

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

Families settled the rural communities of Colorado. 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 wooden frame buildings replaced these. 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 not do without.

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.