

EARLY DAYS OF WHEAT RIDGE

By
F. T. Johnson

(The original manuscript may be referenced in the Wheat Ridge Historical Society, 4610 Robb St. Wheat Ridge, CO 80033 Phone: 303-421-9111)

It was 1937 and Mr. Johnson was 77 years old when he wrote this recollection of the early days of Wheat Ridge. Mr. Johnson was born 10 November 1860 and came to Wheat Ridge in 1881. He died in June of 1961 at the age of 100 years, 7 months, 7 days.

I have been asked to write a brief sketch of the early days of Wheat Ridge, as I remember them from 1882 to 1890. I crossed the plains in a covered wagon from Naponee, Nebraska, to Denver, in the early Spring of 1881. During the summer and late in the fall of that year, my father, brother, Walter, and myself, worked helping to build a flume at Platte Canyon for the Highland Canal and Irrigation Company.

In January of 1882, after finishing our work at the Canyon, father rented and moved his family, on to the farm then known as the Coulehan Place, located on Wheat Ridge. The farm consisted on about one hundred and sixty acres and was located at the north east corner of what is now known as 44th and Wadsworth Avenues in Jefferson County. We lived there one year when father purchased twenty acres of unimproved land south of the Coulehan Place facing 38th Avenue and built a small frame house on it and in the Spring of 1883 moved the family into it. The family consisted of father, his wife, myself and brother, Walter, and my half brothers and sisters, Samuel, Frederick, Mary, Ralph, Adelaide, and Maud.

The name Wheat Ridge originated, as I was informed, from the fact that most of the farms produced wheat as their main crop and the sandy soil seemed well adapted to the growing of wheat. Irrigation was necessary to grow the crops and most all of the farms on the Ridge were supplied by irrigation ditches taking their water from Clear Creek. The county around the Coulehan Place was sparsely settled and I do not believe there were more than a dozen houses within a mile of the place. After we moved to 38th Avenue, then called the North Golden Road, I believe there were only nine houses besides the school house between the County Line and what is now called Wadsworth Avenue. Some of the houses were built quite a distance from the road on account of the land near the road being low and swampy.

Soon after we moved to the Ridge, it was discovered that the soil was well adapted to the growing of berries and other small fruits so the farmers began to plant and grow small fruits of various kinds which have made the Ridge famous for its small fruit crops.

In the early eighties, new comers bought small tracts of land and planted them into orchards and small fruits so that Wheat Ridge took on a new growth and land values increased greatly and new homes began to spring up on all sides, so that today a hundred houses can be counted where only one house stood at the time we moved to Wheat Ridge. Denver was the main market for crops grown on the Ridge and was a City of about thirty thousand inhabitants. It was in Arapahoe County, which extended from Jefferson County to the Kansas State Line.

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The roads leading from Denver to Wheat Ridge were the North Golden Road, now 38th Avenue; the Middle Golden Road, now 32nd Avenue; and the South Golden Road, now Colfax Avenue. They were all dirt roads and used for wagon, horse, and foot travel. The North Golden Road was the best road to travel to Golden when it rained as the road was sandy and not much mud accumulated on its surface.

If you wished to go from Denver to the Coulehan Place, starting from the Post Office located in Fifteenth and Lawrence Streets, you would travel down Fifteenth to the Platte River and over a wooden bridge, up Fifteenth to Boulder and along Fairview Avenue past the Ashland School building, and then past the Bosler residence and then Northwest past the Walker Stone house. Then west, south of the present Elitch's Gardens, over a strip of prairie to the County Line the north to what is now called 38th Avenue, then west to what is now called Wadsworth Avenue and then north to the corner of the Coulehan Place, a distance of about five miles. There was no road where 44th Avenue now enters the Ridge and no cross roads between the Coulehan Place and the County Line.

In the Early eighties a suburban street car track was built from the North Denver loop out 38th Avenue to the County Line and then South to Colfax Avenue. The cars were drawn by a small steam locomotive. Excursions were gotten up by the enterprising Denver Managers and often you would see crowded cars with excursionists being carried around the loop to enjoy the fresh air and view the rural scenery along the route.

