had only been in existence for 39 years, after all, and its tiny population was spread out among a number of fledgling communities that made pro-active enforcement impractical, if not impossible.

Edward Hoffman took office for a two-year term as sheriff that year. Since then, fourteen other sheriffs have held office, including John Hammond, whose 24-year tenure holds the record as the longest in county history. Most Douglas County Sheriffs in the first half of the 20th century ran one and two-man operations, relying heavily on volunteer deputies to lend a hand when needed.

When Prohibition brought bootlegging and Chicago gangland figures to Douglas County in the 1920's, Sheriff Roy McKissack was up to the task. Many stories ran in the local papers describing seizures of stills and the destruction of hundreds of gallons of mash in the ill-fated fight against booze. None-the-less, Chicago mobster Leland A. Varain, better known as "Diamond Jack" Alterie, bought up several properties west of Sedalia and held outlandish parties which were sometimes attended by law enforcement officials. Alterie fancied himself a rancher and frequently sported a large white Stetson while traveling through Castle Rock, sometimes throwing large sums of money to townspeople as he drove by in his car. Mobsters eventually gunned Alterie down in a Chicago hotel lobby.

Tragedy rocked Douglas County's tiny and close-knit law enforcement community on February 14, 1946. Manuel Perez, 17, of Denver, was on the run after shooting two Denver police officers during a domestic disturbance investigation. After making his way south along creek beds for three days, a hungry Perez stopped into the B&B Café in Castle Rock for a bite to eat. Some alert patrons, just back from service in World War II, recognized Perez from newspaper pictures and summoned Town Marshal Ray Lewis and Undersheriff Duncan Lowell. Sheriff H. Robert Campbell was on vacation at the time.

The unarmed Marshal Lewis arrived first and blocked Perez's path as the fugitive tried to leave. When Lewis told Perez that he was under arrest, Perez opened fire with a handgun, killing Lewis instantly. After a short scuffle with café patrons, Perez was subdued. Enraged by Lewis' death, the crowd dragged Perez across the street to the courthouse lawn and prepared to hang him from a tree. Undersheriff Lowell arrived just in time, took custody of Perez, and took him to the El Paso County jail to await trial. Perez was convicted of the killing and eventually died in a prison knife fight.

A fund was established to help Marshal Lewis' family. Among the many notable contributors to that fund was brewing magnate Adolph Coors III of Golden. Ironically, 14 years later – nearly to the day – Coors himself became the victim of kidnapping and murder. Although the Coors family complied with the kidnapper's ransom demand, the ransom was never picked up and the kidnapper was not heard from again.

The Coors family agonized for 7 months before learning the fate of their patriarch. On September 14, 1960, Coors' clothing and skeletal remains were found in a landfill southwest of Sedalia. A Life Magazine photographer captured Sheriff John Hammond in the midst of unearthing Coors' remains, immortalizing Hammond in a series of stunning prints that are on display at the Robert A. Christensen Justice Center in Castle Rock. Joseph Corbett, Jr., was ultimately tried and convicted in the Coors case,

and was sentenced to life in prison. Under sentencing laws in place at the time, Corbett was eventually paroled.

As Sheriff Royal McKinster entered office in 1971, Douglas County's population was slowly increasing and the Sheriff's Office under his leadership became an archetype of today's agency. Staffing levels remained conspicuously low during much of Sheriff McKinster's tenure. It was not uncommon, for example, to have two deputies patrolling the entire county during the day, and an "on-call" deputy responding to calls from his home at night.

A majestic piece of county history was lost on the night of March 11, 1978, when the historic stone courthouse on Courthouse Square in the heart of Castle Rock burned to the ground. Rose Ann Lucero, 17, of Denver, pleaded guilty to setting the blaze out of anger that her boyfriend had been jailed. The fire forced the county's criminal justice agencies to occupy temporary quarters until August of 1979, when a hastily constructed justice center was completed at the corner of Wilcox Street and Plum Creek Parkway.

On January 17, 1980, the partially nude body of KHOW radio intern Helene Pruszynski was found in a field just west of Daniels Park Road in northern Douglas County. She had been brutally raped, stabbed repeatedly, and left to die. As was typical of large-scale investigations in those days, the Colorado Bureau of Investigation was called in to head-up the investigation. A multi-jurisdictional task force reopened the investigation in January of 1999, utilizing cutting-edge DNA "fingerprint" technology, but to date, the case remains unsolved.

