



# FORT COLLINS AT 150

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*A Sesquicentennial History*

*By Wayne C. Sundberg*



*A publication of Visit Fort Collins in cooperation with  
the Fort Collins Area Chamber of Commerce and the City of Fort Collins*



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*HPNbooks  
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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Over forty years of research and writing has gone into this publication celebrating Fort Collins 150th birthday. I fell in love with Fort Collins forty-eight years ago, after moving here. I began teaching at Lincoln Junior High in late August, 1966. One of my first assignments was to teach a course on Colorado history. Out of this I created an interest in Fort Collins history and developed an elective course covering our city's past, which I taught to both seventh graders and to students at CSU until I retired in 1993. I continue to be involved in many aspects of local history, doing walking tours, making presentations, and writing articles and books. I greatly appreciate this fantastic opportunity Ron Lammert of HPNbooks has given me with the writing of this Sesquicentennial history of Fort Collins, and to the unbelievable number of local businesses and organizations who have signed on to have their business profiles in the book.

The book's sponsor, the Fort Collins Convention & Visitors Bureau/Visit Fort Collins, has been of tremendous support and encouragement, over the past twelve months. The help from the bureau's staff has been invaluable.

A number of sources were used for the book, including my own extensive, and very disorganized, archive! Material from two late local historians, who were also long-time friends of mine, provided me with a wealth of information—David Watrous did extensive newspaper research which he printed in notebooks, and Arlene Ahlbrandt researched, collected, and wrote on a wide ranging variety of area history topics. I found many interesting tidbits of history in their materials which were used in the book. The late Evadine Swanson's book, *Fort Collins Yesterdays*, was useful as a fact checking source. The extensive postcard collection of my late friend and neighbor, Jane Bass, provided me with several Fort Collins images that have not before been published. My friend and fellow author, Malcolm "Mac" McNeill, provided valuable advice along the way as well as sharing some of his photos.

One should not neglect to mention the 1911 monumental publication of early newspaperman, Ansel Watrous, *The History of Larimer County, Colorado*. It is the starting place for much of the research on this area, as are the online digital copies of many of the city's early newspapers, and the microfilm and files at the Fort Collins Museum of Discovery's local history archive. Lesley Drayton and Jayne Hansen, of the archive, were always there to help and to provide the digital images that I needed.

I wish to thank City Manager Darin Atteberry and Mayor Karen Weitkunat for their wonderful letters of support, as well as the letters from the Chamber's David May and Doug Ernest on behalf of the Poudre Landmarks Foundation.

The most valuable support and help for this project came from my wife, Joan Day. She painstakingly read and edited my manuscript chapters—sometimes twice, as the copy evolved—and made critical comments that helped to greatly improve the text. I drew extensively from her family collection—Great Uncle Myron Akin's diaries, several Akin family photographs, and stories from the late "Cousin" Wayne Akin, who lived to the age of 102! Joan encouraged, prodded, and suggested many great changes that helped me to finish this project—finally!! This is definitely "Our Book!"

—Wayne C. Sundberg

Note: Photographs without a credit line are from the author's private collection.



# INTRODUCTION

Here is the quandary: 2013 was the 140th anniversary of the City of Fort Collins. The next year—2014—is the 150th birthday of Fort Collins or its sesquicentennial! That is a jump of ten years in one year!! I did not take “new math” in school, but this does require some strange calculations. So here are the pieces to add together: The town of Fort Collins was incorporated on February 3, 1873, by Larimer County commissioners under the laws of the Territory of Colorado. The county observed its sesquicentennial in 2011. Colorado was still three years away from statehood, which means Colorado celebrated its centennial in 1976, the year of the United States’ Bicentennial! But let us get back to Fort Collins. On August 20, 1864, Colonel William O. Collins wrote *Special Order Number One* establishing a “permanent post” or fort, on the Cache la Poudre River. This order’s date has traditionally been recognized as the birth date announcement of the present city.

Over the years, residence of Fort Collins have celebrated this latter date. In 1914, the citizens had a “Semi-Centennial” commemoration. Fifty years later, after months of planning, the city observed its “Centennial” with a parade, pageant, and many other activities. Jack Benny even came to town; more on that in the text! If you have not had enough of the numeral events, consider these: Our beautiful City Park celebrated its 100th birthday in 2012; the city’s police department was one hundred years old in 2013; and the city’s original water works turned 130 in 2012. There are many others, but too numerous to mention, businesses turning fifty or seventy-five or eighty years old.



