

FARMING AND RANCHING IN COLORADO (1859-1910)



(Photo Credit: Colorado Historical Society)

TEACHER'S NOTEBOOK

Doing History/Keeping the Past Project*
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INTRODUCTION

This teacher's guide will help teachers and their students use the materials created by the DOING HISTORY/KEEPING THE PAST: A COLORADO HISTORIC PRESERVATION CURRICULUM PROJECT. The project was created in 1998 to develop a new generation of Colorado history and historic preservation education materials, which will be delivered to schools via computer-based technology. The State Historical Fund of the Colorado Historical Society has generously supported the project.

COMPUTER-BASED MATERIALS

The materials created by the DOING HISTORY/KEEPING THE PAST PROJECT are available on CD-ROM disks and via the Project's Internet website (<http://hewit.unco.edu/dohist/>). The materials may be viewed on the website. The CD-ROM disks may be ordered at the address listed below.

HISTORY IS AN ACTION WORD

The basic idea underlying this project is that history is something one does. It assumes that students should be engaged in creating their own historical understanding by using and interpreting a variety of primary sources and secondary materials. Then they should share their history with others by writing, speaking, drawing, acting out or otherwise presenting what they have learned.

HISTORY OF EVERYDAY LIFE

The most accessible kind of history for young students is the history of everyday life. It is easy for them to related to, to understand, to document, and to do. It also is a very democratic kind of history, as it includes rich and poor, and ordinary and famous people alike. The history of everyday life encompasses at least the following topics:

- Food, Clothing, and Shelter
- Family, Children, and Schools
- Work Grown-ups Do
- Towns and Cities
- Community Life
- Transportation.

HISTORY OF PLACES

Everyday life has a spatial dimension. It is set in specific communities, locations, places, buildings, houses, or rooms. Attention to the history of places and the interaction of people and places should make it easier for students to do history that is visual and concrete.

HISTORY CLOSE TO HOME

School history often has focused on the history of people somewhat remote from students. It is, of course, important for them to learn about other people who once lived in Colorado. But they should also have an opportunity to do their own history, the history of their family, school, community, and town. It is easiest for them to document and preserve history that is close to home.

KEEPING THE PAST

Doing history requires evidence from and information about the past. We cannot be doers of history without being keepers of the past. This project is designed to help students see this connection. It will help students get involved in doing history and keeping the past. It focuses especially on helping students keep the past that is physically closest to them—the past of their family, school, neighborhood, and community. This includes documenting and preserving sites as well as documents that have historical significance to them.

CLASSROOM ARCHIVES

Students need a place to deposit the evidence that they are collecting about their family, school, and community. Some of it will go home with them at the end of the school year. Much of it belongs in the classroom as a resource and model for future students. Classrooms need a history archives. That could be either a filing cabinet or files and folders on a computer. Most of the evidence that students will collect can be keyboarded or photographed and scanned into a computer.

STUDENT WEBSITES

Students also need to share with others the history they are doing. They need a forum, a source of inspiration and new ideas, a publication outlet, a form of recognition. One way to meet this need is to create websites in classrooms and at the project's office at the University of Northern Colorado on which students can share their best work with others.

PROJECT CONTACT INFORMATION

To order computer-based materials or for further information about this project, contact Matthew Downey, Project Director, McKee Hall 318, University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, CO 80639; toll free telephone, 1-800-224-0534; fax, 970-351-3159; email, matthew.downey@unco.edu; website, <http://hewit.unco.edu/dohist/>.

FARMERS AND RANCHERS

OVERVIEW

Farming and ranching in Colorado grew up alongside mining and town building. The influx of gold seekers created a market for meat, flour, vegetables, and other foodstuff. Several of the newcomers saw that farming and cattle raising would produce a more certain income than prospecting for gold. They learned to grow crops in Colorado's semi-arid climate by irrigating the fields. They grew food crops as well as grain. Some cut hay from the meadows along the South Platte River, which they sold as food for horses and milk cows in Denver and in the mining camps. Others learned that the grass that grew on the plains could support herds of cattle the year round. In the process, farmers and ranchers developed a more permanent and predictable economy for Colorado.

FOOD, CLOTHING AND SHELTER

Farm and ranch families raised much of their own food. Most rural families had gardens, usually tended by the women and children. The garden produced fresh vegetables during the summer as well as food that could be preserved and kept through the winter. A milk cow or two kept the family supplied with milk, cream, and butter. Chickens provided eggs and meat. However, farm and ranch families were far from self-sufficient. Many items had to be purchased or secured in trade for butter or eggs from the general store at the nearest market town. These included a variety of staple foods (flour, sugar, salt, spices) and specialty items (candy, canned fruit, and other delicacies).

Men and women in the rural areas of Colorado dressed according to the fashions of the time. Men wore dark-colored work shirts and pants held up with a belt or suspenders. Farm women typically wore long, print dresses, the skirt covered with an apron. With washing and ironing clothes by hand a time-consuming task, aprons were an important labor-saving device. Sunday dress-up clothes, for those who could afford them, included suits for men and two-piece waist and skirt outfits for women. Children commonly wore scaled-down versions of adult clothes, although boys often wore short pants until age 7 or so.