In January, 1983, Stephen C. Zotos took office as Sheriff of Douglas County. Another high-profile murder stunned the county a few months later. On August 18, 1983, the bodies of Littleton school teachers Rod and Marilyn Carlson were found in a field in the Cottonwood subdivision near Parker. Their son, Ross Carlson, was arrested shortly after the grisly discovery. Carlson's controversial multiple-personality defense made headlines for years while the case slowly trudged toward trial. He never got his day in court. Carlson died of leukemia on November 23, 1989, while in custody awaiting trial.

An unusually prolific murderer was brought to justice in 1988 after a Douglas County Sheriff's Office investigation into the murder of an Aurora prostitute helped link Vincent Groves, of Denver, to the deaths of 17 prostitutes metro-wide. Groves was convicted of murder in the strangulation death of Diane Mancera, whose body was found dumped at the Surrey Ridge exit off of I-25 on July 25, 1988.

On March 23, 1989, 20-year-old Eugene Thompson of Littleton went on a one-man, cocaine-induced rampage of rape, murder, and hostage taking that spanned three counties, including Douglas. The day-long ordeal ended with Thompson shooting himself to death in Arapahoe County, but not before murdering two women and brutalizing a third in Douglas County.

An unprecedented number of murders stretched the sheriff's office's investigative resources in 1998, when eight people fell victim to homicides. The highest-profile of those killings occurred in the newly-formed city of Lone Tree, when David and Mary Ann Hanschu and their adult daughter, Lisa Garner, were found shot to death in their beds on the morning of January 19. Lisa's husband, James Garner, was charged in the killings, but was acquitted by a jury in July of 1999.

With the completion of the Robert A. "Chris" Christensen Justice Center in June of 1998, all of Douglas County's criminal justice agencies were once again able to move under one roof. The new justice center was a culmination of years of research and planning, and dramatically improved the efficiency of the entire criminal justice system in Douglas County.

Tragedy once again befell the Douglas County law enforcement community on May 21, 1999, when Deputy Ronald M. King was killed in the line of duty by a drunk driver. Deputy King and his partner, Deputy Chris Washburn, were on motorcycle patrol on U.S. Highway 85 when a van driven by Anthony Sanchez of Denver turned into their path. Deputy King died of his injuries that night. Deputy Washburn suffered serious injuries, but miraculously, was able to return to full duty within a few months. Sanchez, who had previously been arrested five times for drunken driving, was convicted of vehicular homicide, driving under the influence of alcohol, and a host of other charges.

With society's increased reliance upon technology to provide most of the staples of modern life, the sheriff's office – along with the rest of the industrialized world – made frantic preparations for the specter of "Y2K" as the clock struck over to January 1, 2000. Thankfully, and probably because of the massive preparations that were undertaken, the "Y2K bug" failed to bite in any noticeable way.

In January 2003, Micheal Acree, a 20-year Douglas County Sheriff's Office veteran and former commander of the investigation, patrol, and detention divisions was elected to the office of Sheriff. Sheriff Acree resigned his post two years into his term to take a position with the Colorado Department of Public Safety. His Undersheriff, David A. Weaver, a 26-year Douglas County veteran, was appointed to carry out the remainder of Sheriff Acree's term, and was elected Sheriff in his own right in November, 2006.

Over the course of Sheriff Weaver's career, Douglas County has seen exponential growth and the rapid advancement of the sheriff's office as a leader in suburban law enforcement. The advent and implementation of sophisticated technology and a tremendous increase in staffing have helped the sheriff's office keep pace with the unparalleled growth of Douglas County's population over the last decade, and has helped to propel this fine agency into the 21st century.

The future promises to be bright, not only for the Sheriff's Office, but for the entire county of Douglas. In describing the town of Castle Rock in the year 1890, the editor of the *Littleton Gazette* eloquently summed up the attitude that now permeates Douglas County: "*[It] has before it a great future, to which fact the citizens seem fully alive. All are working for advancement and the air of progress pervades every breast.*" *

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