

A History of Law Enforcement in Douglas County

By Sergeant Attila C. Denes

Life in the early dawn of the area now known as Douglas County was an on-going struggle. The natural elements were merciless and forbidding. The Cheyenne and Arapahoe Indians, still seething over treaties with the white man relinquishing 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 William 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.

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 F. Parkhurst was elected the first sheriff of Douglas County in 1862.

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 Christian S. Eyster presiding. A small jail building stood in the fields, facing the hotel. By the early 1870's, Frankstown had reached its peak development. As many as 100 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. 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, 15 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. Nonetheless, 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.

An especially devastating natural disaster shattered the relative calm of the early 1900s when, on August 3, 1933, a cloudburst caused heavy floodwaters to inundate the Castlewood dam near Franktown. The concrete and stone dam was constructed in 1889-90 at a cost of \$100,000, but it failed in just minutes, sending vast torrents of water, trees, and boulders 30 miles downstream into the heart of Denver.

In January, 1942, Douglas County Sheriff S. Hugh Buckner died in office. H. Robert Campbell, who had served as Douglas County's undersheriff for 11 years, was appointed to fill the remainder of Sheriff Buckner's term on February 4, 1942. Four years later, 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.

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 to 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 seven 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. He committed suicide in Denver in 2009 at the age of 80.

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.

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 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. He was sentenced to 57 years in prison.

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 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 of 2003, Micheal Acree, a 20-year Douglas County Sheriff's Office veteran and former commander of the investigation, patrol, and detention divisions, took office as 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 25-year Douglas County Sheriff's Office veteran, was appointed to carry out the remainder of Sheriff Acree's term, and was elected sheriff in his own right in November, 2006.

Sheriff Weaver's second in command, Tony Spurlock, was appointed to finish Sheriff Weaver's second term in July, 2014, and was elected sheriff in November, 2014. Over the past two decades, Douglas County has seen exponential growth. The acquisition of cutting-edge technologies and a tremendous increase in staffing have helped the sheriff's office keep pace with the unparalleled growth of Douglas County's population.

In describing the town of Castle Rock in the year 1890, the editor of the *Littleton Gazette* eloquently summed up the attitude that aptly describes Douglas County today: *"[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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