Farmers and ranchers used a variety of building materials to construct houses. The first houses usually were one-story structures that took advantage of local building materials. Log cabins were common, especially near the foothills of the Rockies where timber was available. By the 1880s, settlers on the plains of eastern Colorado used strips of sod to construct their first houses. In the Hispanic settlements of southern Colorado, houses made of adobe, sun-dried bricks were common throughout the 19th century. The vast majority of Anglo settlers in Colorado considered log or sod houses as only temporary shelters. The only proper kinds of houses from their cultural perspective were those

constructed of frame, stone or fired-brick. Frame houses eventually dominated the rural landscape in most rural areas of Colorado.

FAMILIES, CHILDREN AND SCHOOLS

The rural communities of Colorado were settled by families. Married men and women outnumbered the single men who worked as hired farm hands and cowboys. With children present from the outset, schools appeared early in the development of rural communities. Erecting a rural school building usually was one of the first public tasks that brought people together. The first schools typically were one-room buildings made of logs or sod. In time these were replaced by wooden frame buildings. During the first years of a new settlement, the school often served as a community center as well as a place of learning. Rural people assembled there for public meetings, potluck dinners, and community spelling bees. The rural school helped give fledgling rural communities a sense of identity as well as a community center.

FARM WORK AND TOOLS

By the 1870s, farming throughout the United States had become a mechanized occupation. Farming in Colorado was no exception. Farmers cut hay with horse-drawn mowing machines, gathered it up with horse-drawn rakes, and baled it with special hay presses. They used a variety of specialized steel plows to cut sod for houses, break the sod for planting, and till the soil thereafter. They planted wheat with horse-drawn seed drills, harvested the crop with horse-drawn binding machines, and threshed out the grain with separating machines powered by steam engines. Their dependence on machines had a variety of social and economic consequences for Colorado farmers. It sometimes brought them together to share equipment; it also put many farmers in debt to buy the implements they could no longer do without.

Because of Colorado's very dry climate, farmers there could not farm in the same ways as they had "back East." Rainfall averaged 8 to 10 inches a year in most areas where farming was possible in Colorado. Moreover, these averages did not take into account seasonal or yearly variations in rainfall. Some seasons and years were quite drier than others. Farmers in Colorado therefore had to find new ways of doing business. As a result, they began to develop irrigation systems in the state's river valleys, although digging ditches and making dams, which made irrigation possible, added new costs for farmers. On the plains, farmers also began to adopt dry land (water-saving) farming methods. In both types of regions they began to experiment with new varieties of crops.

RANCH WORK AND TOOLS

Ranch work was focused on the raising and marketing of cattle. From the beginning of Anglo settlement until the late 1880s, the cattle were left alone most of the year to graze on the grassland of the plains. During the winter, a cattleman's herd might drift for miles on the open range, ending up mixed together with neighboring herds. Ranchers went out each spring with their hired hands to round up the cattle bearing their ranch's distinctive brand and to drive their herd back to its home range. New calves also were branded during the spring roundup. A second roundup took place each fall to separate out the cattle that were ready for market. These animals were then driven to the nearest railroad siding, where they were loaded into cattle cars to be sent to eastern slaughterhouses.

The open-range phase of the cattle industry came to an abrupt end in the late-1880s. By then the grasslands were dangerously overstocked with cattle. Then two disastrous winters in 1886-1888 wiped out many of the underfed herds. Thereafter, ranchers fenced the grasslands that they owned or could control and fed their cattle hay during the winter.

The cattlemen's tools were the relatively simple ones needed for raising and marketing cattle. Cowboys needed saddles and horse tack. The tools of the roundup included chuck wagons, lariats, branding irons, and the cowboys' bedrolls. During the latter phase of the industry, fence-post hole diggers, mowing machines, and hay rakes and wagons became important, as well.

MARKET AND SUPPLY TOWNS

Although farmers and ranchers lived in rural areas, they were dependent on nearby towns. The towns served as supply centers for the surrounding farms and ranches. Rural dwellers came to town to buy food staples, hardware, and cloth. They brought broken equipment in to be repaired by the local blacksmith. They stopped at implement dealers to order new plows or harness shops to buy saddles or horse tack. Farmers brought their surplus farm products to market towns. Towns located on railroads also usually had cattle pens and loading chutes nearby to which ranchers brought their cattle that were ready for market.

COMMUNITY LIFE

People who settled on Colorado's farms and ranches, no less than those who came looking for gold, brought well-established institutions and customs with them. Religious services, national holidays, local elections, and public meetings provided many occasions for people to come together. In the early years, rural people came together to build a school, to help new arrivals build a house or to meet in someone's home for Sunday religious services. They eventually built churches at rural crossroads or in a nearby market town. Farm families also went

to town for Fourth of July parades, county fairs, and harvest celebrations. The harvest festivities tended to focus on a particular crop for which the locality was well known. Grand Junction had its Peach Day, Greeley its Potato Day, and Rocky Ford its Melon Day. By the turn of the century, sporting events, especially high school ball games, also brought rural together.

TRANSPORTATION

Horses, horse-drawn vehicles, and railroads provided most of the transportation needed by Colorado's farmers and ranchers. They drove to town in farm wagons to pick up supplies, to sell hay or farm products or for social events. Ranchers used chuck wagons to haul their cowboys' food and bedding to roundups. Both also were dependent on railroads to haul their products to faraway markets, especially cattle raisers. Long trains of cattle cars heading east each spring and fall kept ranchers in business and provided eastern cities with beef.