

The Early Days in Elk Falls

by Jim Houze

During the gold rush days in the 1800's, Elk Falls was a hideout for stagecoach robbers and thieves. A favorite place to hole up was in Box Canyon where there was adequate ground cover for their horses and many springs. Between Box Canyon and Shawnee there was a high ridge called "Signal Hill" where the bandits could spot the stagecoaches coming from the gold fields. When a stagecoach was sighted a signal-fire was then built which alerted the outlaws in Elk Falls to ride to Shaffers Crossing and hold up the stagecoach when it arrived. At one time Shaffers Crossing was known as "Shawns Crossing."

This was documented on a metal highway sign at Shaffers Crossing where the present asphalt turnoff ends from U.S. Highway 285. The sign read: "Elk Creek Valley Rendezvous of Early Stage Coach Robbers and Thieves." This sign remained for many years in the 30's and 40's and then mysteriously disappeared.

Further documentation occurred in a Rocky Mountain News editorial prior to World War II telling of the stage coach robberies and the likelihood that some gold might have been hidden in Elk Falls. Also, a picture of the Elk Falls area accompanied the editorial. Many people, including the writer and his wife have searched this area without success.

In the early 1900's there was only a horse and buggy road from Shaffers Crossing to the present picnic ground. Elk Creek had only a few wooden bridges and in some places no bridges at all.

In the 30's, 40's and 50's travel from Denver to Elk Falls was a long, slow trip over old Colorado State Highway No. 8 (now U. S. Hwy. 285). It was a narrow, dangerous, winding road which went first through Morrison, then Tiny Town, up Turkey Creek to Aspen Park, then to Conifer Junction, Richmond Hill and Shaffers Crossing. In the late 60's, Highway 8 was relocated, widened and changed to U. S. Highway 285, now a major North-South artery.

Elk Falls was a favorite recreational spot for many organizations in the 30's and 40's. The local schools held their annual picnics and outdoor activities here. The Denver Athletic Club boys used the rental cabins and all the facilities for their summer programs. Many Boy Scout troops had campouts near the Falls. The

Round-up Riders would terminate their horseback trips at Elk Falls. A number of large Denver firms rented the picnic area for company picnics. The writer and his wife Irene spent their honeymoon in 1941 at the Hardey cabin (now owned by the Madsens).

During the late 30's and early 40's, Elk Falls was a working ranch managed by Jack and Hazel Stillwell. Cattle and turkeys were raised along with hay for feed. In 1949 Andy and Bessie Beye took over as caretakers.

Elmer Berg owned all of the Elk Falls area including the section now known as the "Upper Ranch." He also had a Chrysler-Plymouth dealership in Denver and a steel and iron works in Littleton. In the late 1950's Mr. Berg had the entire Elk Falls area surveyed and then subdivided into the three blocks as it is today.

Life in Elk Falls was very primitive in the 30's, 40's and 50's. No electricity, no telephones and no modern conveniences. Coleman lanterns, kerosene lamps and candles were the only source of light. Heat was either by wood, coal or distillate stoves. Water and ice had to be hauled in. In 1960 the IREA began installing poles and wire. Later on, Mountain Bell provided 8-party telephone service.

The present lodge building in the early days had a restaurant in the east wing which was open only in the summers. The west wing where the pool is now was destroyed by fire after World War II. Directly in back of the lodge was an icehouse where ice hauled in from Crystal Lake was stored. No roads existed above the lodge except for some ruts to six cabins located on the hill.

In 50 years, Elk Falls has grown from six cabins to almost a small city as Mr. Berg once predicted. With close in shopping and good schools this high country living in Elk Falls can't be beat.