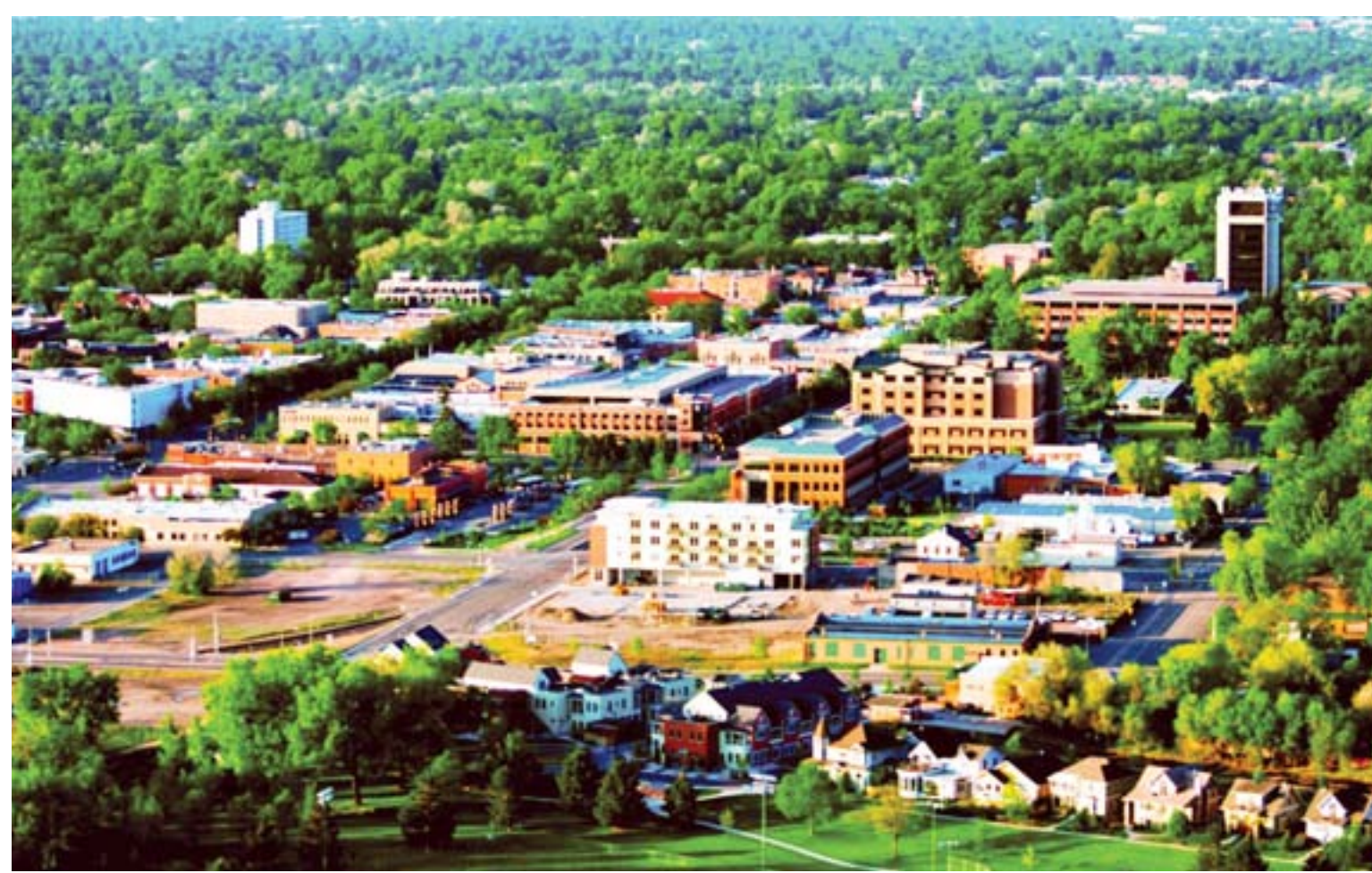
*Opposite: The beautifully restored former residence of Franklin Avery’s family is now a house museum.*

*Below: New West Fest, what started as a celebration of Fort Collins birthday in the 1980s has evolved into a large August festival bringing thousands of people to downtown Fort Collins.*

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF RYAN BURKE, PHOTOGRAPHER FOR THE FORT COLLINS CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU/VISIT FORT COLLINS.







