

FROM NORAD TO PARKS...

A TALE OF THE CHEYENNE MOUNTAIN PROJECT

Colorado Springs is known as one of the United States' most scenic cities. As one approaches from most any direction, Pike's Peak dominates the skyline. Once within city limits, however, Cheyenne Mountain, defining the transition between the plains and the mountains, is the area's most prominent landmark. Thanks to the dedication and commitment of Cheyenne Mountain Reserve, LLC, the City of Colorado Springs, Colorado State Parks, and the involvement of Colorado Open Lands, nearly 1,000 acres of the crest of Cheyenne Mountain is now permanently protected as an addition to Cheyenne Mountain State Park.



Colorado Springs and Cheyenne Mountain: Parallel Paths

Cheyenne Mountain is closely intertwined with the cultural history of Colorado Springs. At one time, its steep slopes and hidden valleys provided safe passage to bands of Ute Indians that would venture onto the plains to steal ponies from their enemies. It is told that if they were closely pursued, they would light the dense forest ablaze to cover their retreat.

Later, after making his fortune in the gold mines of the Cripple Creek mining district, Spencer Penrose developed the Broadmoor Hotel, the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo, and the Will Rogers Temple of the Sun, all located on the mountain's northeastern flank. These improvements marked Colorado Springs' growth as a health industry destination for tuberculosis sufferers.

In popular culture, Cheyenne Mountain is most widely known as the location for the underground North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) operations center, developed during the Cold War. Colorado Springs faced a military boom during this era due to the establishment of Fort Carson, Peterson Air Force Base, and the United States Air Force Academy. To provide television and communications services to the burgeoning city, an "antennae farm" was constructed on the central highest point of Cheyenne Mountain in the 1950s. This cluster of communications towers is still prominent today.

Colorado Springs' rapid growth continued through the 1990s. In 2000, Colorado State Parks and the City of Colorado Springs achieved a major preservation victory when, together, they purchased 1,680 acres of the JL Ranch on the southeastern flank of the mountain. The entirety of the JL Ranch was slated to become a housing development comprised of 1-acre lots.

Many, including State Parks and the city, believed that this victory was incomplete. The long-standing vision was to acquire an additional 1,000 acres to the west of the JL Ranch property, protecting unique geology, stunning views of the city, and connecting

From NORAD to Parks...a tale of the Cheyenne Mountain Project

the lower elevation grasslands and shrublands of the JL Ranch to the subalpine conifer community of Cheyenne Mountain's peak within the Pike National Forest.

Chris Leiber, with Colorado Springs Trails Open Space and Parks (TOPS), put it this way *You can't hike around the JL Ranch acquisition and help but look up at Cheyenne Mountain, which dominates the view, and think that you want to hike up to that notch, ridge, or outcrop. It's a natural extension of the existing Park.* Adds Rich Dudley, Park Manager for Cheyenne Mountain State Park, *It's been a vision of mine to connect the lower elevation Park land with the extensive public lands to the west. It would create a much larger public lands presence for recreation and public enjoyment.*



Settling the Mountain

Approximately 800 acres of the Cheyenne Mountain State Park addition was homesteaded in 1917 with actual grants being conveyed between 1922 and 1926 to Thomas Dixon and Bert Swisher. Dixon built a cabin in the middle of three valleys on top of the mountain. Dixon accessed his cabin utilizing a hiking trail to the south. Although it has not been verified, it is believed that Thomas Dixon was the son of William F. Dixon, a pioneer whose Dixon Ranch and apple orchard later

became part of the Broadmoor.

Bert Swisher built a cabin further to the north near where the antenna farm is now located, and accessed his property by hiking the Old Stage Road that ran from the Broadmoor to the Cripple Creek mining district. His wife, Myra Ann, and young children would stay at the cabin during the week, and Bert, who had a plumbing business in Manitou Springs, would return on weekends. Each evening during the week, Myra Ann would light a fire on the edge of the mountain to let Bert know that everything was all right.

Dixon and Swisher ended up in a contest over the issuance of the patent to Dixon's property. Swisher believed that he had properly applied for the homestead for the entirety of the property in 1917. After involvement by their attorneys and letters to the Secretary of the Interior, it was determined by the government that Dixon had applied one month earlier and had better title. Eighty-one years later, Bert Swisher's grandchildren, Bert Reissig and Myra Ann Benjamin, through Cheyenne Mountain Reserve, LLC, purchased the entirety of the Dixon property and the two properties were finally combined.

