

Historical Summary of the Pella Crossing Area

Introduction

Pella Crossing Open Space was acquired by Boulder County in 1991 when Frontier Materials, Inc. donated the partially reclaimed gravel pits to the County. The reclamation was subsequently enhanced and the area was dedicated by Boulder County Parks & Open Space (BCPOS) as Pella Crossing Open Space in 1996. Pella ponds serve as important habitat for resident birds as well as many migratory birds, including ducks, geese, wading birds, raptors, and songbirds.

Although Pella Crossing is basically a human-created natural environment following the gravel mine reclamation, it has become an important natural resource for many wildlife species and a popular destination for people looking to enjoy the property's 2.9 miles of trail and six ponds.

History: The Iowa Connection and Gold Mining in Boulder County

Pella Crossing, also variously known as "Upper Crossing" or "Laramie Crossing", was a St. Vrain River ferrying point for people, freight, stagecoaches, and livestock at the present site of the intersection of 75th Street and St. Vrain Road. Pella Townsite was first officially platted in 1887 by Lydia Downer who had purchased the land first homesteaded by Moses Elliot in the 1860's. The Pella community, which eventually included the river ferry, a school, a store, a grist mill (built by Lydia Downer's husband in 1861), sandstone quarries (predating those of Lyons), and a post office, actually preceded the town of Hygiene by ten years.

Drawn by the opportunity to homestead land along the St. Vrain River, many of the original settlers in the Pella Crossing area were Dutch adherents to the German Baptist Protestant religion, also known as Anabaptists. The members of this sect, an offshoot of the Mennonites, were sometimes referred to as "Dunkards", for their practice of fully immersing the adult faithful three times at baptism. Their leaders had originally immigrated to Marion County, Iowa in the 1830s and established the town of Pella, Iowa. Pella in Hebrew translates to "City of Refuge", and several subsequent migrations from the Iowa town by members of this group resulted in other towns named "Pella" in Nebraska and Texas.

No history of Pella would be complete without mentioning Matthew McCaslin who came to Colorado after various ventures in Pennsylvania, Iowa, and California. His motivation for coming to Colorado was to mine for gold which he did successfully with partners in Gold Hill. He sold his interest in the Horsfal Mine and moved to the Pella area, purchasing a homestead west and north of the St. Vrain River and established the Upper Crossing Ranch. The farm still exists at 75th Street and St. Vrain Road, and is designated a Centennial Colorado Farm and a Boulder County Historic Landmark. The McCaslin family was instrumental in creating the settlement of Pella west of the ferry crossing. Some may also recognize the surname as that of a busy commercial thoroughfare on the west side of Louisville, Colorado. The McCaslin's served as County Commissioners and at one time held over 5000 acres of land in the area.

Two of the settlers recognized by points of interest at Pella Crossing, Jacob Zweck, and George Washington Webster were also drawn to Colorado by mining. Jacob Zweck was a Prussian immigrant who came to Colorado with a partner to search for mining success via Iowa (though not with a Marion

County connection), and Omaha, Nebraska. His mining partnership eventually prospered, but in the meantime he married in 1866 and began farming land to the south and east of Pella Crossing Open Space. The ditch, which runs through the property was hand-dug by Mr. Zweck and his neighbor Mr. Turner in the late 1860's to bring water from the St. Vrain River to his dry land property.

Zweck's Prussian Mine, situated along Left Hand Creek, became one of the most valuable mines in the county, yielding \$400,000 in ore in a single month in 1879 (that's 1879 dollars!). Unfortunately, Zweck suffered financial reverses including the 1881 blizzard which wiped out his cattle holdings in Wyoming, the playing out of the Prussian Mine, the subsequent collapse of the silver market ten years later, and, finally a flood on the St. Vrain River in 1894 leaving his widow destitute at his death in 1902. Mary Zweck saved the property by sheer hard work and will power over the remainder of her life, and at her death in 1934 the home and 232-acre farm were free and clear of debt. One can buy vegetables from the heirs of the Zwecks by a roadside stand south of the St. Vrain River on Airport Road (a.k.a. 85th Street)

Webster Pond is named in the honor of another Pella pioneer, George Washington Webster. After success in the gold fields of Gilpin County, Webster and Charles True purchased a homestead in what is now the 6400 block of Hygiene Road. Both men spent time during their early manhood in Marion County, Iowa. Besides cattle-raising, the men established fruit orchards which eventually yielded 22 varieties of apples, as well as grapes, plums and cherries. In 1903, when Boulder County platted a right of way for Hygiene Road, it agreed to pay Mr. Webster the princely sum of \$50 for each apple tree which had to be destroyed for the completion of the road. Webster also established a community racetrack and another school in the Pella area.

There is a rail line along the north boundary of Pella Crossing Open Space. The decision by the Denver, Utah, and Pacific Railroad to build a spur to Lyons through Hygiene and bypassing Pella, along with the closure of the Pella School in 1910 proved to be the end of Pella. On July 21, 1916, Hygiene and Pella officially consolidated their communities.

2013 Flood

September 11-13, 2013, the Colorado Front Range region experienced significant rainfall, causing extensive flooding, loss of life, and widespread damage. More than 18 inches of rain fell in the area causing 25 to 100-year flooding along Boulder County's 15 drainages. As a result, Boulder County was designated a Federal Disaster Area. Dragonfly and Webster reservoirs at Pella Crossing were fully breached during the flood, and the embankments at Poplar and Sunset reservoirs were also damaged. The damage at Pella Crossing caused dramatic wreckage and immediate pleas from the public for its repair and re-opening.

Restoration

To mitigate potential damage from future flood events, the City of Longmont constructed the Heron Relief Channel, a drainage channel from Pella Crossing Heron Lake to the St. Vrain River, to intercept future floodwaters and guide them back to the river. BCPOS staff concluded that keeping shallower post-flood water levels in Webster Pond would allow for wetland establishment and increased wildlife habitat values, including a native fish nursery. Funding was secured through the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Wetlands Program to create three acres of

wetland along Webster's shoreline. Webster Pond is now closed to fishing, with plans for the eventual introduction and raising of native warm water fish, including Northern Redbelly Dace and Brassy Minnow. Pella Crossing reopened to the public in April 2017.

Summary by Tim Schabacker, Boulder County Parks and Open Space Volunteer Naturalist, 2010

Source: "Refuge in the Valley 1800s Pella, Colorado" (2004) by Diane Good Benedict

Update by Larry Colbenson, Natural History Program Coordinator, BCPOS, 2020