

Colorado

**(Historical Essay on Agriculture and
Rural Life)**

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Colorado has the distinction of being the highest state in the country with an average altitude of 6,800 feet. This seems like an unlikely stronghold for agriculture, but there is far more to the land than stately snow-capped peaks and deep mine shafts. The landscape of Colorado includes majestic mountain ranges along most of the western side of the state. The east is characterized by rolling plains and farmlands. Water is a precious resource throughout the state. "The Colorado System," instituted during the late nineteenth century provides a legal guarantee of priority water use to the first person or agency productively diverting it from a natural stream.

Early travelers to the region had little thought of staying here. They planned to return to their home as soon as they made a "stake" or found the bodily vigor the climate was expected to give. For many though, the lure of the west that had drawn them across the plains held them fast to this land. Over the years, the miner, the soldier of fortune, the hunter and trapper, the stockman, the farmer, the professional woman, and the health seeker became community builders and in due time qualified Pike's Peak country as the state of Colorado.

The valleys of Colorado have been critical to the development of agriculture. The first valley below the northern state line is the Cache-la-Poudre. It was one of the earliest settled and best farming valleys in the state. Here you found the Union Colony at Greeley and the Agricultural Colony at Fort Collins. About seventeen miles south is the Big Thompson Valley. Early in history trappers inhabited the St. Vrain Valley. It was the first area of the state said to have fenced and "properly improved" farms. Boulder Valley was a famous wheat-growing section. Ralston, Bear, and Clear Creek Valleys are in the area near the city of Denver. The South Platte Valley and the Arkansas Valley include vast stretches of arable land reaching from the foothills to the eastern most limit of the State. West of the Arkansas tributaries, and past the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, is San Luis Park, watered by the Rio Grande and its feeders, the Alamosa, Conejos, Costilla, and others.

In 1540 Vasquez Coronado, a Spanish adventurer set out for an expedition whose passage along the base of the Rocky Mountains is the first upon record. He came up from the south, passing to the Rio Grande del Norte, following this stream until he entered San Luis Park and then through the pass of the Sangre de Cristo. He came up until he reached what is now Long's Peak, in the northern part of the state.

Major Zebulon N. Pike led the first major expedition to the area later known as Colorado. His main objective was to find the source of the Arkansas. On November 15 of 1805 he came to what had been called Mexican Mountain, now known as Pike's Peak. He tried unsuccessfully to ascend it. Returning to the plains, he crossed the Divide between the Arkansas and South Platte and ended up along the Grand, in the western part of the State.

In 1819 Col. Long's expedition set out from Pittsburgh and striking the mountains near Fort St. Vrain, on the stream of the same name, he saw for the first time the peak named in his honor. Long traversed the base of the mountains through the entire length of the territory. During this exploration Dr. James ascended the Mexican Mountain, or Grand Peak. Long tried to name it after James, but found that Pike's name has been fastened to it by the settlers in a way it could not be changed. Col. Fremont's expedition in 1842 passed through the South Platte, Big Thompson, Cache-la-Poudre, and Crow creeks up to Fort Laramie and then across the range to the Pacific. Up to this time there were few white settlers in the country. The Pawnee, Cheyenne, Ute and Arapahoe roamed the country.

In 1857 gold was discovered in the sands of Ralston Creek, an affluent of the South Platte River. By 1859 Pike's Peak was the objective point of the multitude of gold seekers of the territory. Colorado City, Denver, Black Hawk, Golden, and Georgetown were founded soon after. In 1861 Congress organized the Territory of Colorado. A Constitution was formed and submitted to the people and was passed. It took several years and two bills for admission, but in 1876 Colorado joined the United States as the Centennial State. The state comprises the portion of the area within the thirty-seventh and forty-first parallels of north latitude, and the one hundred and second and one hundred and north meridian of west longitude. It comprises one hundred and six thousand four hundred and seventy five square miles or nearly sixty eight million acres. Two thirds of this region is mountain ranges. Professor Hayden in his survey, completed in 1873 stated this as, "one of the most interesting areas on the continent, both in a geological and geographical point of view, forming as it does, the center of the greatest elevation in the Rocky Mountain chain."

The first impressions of the West came from the stories and writings of the early explorers including Lewis and Clark 1804-05, Zebulon Pike in 1806-07, Long in 1819-20, and the Fremont expeditions of 1842 and 1843-44. Colorado is at the top of the western part of the United States with mountain parks and valleys, and broad plains country sloping down to Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and New Mexico. The rivers marked the earliest travel routes, except where river canons were too difficult. The first explorers looked for ways to get beyond the mountains. Lewis and Clark went up the Missouri in 1804 to find a way to Oregon, Pike traveled up the Arkansas in 1806 until the mountains turned him south, and Fremont in 1842 followed up the Platte to Fort St. Vrain, then to Fort Laramie.

Railroad building took the same routes. The Union Pacific survey touched Colorado at Julesburg, but then turned northward and crossed the land by way of southern Wyoming. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe route was fixed, it led up the Arkansas into Colorado to turn southwest at La Junta and then across the Raton Mountains to pass over the Continental Divide in western New Mexico.