Commitment to Conservation

Upon their mother's death in 1994, Bert Reissig and Myra Benjamin hired P.J. Anderson, an attorney and former El Paso County Planning Director (see sidebar), to investigate a non-compete agreement that their grandfather, Bert Swisher, had signed when he deeded the antennae farm property in the 1950s. Bert and Myra dearly wished

From NORAD to Parks...a tale of the Cheyenne Mountain Project

to preserve the property to honor their grandfather's legacy, but at the same time needed to generate income from the land.

Settlement of a lawsuit with the owners of the antennae farm allowed Bert and Myra to obtain ownership of additional acreage, along with access to their lands via an approved road. This settlement, however, also opened the door to the potential development of the land, a worst-case scenario that was looking increasingly probable.

At about this same time, Colorado State Parks and the City of Colorado Springs announced the acquisition of the JL Ranch and their intent to create Cheyenne Mountain State Park at the base of the Mountain. PJ Anderson, a founding member of the Colorado State Parks Foundation, approached those agencies to gauge their interest in purchasing the property.

While State Parks and the City's level of interest was high, they had just made a major investment in the JL Ranch, and due to the high development potential of the summit, the price tag for the property was just too high. Nevertheless, Bert, Myra and PJ were determined to preserve rather than develop the property.

To their great credit, Bert, Myra and PJ continued to be very patient with the process and on an annual basis took local elected officials, community leaders, and members of State Parks and Colorado Springs TOPS boards to the top of the mountain to help open their eyes to the value of the resource and importance of the property, said Colorado Springs' Chris Leiber.

Colorado Conservation Easement Tax Credit Program Makes the Project Possible

In 2006, Cheyenne Mountain Reserve, LLC contacted Colorado Open Lands to discuss the possibility of conveying conservation easements over the proposed Cheyenne Mountain addition. The purpose was two-fold: to ensure that the property's conservation values would be preserved in perpetuity, and to lower the value of the property by removing its development potential so that it would then be possible for the City of Colorado Springs and State Parks to purchase the land. Income to the landowners from the Colorado gross conservation easement tax credit program would help to fill gap between what the agencies could pay for the land and the return on their assets.

Colorado Open Lands began to work closely with Cheyenne Mountain Reserve, LLC, the City of Colorado Springs and State Parks. It became clear that the City and the State could not fund the acquisition all at one time, and that the only solution was a phased approach. Fortunately, because of the high value of the real estate and the structure of the state tax credit program, it also made sense to structure the conservation easement donations over time.

Colorado Open Lands' staff ultimately helped structure the easement donations and purchase transactions in such a way as to meet the landowners' income needs and balance the flow of cash from the City of Colorado Springs and State Parks. *Colorado Open Lands played a crucial role in the transaction by bridging communication between the landowners and the agencies* said Chris Leiber.

From NORAD to Parks...a tale of the Cheyenne Mountain Project

Ultimately, the landowners donated conservation easements to Colorado Open Lands in 2007, 2008, and 2009 over a total of 925 acres. This was followed closely by the acquisition of these preserved parcels by State Parks and the City of Colorado Springs; the final phase of the transaction was completed in January 2009.

Compatible Futures

The recently preserved property, containing parts of both the face and eastern-most peaks of Cheyenne Mountain, is comprised of shrub and canyon riparian communities at lower elevations and aspen stands, ponderosa pine forest, and mountain meadows at higher elevations. Historic wildfires have helped create a diverse community structure. Common animals such as deer, bobcat, and bear inhabit the property, but it is also used by more rare species such as Abert's squirrel, Mexican spotted owl and peregrine falcon. Several plant species of state importance can also be found there.



It will be some time before we are able to open the property up for public use, because we want to be sure that we aren't creating negative impacts to the resources. We are undertaking a resource inventory beginning this summer, and are beginning a planning process that will undoubtedly take several years to complete said Park Manager Rich Dudley. We don't anticipate many developed uses of the property beyond low impact uses like hiking and camping.

When asked about the partnership and investment in the expansion of Cheyenne Mountain State Park, Chris Leiber gave an answer that indicates that the use of the mountain continues to parallel the cultural development of Colorado Springs. *It's my belief that Colorado Spring's beautiful setting and access to recreational amenities favors significantly in many individuals and business' decision to locate here. The City's investment in its most visible landmark through this project is completely consistent with and will contribute to our areas' continued economic growth.*