At the intersection of 44th and Wadsworth Avenues on the left hand side going towards Golden, was a small pond bordered by swale grass and cattails, and diagonally across on the Coulehan Place was a similar pond. Also, on the east side of the Coulehan Place was a small pond. In fact, there were a great many small ponds and swampy places on the Ridge due to irrigation seepage. At the foot of the hill on the North Golden Road, before crossing the Clear Creek Bridge, was an old Grist Mill with a mill race built for the use of the mill. I do not think the mill was in operation at the time.

Between Denver and Wheat Ridge was the town Highlands, which lay principally east of Sloans Lake. Our post office address was either Denver or Highlands. We did most of our trading in Denver as it seemed the most convenient for those living on the North Golden Road.

Elitch's Gardens, Lakeside, and other resorts west of Denver, did not exist but were built later. I saw garden vegetables growing on the land where the Elitch's Garden Bear Pits are now located, and I harvested a crop of wheat on the land where Lakeside now is situated.

The land where Berkley is now situated was vacant and unimproved. It was not considered very good land for farming or garden purposes, on account of excessive alkali that appeared on the surface. We did not value it as high priced or as good as the Wheat Ridge land and its selling qualities were not as attractive. I could have bought any of it for one hundred dollars per acre. In 1882, when I first saw Clear Creek, I thought its name was a misnomer. I thought it should have been called Muddy Creek instead of Clear Creek. The water had a dull gray-blue milky appearance., caused by the dumping of mine tailings into the stream from mines located in Gilpin and Clear Creek

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Counties. I thought it a shame that such a muddy and unwholesome looking stream should be permitted to flow down the beautiful Clear Creek Valley. The waters were so polluted that fish could not live in the stream. Horses and other livestock could not drink the waters safely on account of the poisonous substances coming from the mines into the stream. The water was unfit for irrigation or domestic purposes and much of the irrigated lands were damaged by use of the water. Mud, sand, and silt flowed through the Irrigation ditches to such an extent as to cause irreparable injury to the land in many places.

Along in the eighties, a number of farmers on the Ridge, including myself, raised the sum of fifteen hundred dollars to finance a court action to enjoin the mine owners from dumping their mine tailings into Clear Creek, and its upper branches. A suit was never brought to trial and nothing was accomplished by our efforts to prevent further pollution of what was once one of the most beautiful streams in the state.

The mining interests were too powerful to be overcome by the farming interests, so the mud and silt has continued to flow down the Creek and the polluted stream continues under the false name of "Clear Creek" which ought to be changed by a Court action which seems the only remedy.

The school house was located on 38th Avenue, the present school site, and was a small one room frame building with a hallway entrance in the front. It would accommodate about twenty five children when used to full capacity. It occupied about one acre of ground as near as I can remember. Its location compelled some of the children to come a distance of about one mile to a mile and a half to attend school. Miss Virginia Mellon was the teacher when we moved to the Coulehan Place and three of father's children Samuel, Frederick, and May attended school during the school term. The teacher was paid the sum of forty dollars per month, but afterwards it was raised to sixty dollars per month.

The school house was used for Church services on Sunday by the Methodist people on the Ridge. Also, it was used as a meeting place for a literary society, a farmer's club, school elections, and other social affairs. We organized a literary society that met at the little school house on each Saturday evening. It was called the Wheat Ridge Lyceum. We gave entertainment to which almost everybody in the neighborhood, as well as those within traveling distance, attended. We put on plays and furnished music which drew large crowds and filled the school house to full capacity and sometimes standing room was at a premium. We gave performances at which we raffled off homemade cakes, made by the good housewives, at ten cents a chance and in time we managed to raise three hundred dollars which we invested in a small reading library for the use of the society and the members. I believe that this was the first literary and social society ever organized on the Ridge.

About this time some of us people concluded that the school house was too small for our meetings, as well as for school purposes, and that a new school house should be built. We submitted the question to the voters of the school district on the proposition of raising the sum of five thousand dollars with which to build a two story four room brick building. Those opposing the measure said that such a size building would never be needed, and that it was wasting the taxpayers' money.

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On counting the ballots, the vote was in favor of the proposition submitted, but our opponents took the matter into Court and the election was set aside. At the next school election, we again submitted the matter to the voters and the measure carried. At this election, however, we raised the building fund to eight thousand dollars and the new school house was built at that cost. A few years later, each room was filled to capacity, and it turned out that the taxpayers' money was not wasted or ill spent in the cause of education.