The men who were later known as the pioneer farmers and stockmen of Colorado had come to the country with the fever of adventure in their blood. Many came for gold, but some found they knew more about farming and gardening and stock raising than they did about mining, so they took up the way of living and making a living that they had learned on old and new farms in other states and countries. Pike seems to have said nothing of agricultural promise. Later Long and Fremont did make observations of real agricultural value. Many hunters and trappers passed through the mountains and along the river valleys in the years from 1820-1845.

In 1861 a group of men prominent in the community called a meeting for the discussion of forming an agricultural society. Nothing came from that meeting, but in 1863 a meeting was held in Denver and a committee was appointed to draft a constitution and by-laws for the Colorado Agricultural Society. The society focus, "shall be to promote the interests of stock raising and husbandry in all its branches, and every means and measure which will conduce to the benefits of its members..." The society didn't draw much support from farmers, since it became an organization for the backing of the territorial fair. The first fair was held in 1866. It was claimed a success. The Rocky Mountain Weekly News, September 26, 1866 reported: "The size and quality of our vegetables are wonderful to recent arrivals in Colorado. Turnips as big as pumpkins and weighing over fifteen pounds... Of potatoes we noted very fine lots from various quarters. Corn raised on the highlands eleven feet in height and ripe enough already to defy the attack of grasshoppers is there."

The Colorado Agricultural Society formed in Denver had little direct influence on the practice of farming. The Union Colony at Greeley started a different type of organization. That was an association of actual farmers for the purpose of discussing the technical side of farming and to exchange ideas that might be helpful to the membership. It was the beginning of farmers' institutes in the form already familiar to the eastern states but then new to rural Colorado.

The town of Greeley, in Weld country, was settled in April 1870 under what was called the "Union Colony". It was said of the settlement, "Locations were chosen by those who, having ventured so far had sufficient foresight to see that the experiment was but at its beginning, and that success lay in the near future. The top of the ladder was not to be reached by one bound, even in Colorado. One by one the rungs were to be trodden, and by feet made weary on the upward way. But soon an irrigating canal was completed and the water came dancing through the flumes like a ministering angel, scattering blessings along its path. It ran over the parched land, and blade and blossom awoke to a new beauty. The birds sang their welcome, and early and late, to the new comers, whom destiny had brought to these so lately desolate but now blooming prairie lands."

Eighteen seventy-six was an eventful year for Colorado. It was the centennial for the United States and Colorado's arrival as a state. It was also the year after the great plague of locusts, so the "grasshopper appropriation" helped provide food and clothing for farmers whose crops had been eaten. The grasshoppers came back in 1876 and one

account says, "At noon they looked like snowflakes in sunshine, filling the air thickly as far as the eye could reach. In the evening they literally covered walls, fences, and pavements. Corn was stripped to the bare stalk."

There was danger from the Indians and hardships due to weather and fortune, but the rank and file of those who came early to Colorado was the average type of rural and urban citizens from the east. Few were newly arrived European immigrants, mainly German. According to the 1860 census, the population of the state was 34, 277. During the early settlement, the only staple food besides meat that was produced and manufactured in Colorado in sufficient quantity was flour. Produce was coming from both east and west. Butter and eggs came from Kansas and Nebraska, onions, cabbage and barley from California and Utah.

Over the years where water could be brought to the land, agriculture took hold. The Western plateau is finely suited to fruit growing. The irrigated lands east of the Rocky Mountains yield a plethora of crops including beans, barley, potatoes, corn, wheat, and forage crops. In the Arkansas River Valley melons are plentiful.

There is a wealth of agricultural and rural life material for the "Centennial State". Alvin T. Steinel's *History of Colorado Agriculture* (1926) emphasizes early farming and ranching, from contributions by faculty, USDA publications, newspaper articles and letters from pioneer agriculturalists. Cooperative Extension Director F. A. Anderson's 1947 report comprehensively reviews Colorado agricultural developments from 1880. This report and others are used in Dr. James Hansen's, *Beyond the Ivory Tower: a history of Colorado State University Cooperative Extension* (1991), which expertly details agricultural extension work in Colorado. Dr. Hansen's book will also provide important resources for developing the bibliography of agriculture and rural life for the state. There are gems hidden in the *Colorado Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin* such as the Meteorological Data from the experiment station from 1887-1947.

Colorado's rich agricultural history began out of a gold rush in 1858-59. With the rush of water in irrigation ditches and the rush of new people seeking out a life "in the west" Colorado has continued to make a vibrant and expansive contribution to agriculture. Colorado is in the top ranks of production of dry beans, barley, alfalfa, potatoes, sunflowers, wheat, and carrots, just to name a few crops. There are approximately 10.5 million acres of cropland including 3.4 million acres irrigated. There are over 30,000 farms and ranches in the state. The participation of Colorado State University in the USAIN-NEH grant would allow for an important documentation of the agricultural history of the Centennial State.