*Modern Fort Collins is a vibrant city of  
almost 150,000 people*

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF RYAN BURKE,  
PHOTOGRAPHER FOR THE FORT COLLINS CONVENTION  
AND VISITORS BUREAU/VISIT FORT COLLINS.

Like Fort Collins, cities all over the world find reasons to celebrate key events, products, or even bizarre occurrences. For example, Nederland, Colorado, has an annual event named “Frozen Dead Guy Days!” In the Fort, we choose to fete our heritage and culture in several ways. There is an annual St. Patrick’s Day Parade. We host the Colorado Brewers Festival to celebrate our beer culture, as we promote ourselves as the nation’s Craft Brewing Capital. Our summers conclude with an extravagant festival called “Bohemian Nights at New West Fest.” History and heritage are very important to locals as well as tourists, so promoting our 150th birthday is very germane.

In its one hundred and fifty year history, Fort Collins has grown from a few small farms along the Cache la Poudre River and a small frontier military post to a vibrant beautiful city of over 150,000 people. Many structures from our past still exist, such as the town’s first dwelling place, the beloved Elizabeth “Auntie” Stone’s log cabin, and Franklin and Sarah Avery’s picturesque sandstone home, a National Register property. Many beautifully restored commercial buildings

dot the historic downtown and the Old Town National Historic District. Fort Collins citizens are proud of their efforts to go the extra mile to preserve their heritage.

Our modern city has an abundance of inviting, well-maintained public parks and open spaces. More than 200 miles of bike lanes and trails wind their way through Fort Collins and along the Poudre River. The magnificent new Fort Collins Museum of Discovery exemplifies a significant and unique partnership between the city and a nonprofit, combining science and history under one roof. The multitude of brewpubs, micro-breweries, and craft breweries contribute much to our local culture as does our emphasis on bicycle transportation. Fort Collins is known as a very “green” city, with a major emphasis on sustainable living.

This publication will attempt to tie our past and present together with written history, sidelights, photos—some familiar; some never before published—and with business histories of today’s economic drivers. Read on, and enjoy learning our fascinating “Sesquicentennial History!”

# OVERVIEW

## FORT COLLINS: THE SETTING

Fortunate Fort Collins! Tree City USA! Lilac City! One of the top ten cities for retirees!! Bike Fort Collins! Gateway to the Poudre Canyon! All of these descriptors have been applied to Fort Collins at one time or another. The city sits in an ideal location, making it attractive to visitors and residents alike. Geographically it is on the western edge of the Great Plains, at the base of the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. Thirty miles to the north, forming part of the Colorado-Wyoming border is the Cheyenne Ridge, described in James Michener's epic novel, *Centennial*, as the "Gangplank." The ridge and foothills place Fort Collins in a semi-protected basin, where many storms are diverted away from the city.

The Cache la Poudre River emerges from its beautiful canyon ten miles from downtown Fort Collins, flowing along the north side of "Old Town" before turning southeast, where thirty miles lower down, it joins the South Platte River just east of Greeley. The Poudre provides water for a myriad of irrigation canals and reservoirs surrounding the city and giving rise to a thriving agricultural area—both presently and historically. The Poudre also provides many recreational opportunities. People use the river and canyon year-round, with use peaking in the summer. Many campgrounds dot the river bank in the Poudre Canyon. During the peak run-off of the late spring and summer, rafters and kayakers dominate many stretches of the river, as do both fly and bait fishermen (and fisherwomen). Hiking trails, of varying degrees of difficulty and length, wander up the sides of the canyon. And the canyon has been a favorite motor route since the early days of auto transportation, due to its geologic diversity and natural beauty. Completion of an unpaved highway through the canyon in the 1920s made the whole area accessible to people. Today, the all-weather highway, Colorado 14, makes the canyon very compatible to recreationalists and travelers year-round. Skiers headed for Steamboat Springs or cross country skiers wanting to travel the trails near Cameron Pass find the well-maintained road to be an excellent travel route.



