

GUFFEY HISTORIC DISTRICT DESIGNATION
TO BE OR NOT TO BE?
By Kathy (Flip) Boettcher

In May, 2006, the PCOHP began an intensive survey of the town of Guffey to see if anything remained of historical value.

The survey was completed in May, 2007, and it found that 14 sites with a total of 25 buildings had some historical significance at the local level only.

The survey area covered approximately 41 acres of the originally platted town. The boundaries of the district are: 3 rd St. on the North, Water St. on the East, 9 th St. on the South and Ridge St. on the West. It also includes part of the 8.67 acre property adjacent to the southwest of town, where perhaps the first miners or homesteaders lived in an old sod house.

One of the main purposes of historic designation is preservation of the historic sites. It encourages owners through tax incentives and/or grants to restore their historic buildings versus tearing them down or just letting them deteriorate. It also helps prevent governmental agencies from encroaching upon the district, if possible.

Very little documentation and few pictures remain of the town of Guffey or Freshwater (the town name before it was Guffey). Strangely enough, there seems to be more information about Old Mose, the Grizzly bear that roamed the hills in the area in the late 1800's, than there is about the town, its people and events.

Looking up and down the streets of Guffey today it is very hard to imagine it in its heyday. It was a thriving, bustling mining camp of at most 500 people, some 40 businesses and buildings to support those businesses and people and about 1000 people in the surrounding area.

Here and there though, an old building catches ones eye, stands out and seems to have a story to tell of its past.

Life was and remains a challenge in the mountains. Rose White remembers moving to the area during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl days, and that they had a tremendous impact on the area. Everything was difficult during those days. "Time were very hard, but

there was a community spirit of togetherness and survival at that time.” Rose White, Guffey, One Hundred Years of Memories.

Guffey still has that sense of community and shared survival, and the residents have the same independent, hard working spirit as the individuals who pioneered the area.

Guffey is an eclectic mix of its prehistoric past, its Native American heritage, its pioneer - homesteading - mining - ranching days to present day residential/commercial semi-ghost town.

Millennium ago, what is now Guffey, was once the center of volcanic activity. Guffey is in the basin - the caldera - that resulted from the eruptions. Guffey is surrounded by ageless mountains, many of them named for pioneers in the area, with Freshwater Creek running through it.

Originally the area was the home of various Native American tribes, but the Utes mainly controlled the mountain areas, including Guffey, until the mid – to late 1800's. The soda springs just south of town was a popular spot and there is some evidence of fortification sites on the surrounding hills.

Then, during the 1890's, gold was discovered in nearby Cripple Creek . The prospectors were originally drawn to the Guffey area because of similar geology. As word got out, over 1000 prospectors came to the area. The town of Freshwater was founded and platted in 1895. Soon it grew to 500 residents and 40 businesses. The camp boasted of a lady barber, Miss Viola Tipton, who supported herself and her mother by plying the tonsorial art, as recorded in Guffey 100 Years, from an article in the August 7 th, 1896 issue of the Denver Times.

Freshwater's Main St. was lined with false-fronted stores. With the large community here, Guffey was an important stop on the road between Canon City and Fairplay. The railroad never made it to Guffey, so everything was hauled in by wagon and stagecoach.

The size of the plat map indicates that a much larger town was planned, but since gold or anything else was never found in any appreciable amounts, the boom was short lived.

The residents of Freshwater applied for a post office in 1895. Since there was already a Freshwater in California , the town was briefly named Idaville, after the owner of several mining claims in the area. The next year the name was changed to Guffey, after James

Guffey, a wealthy oil and mining man who donated money to the town for street improvements.

On November 23, 1896, Gus Cohen, the mercantile owner, purchased all 110 platted acres of Guffey for \$1.25/acre, or \$137.50 for the entire town as recorded by the US Land Patent office!

No large lodes were found though, and within several years the town was all but deserted when ranching became its economic base.

In the early 1900's ranching and farming became the most common means of survival for the area's residents. The town was still dwindling but Guffey became a community gathering place for meetings, rodeos, dances and to obtain supplies. Many ranchers also rented a place in town during the winter so their children could get to school.

Farming in the area was mostly potatoes. Several acres of potatoes were planted each year. The largest ones were sorted out and taken to Canon City or Cripple Creek to be sold. Maud Marie Ownbey, a longtime, early resident, remembers trading 1000 pounds of potatoes for 1000 pounds of flour, sugar and salt and not much else. From Guffey 100 Years.

Ranching was difficult at best. Franklin Nash, a longtime, early resident, remembers his father saying that "this was the best country in the world, and ranching is the greatest life in the world. You just need some way to make a living"! From Guffey 100 Years . Nash said they just kept mortgaging and mortgaging the ranch and ended up land rich and cash poor and having to sell off parcels of land. The fact is he said "you go broke ranching out here." From Guffey 100 Years.

Everyone came out to homestead and get their 160 acres. One just had to live on the land for five years. Then you could get 160 acres more and then 160 acres more.

Homesteading didn't really catch on until immediately after World War I, when wildcat speculation and laws giving advantages to returned soldiers put government land in great demand. A soldier now had only to live on a homestead seven months, if he had spent enough time in the army. He was also given preference in all new lands that opened up.

Guffey was a gathering and meeting place. Cattlemen and ranchers held their association meetings in the City Hall (Town Hall or the Museum today). Dances were also held once a month, or so, in the City Hall. Folks would come from miles around. Virgil White

remembers that they had a check stand at the dance hall in Guffey and “everyone was compelled to check his six-guns and spurs.” From Guffey 100 Years.



Photo courtesy of Vanessa Hess

Guffey was also a place to come for supplies and mail, as it was an important stop on the way to Fairplay. Gus Cohen ran the mercantile store and apparently sold just about everything there was to sell. “It was a great store for a little town”, said John Tremayne, Guffey 100 Years.

According to Franklin Nash, Guffey 100 Years, 50-60 people would gather in Guffey twice a week when the mail team would come through.

Many of the nearby ranches are still present and could possibly qualify for a larger ranch area historic district of some sort. They were not part of this survey because of distance, lack of time, money and information.

The town of Guffey has a very interesting history and probably should be preserved, if possible. Each of the 14 sites and 25 buildings has its own history, as well. Many of the sites have had some restoration, thanks to longtime town resident, Bill Soux. Mr. Soux owns many of the historic buildings and has refurbished them all.

Unfortunately, many have not been restored. There is a high probability that some of these buildings will be destroyed, moved or scrapped in the decades to come. Historic district designation is an incentive for property owners to fix up the historic buildings instead.

The PCOHP can help property owners, “find ways to properly care for your historic properties, suggest possible grants to help pay for the work, and explain how to comply with rehabilitation standards that might qualify the work on your property for state and or national tax credits.” PCOHP pamphlet. PCOHP's goal is to help Park County property owners to both preserve and be able to use their historic properties. PCOHP pamphlet.

Some may be worried that this might change Guffey or bring more people here, but nothing really needs to change. It will give property owners more of an incentive to refurbish their historic properties, though.

The property owners within the district – 3 rd St , Water St. , 9 th St. , and Ridge St. – are particularly invited and encouraged to attend, as a 50% YES vote is need from the district property owners for the historic designation to go through.

I would like to acknowledge and thank everyone involved for their foresight in putting together the book, Guffey One Hundred Years of Memories, especially the story tellers. Many of those whose memories were recorded in the book have passed away or moved away. I relied heavily on information in the book for this article.