



Sugar Beet Factory

By Kathy Jordan

Perhaps as you are driving eastbound on the Riverside Parkway you have noticed a large brick building on the north side of the highway and have wondered why the building is there and what its uses are.

It was built in 1899 as the Colorado Sugar Manufacturing Company, the first sugar beet factory in Colorado. The factory was three stories tall, with a foundation larger than a football field. It was constructed of more than one million bricks and three rail cars of structural steel. The factory employed over 100 men when it started operation in December 1899.

mkSugar beets were first grown in Mesa County in 1887, when Henry R. Rhone decided to raise them on a test basis.

In 1888 M.L. Allison, a member of the Grand Junction Town Co., worked with the State Agricultural College in Fort Collins to grow a crop of the school's beet seeds. Crops from the farms of both men were found to have a high sugar content which promised potentially high profits.

In the early 1890s, Grand Junction boosters used this information to encourage sugar beet production and possibly convince some company to build a factory in Grand Junction. The group sold the Oxnard Beet Sugar Company of Grand Island, Neb., on the idea of building a refinery here, but Oxnard backed out when the booster group was unable to get enough local growers interested in growing sugar beets.

Apparently the Nebraska group was convinced that sugar beet crops could become a major industry in the area, because 1893 Mesa County property records show that investors from Nebraska formed the Bluestone Valley Land and Improvement Co. and purchased a great deal of property intending to develop it.

It wasn't until 1899 that Charles E. Mitchell and Charles N. Cox again sold the idea of the sugar beet factory. The two men convinced the Mesa County Commissioners to guarantee at least \$350,000, or one percent of the cost of building a plant.

No doubt the outbreak of the Spanish-American War in 1898 heightened the interest in sugar from beets because of the shortage of cane sugar that the United States had been importing from Cuba.

Cox obtained a donation of land from the George Crawford estate for the facility, along with pledges from farmers for 3,000 acres of beets, the minimum needed for a plant to operate.

Investors were still needed. Cox had Denver connections, including his wife's sister, Mrs. John R. Hanna, a leader in Denver's top social set, the Sacred 36 Bridge Club. He was able to sign up Denverites Charles Boettcher, whose family later donated the present Colorado Governor's Mansion to the state, John F. Champion, Eben Smith, and J.J. Brown, husband of the "Unsinkable Molly" Brown. J. R. McKinney of Grand Junction was the sole local investor.

Cox was also involved in ranching, and Mesa County documents show that Cox along with Charles A. Otis and John S. Casement had a large ranch in Unaweep Canyon called the Waterfall Ranch, or better known as Fall Creek Ranch. John Casement's son, Dan, lived at the ranch and managed it for several years. Property deeds also show that Cox owned a great deal of property on Orchard Mesa.

A labor shortage created problems, and the factory changed hands several times. The owners tried to sell the factory, and in 1901 the plant was closed and went into receivership. In April of 1902 the company was reorganized, but by November of that year it went into receivership again because the corporation had been unable to get farmers to produce enough beets. According to records, McKinney, the Grand Junction

investor, worked mightily to keep the factory afloat when it was going in and out of receivership.

In 1902 Western Sugar and Land Co., of Wyoming purchased the plant and operated it until 1916 when they sold to Holly Sugar Co. Holly Sugar operated the factory until 1929 at which time management decided to close the Grand Junction facility and consolidate its operations at Delta.

When uranium became a valuable commodity, the building was operated as the Climax Uranium Mill from 1951 to 1970.

It is now a warehouse.