

Lynchings in Park County

Mobs sometimes took law into own hands



FAIRPLAY HOTEL

The Fairplay Hotel is shown here a few years after Hoover shot and killed Bennett in 1879. Bennett died in one of the upstairs rooms from a gunshot wound to the chest. (Photo from Park County Local History Archives No. 1678. Source: South Park Historical Foundation.)

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Correspondents

Lynching was a gruesome practice in the west in the 1800s, and Park County had its share of the sordid activity.

As early as 1860, a man named McFarland was hung at the Tarryall mining camp, according to Stephen J. Leonard's book "Lynching in Colorado: 1869-1919." Accused of stealing, McFarland was hung by a mob even though the evidence against him was weak. In Colorado Territory times, mining camp law was strict; punishment could include banishment (permanently sent out of town), floggings and hangings.

A total of seven known lynchings marked Park County's Wild West era, and there were probably more that were never recorded. Luckless McFarland appears to have been the first recorded victim.

The next fellow was a man named Baxter, hanged during the early 1860s during the Espinosa frenzy. The Espinosa brothers



HALL VALLEY

Two men were lynched in the new mining camp of Hall Valley in 1873 for shooting up the town. This period photo shows the town's layout, with the many buildings necessary for a large mining operation. (Photo from Park County Local History Archives No. 3136. Source: Boot-Hall Family Collection.)



ALMA, LATE 1880S

The bustling town of Alma had a roaring night life that often led to trouble. Groups of men like these may have been members of a vigilante committee by night. In this late 1880s photo, a jack train is loading up to head to the mines. It was the only transportation means that was available at such high elevations. (Photo from Park County Local History Archives, No. 2102. Source: South Park Historical Foundation)

were from southern Colorado and rode into Park County in the spring of 1863, killing men indiscriminately. Bent on avenging their treatment at the hands of white men in the Espinosas' original homeland of New Mexico, they killed six men in Park County within a two-month span.

Naturally, the random killings instilled widespread fear in the region, especially in the many isolated ranching areas. People traveled in groups, and just about any stranger was a potential suspect. Soldiers were sent into South Park from Denver to hunt down the marauders and to keep the peace in that part of the Territory.

Into this atmosphere rode a man named Baxter on the night of May 2, 1863. A notorious cattle thief and a sometimes-member of a Leadville gang, he stopped for the evening at an overnight hotel called the Junction House. This was located near present-day Como at the intersection of two roads. Apparently Baxter had been identified and reported, because a group of soldiers came looking for him that evening. Wanting to protect their guest, Mrs. Snyder (first name not available for her or her husband) refused entrance when the soldiers knocked, claiming she was home alone. When they tried to force the door, she fired a shot. Frustrated, the soldiers recruited reinforcements from the nearby Kenosha House, another overnight stop, returning with a show of force; however, one of the men was able to coax Mr. Snyder outside. Snyder had actually been hiding in his own house all along. When the group heard a gun being cocked and saw another man inside, they realized they had also found Baxter.

provide glimpse of Old West



SUMMER BREWERY

One of Fairplay's early saloons was the Summer Brewery, originally housed in a log building that burned in 1873. A brick building replaced it that still stands in the South Park City restored mining town. It is the home to the successor brewery, the South Park Lager Beer Brewery. Hoover owned the Cabinet Billiard Hall in Fairplay, where he sold liquor and cigars. (Photo from Park County Local History Archives No. 1545. Source: South Park Historical Foundation.)

Snyder and Baxter were hauled back to the Kenosha House, where, after several mock hangings, Snyder was released with the order to leave the county. Baxter did not fare as well – he was taken to Fairplay, where the soldiers and a group of citizens decided he should be the subject of summary justice.

Driven within sight of Red Hill Pass, dubbed "the Bloody Red Hills," Baxter was hung from an aspen tree, where, "the next morning, his body was found pendant from the limb of a quaking aspen tree, with one end of a rope around his neck and the other fastened around the limb aforesaid," according to a letter to the Rocky Mountain News Weekly of May 16, 1863.

Ten years later there was a double lynching in Hall Valley, a small mining district in the northwestern part of the county now accessed via County Road 62 at the foot of Kenosha Pass. Due to Hall Valley's 35-mile distance from the county seat of Fairplay, the law did not have much presence there, and a number of ruffians, or "roughs," soon flocked to the new mining camp. A man named Henry Hall (no connection to the Hall Valley name) arrived and promptly opened a saloon, and one of his customers, Michael Boice, was a tram worker who frequented the saloon. Boice was employed to help build the four-mile tramway in the valley

that ran from the profitable silver mines at the top to the smelter down below, where the ore was processed.

Colonel Jairus W. Hall, who owned the mines and for whom the valley was named, shut down Henry Hall's saloon after too many workers began getting drunk and fighting. Miffed, Hall and patron Boice pulled out their guns one evening, firing indiscriminately around town. A posse was quickly formed, and it disarmed the two after they refused to leave town, continually threatening to kill people. Henry Hall and Boice were locked in an empty storeroom for the night since the posse planned to take the two into Fairplay at first light. They never made it. In the dead of night a vigilante mob took the pair out into the night air, marched them a half-mile down the road and hung the two from the same tree. Needless to say, most of the bad influences left town the following morning when they saw their cohorts "decorating a tree."

The next lynching happened in 1867 in a valley just east of Hall Valley called Geneva Gulch. Not much is known about this episode other than a man named Charley Ogden was lynched after allegedly killing someone.

In 1880 there were two illegal hangings a little over one month apart – Bill Porter was lynched in Alma in March of 1880, and John Hoover met his demise in April

of that year.

Porter was a miner whose mean temper had earned him a bad reputation. On the night of March 22, 1880, "Wild Bill" was drinking in an Alma saloon when he began arguing with a young man of Irish descent about religion. After the two left the saloon, Porter suddenly pulled out his gun and shot the man right there in the street. The victim managed to make it to a nearby hotel, where he died shortly thereafter.

Porter was taken to the Alma jail by the local town marshal, but a mob of about 50 had already formed, determined to administer their own kind of Western justice. The group stormed the jail, dragged Porter out and strung him up from the ridgepole that extended above the building's roofline. Porter was defiant to the end, only asking that his young sons, who lived back in Wisconsin, not be told how he died.

Thirty-six days later, a convicted murderer named John Hoover was lynched out of a Fairplay courthouse window. Hoover shot and killed a man the previous year because the man was cleaning out a town ditch, and Hoover thought the water was ruining his own property. After spending nearly a year in jail, the court officials devised an agreement to sentence Hoover to only eight years in prison for manslaughter, a lesser penalty