



## **History of Russellville, Colorado Douglas County's Earliest Settlement**

**By Patrick Gerity**

A 33-acre private ranch just southeast of Franktown known as the Russellville Ranch is the earliest settlement in Douglas County, and has several ties to Confederate history as well as "Pike's Peak or Bust" gold rush tales.

The area that became Russellville was for centuries used as a resting place along well established travel routes. Plains Indians such as the Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Kiowa frequented the area sheltered by the Black Forest. In the early 1800's the trail route became known as the Trapper's Trail as mountain men such as Kit Carson, Jim Bridger, and Jedediah Smith used the route to travel while on hunting forays. A supply route established by "Uncle Dick" Wootton passed through the same area on weekly runs between Bents Fort and Fort St. Vrain in the 1840's. By the late 1850's the trail was most commonly known as the Cherokee Trail and was a primary travel route from the Santa Fe Trail between Fort Bent and Pueblo north along the Front Range to Ft Laramie, Wyoming.

In 1858 the Russell brothers of Georgia, along with a party of Cherokee Indians, were travelling through the region towards rumored gold finds in what would become Denver. While camped in the Black Forest for the winter, minor traces of gold were panned from a creek in the vicinity. The finds were insignificant to hold the Russell brothers in the area, but rumors spread like wildfire of the discovery. Within a year Russellville was established as a smalltime boomtown with enough population to support a hotel and sawmill by the end of 1859. The Russell brothers went on to establish Auraria at the confluence of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River. Their namesake town flourished as a lumber mill center which supplied the first wood for construction in Auraria and Denver City.

With the outbreak of the War Between the States in 1861 the loyalties of the pioneers in the soon to be Colorado Territory were typically divided between Southern and Northern natives. While most people were much more interested in finding riches in the creeks and streams there were some who professed Confederate or Unionist allegiances and participated in the inflamed rhetoric of war and patriotism. Rival newspapers bantered back and forth, groups of loyal Union men or Southern Sympathizers would gather in saloons, and Confederate flags could be found floating over certain Southern leaning establishments or homes from time to time. While many toiled away searching for gold, others rallied around banners ready for a fight.

Russellville seemed to be a stronghold of Southern sympathies. Many military artifacts have been discovered in the area including a cache of .58 caliber ammunition. The loyalist government appointed to run the new territory suspected that Russellville was being used as a rendezvous point for Confederate recruits. Territorial Governor William Gilpin was so concerned

about a possible Confederate uprising within the territory that he had 40 men arrested departing Russellville. The belief was that these men had rallied at Russellville and mustered into Confederate service and were headed to join General Sibley's army in Texas. That army would soon threaten Colorado as it moved north up the Rio Grande through the Arizona/New Mexico territories in early 1862.

Later, in 1864, Russellville would become the site of a massacre of purported Confederate Guerillas. Jim Reynolds and a band of Texas outlaws organized themselves as the "Reynolds Gang" in July of 1864 in South Park. The group supposedly robbed ranches, stage stations, and mail coaches around Fairplay in the name of the Confederacy. Stories vary if this group was really a band of Confederate Guerillas helping to finance the Confederate Treasury or just outlaws using the War as a reason to plunder. Eventually the group was captured with 5 members taken as prisoner to Denver.

The prisoners were then to be transferred to Fort Lyon on the Santa Fe Trail for processing and it is in this transfer that stories of a military conspiracy and massacre occur. Because of the years of war and general lawlessness present in the West, there wasn't much care for outlaws and especially if they supported the Confederate cause. The military escort to Fort Lyons was ordered to shoot the prisoners if they made any attempt to escape. Interestingly enough at Russellville the wagon carrying the prisoners fell behind the mounted escort. With an opportunity so ripe the prisoners made an attempt to escape and three or four of the men were killed, reports say either one or two actually made good on their escape. It is believed that the escort unit was instructed to purposely let the wagon fall behind to facilitate the escape and murder of the men.

"Uncle Dick" Wootton, who was a known Southern sympathizer throughout the War, told a different story in which the men were summarily executed at Russellville by the military in vengeance for being Confederates. Wootton supposedly visited Russellville after the killing where he found four skeletons tied to trees. Each man still had his boots on and a bullet hole in his skull. In any case this was not the first, no the last, case of vigilante justice committed in the west. The Colorado Territory Militia would go on to commit even greater atrocities at Sand Creek in November of 1864, killing hundreds of Arapaho and Cheyenne camped under both an American and white flag of surrender.

After the War Russellville became a lumber supplier with as many as 6 mills operating in the 1880's. It's location within the Black Forest provided plenty of Ponderosa Pine lumber for the booming Colorado economy. The town eventually faded into history and became part of a private ranch. In 2004 Douglas County designated the ranch a historic landmark.



**Russellville Ranch in Franktown, Colorado**



**Stage Barn (built in 1861)**



**Stage Barn (built in 1861)**



**Ice House**

All photos courtesy of the Douglas County Historic Preservation Board