Today, there is a fine high school building on the old school ground built to meet the present wants of the community for school purposes. It is a fine monument for the enterprising and up to date people of Wheat Ridge who aided in building it. It speaks well for the cause of education on the Ridge that began in the little frame school house over fifty years ago.

The habits and customs of the people on the Ridge were not much different from other rural communities. Being near Denver, there was a little more attention paid to style and appearance than in those communities farther away from Denver. The habits and customs of the mountains and plains generally prevailed among most all of the early settlers.

Men generally wore beards and the women wore their hair long and rolled up on the top or back of their heads when going about their work. The children were dressed modestly and all were treated equally on the school grounds as well as in the homes. I found that people as a whole to be industrious, frugal, and loyal to their community and a good type of law abiding citizens.

Home life on the Ridge was not always dull and monotonous. We had plenty of work to do on the farm. When our work was over we could hitch up our team to the wagon and drive to Denver for shopping or for recreation. We could drive up into the mountains and enjoy the cool and refreshing mountain air during the hot days in the valley. We could fish and hunt as a matter of sport while the women and children picked Columbines and rested in the shade of some spruce or pine tree. We could visit our neighbors and listen to tales of early times in Colorado full of thrill and interest, and we could make our own amusements at home and enjoy our family relations as most families can do. All those things were practiced by the families living on the Ridge as I now remember, and life was not so dull after all.

Speaking of Wheat Ridge Society, I would say that there were very few social gatherings on the Ridge. Card parties, dances, Women's Clubs and old settler picnics were not in evidence. We went to Denver for our amusements outside of those I have previously mentioned.

Class distinction was not practiced or recognized except in a private way. Each family assumed to stand on its own record. Gossip and neighbor meddling were not of much force and effect as a disturbing element, at least to our family. We made it a practice to attend to our own business and let our neighbors attend to theirs. New settlers were moving into the district and there was little opportunity to practice class distinction and make it effective. It take time to find out the faults and shortcomings of your neighbors so that you can fit them into a class of their own. None of our neighbors had "struck it rich" and gaudy appearance stylish riding rigs were missing on the Ridge.

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Just ordinary people following their occupation of farming was the class to which we belonged and that describes the people as I remember them. Society was not much of an established factor on the Ridge in those early days. Every family looked after its own social standing and that made up our society in general.

I was twenty one years old when I move to the Ridge and I am now approaching my seventy eighth birthday, so you see I have had a long time to think about the days and years I spent as a young man on Wheat Ridge back in the days of the eighties.

While living on the Ridge, I became acquainted with young man named Walker Whiteside who lived with his parents on the Middle Golden Road about one mile south of our place. I often visited his home in company with some of my associates and he entertained us by recitations from Shakespeare and other dramatic authors. He afterwards went eat and studied for the stage and in time became one of our leading actors. I visited him in Denver several years later and we talked over old times. His hair had turned gray, but he seemed full of life and vim and said he enjoyed his profession. He was a credit to Wheat Ridge and I mention his name as belonging to the early history of Ridge.

As for myself, I began the study of law while living on the Ridge, back in 1882. In 1885 I was admitted to the bar and took up the practice of law a short time later. I was elected a Justice of the Peace for Wheat Ridge district and served four years. About this time, I first met my wife. She was one of the first teachers in the new school building I have previously described. I married her in 1890 and moved to Denver where we have made our home ever since, except for a short while we lived on the old home place to help look after father and his family, after the death of the children's mother. In 1895, I was elected one of the Denver District Judges and served two terms covering a period of twelve years. Since then, I have practiced my profession up to the time I retired a few years ago. During all this time, I maintained my acquaintance with my other neighbors on Wheat Ridge and remember them often.

Most of them have died and I am one of the few left, but my memory of Wheat Ridge and its people as I saw and knew them back in the early days is pleasant to recall. I often ride by the old home place in an automobile and over the old roads once travelled by team and wagon and I can hardly realize the change that has taken place. Now homes and highly cultivated land with orchards and small fruits growing abundantly now show themselves on each side of the roads.

I am proud that I once lived on Wheat Ridge and may the present generation continue to prosper is the wish of the writer.

To maintain continuity, it was transcribed exactly as originally written, with respect to punctuation and spelling. Some paragraphing occurs at the whim of the Editor (Pat Kemper, FhGS Inquirer Editor) and is the only deviation from the original.