*Forming the border between Colorado and Wyoming, north of Fort Collins, is the Cheyenne Ridge (James Michener's "Gangplank").*





*Above: Emerging from the mouth of the Poudre Canyon ten mile northwest of downtown Fort Collins is the beautiful Cache la Poudre River winding through Pleasant Valley.*

*Below: One of the area's historic irrigation canals, part of the lifeblood of Northern Colorado's agriculture.*

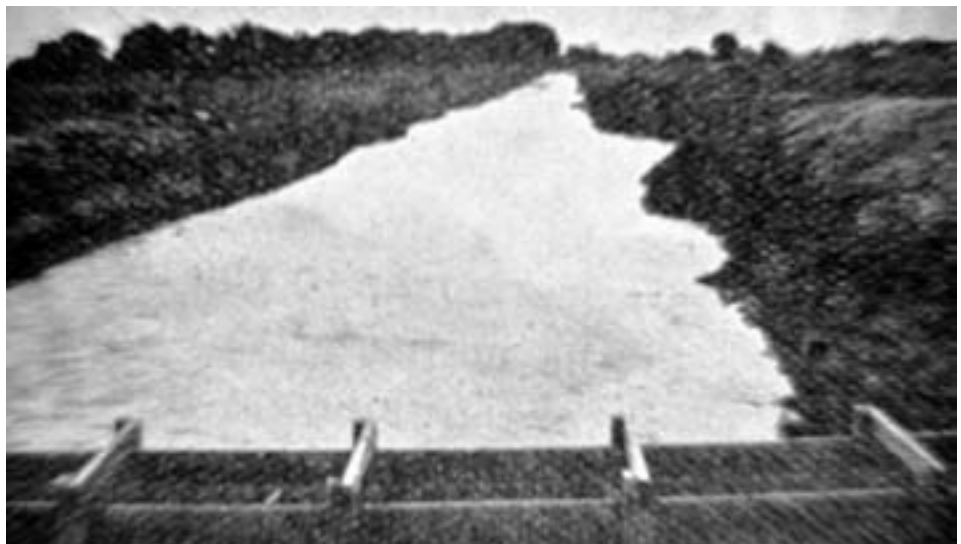
Bordering Fort Collins on the west are ridges of foothills. Between the first two ridges is the beautiful Horsetooth Reservoir, covering part of Pleasant Valley. The namesake geologic formation, Horsetooth Rock, dominates the second ridge, and led to a fable attributed to the early Native Americans—“The Legend of Horsetooth.” According to the story, as written by Hugo Evon Frey many years ago, the valley the Native Americans called the “Valley of Contentment,” was filled with abundant game—bison, deer, and pronghorn. They couldn’t enter the valley to hunt because it was guarded by a fearsome giant who would slay any who tried to hunt there. At night, while the giant slept,

a large nighthawk flew above and screeched a warning any time someone tried to enter the valley. But let Frey’s own words tell the tale:

But it became known that this giant, in his sleep, exposed his great heart at certain times of the full moon.... The Indians called on their great most powerful chief to lead them against the giant. When Chief Maunumoku learned of the moonlight vigil of the nighthawk, he determined to lure the bird away with the aid of a large white rabbit. He stealthily approached the sleeping giant. He could see the great breast, heaving in stertorous breathing, and he saw the titanic heart outlined against the sky.

Maunumoku grasped a glittering tomahawk out of the skies, brilliantly studded with stars, and with a mighty stroke, he cleft the giant’s heart. Blood spurted as though from a volcanic crater out of the gaping wound as the giant struggled to rise. The giant’s roar made the earth tremble, as Maunumoku struck again, once on the right and once on the left, leaving huge ugly wounds. The gushing blood filled the valleys, reddening the cliffs, and the stricken giant soon lay still and quiet. The great body and heart turned to granite, and this is the mountain now known as HORSETOOTH.

It is always nice to know the true story of our geologic past, and to learn why the sandstone rocks are red!





*Above: Horsetooth Reservoir with its namesake mountain, Horsetooth Rock, or the giant's stone heart is looming over the west side!*

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF RYAN BURKE, PHOTOGRAPHER FOR THE FORT COLLINS CONVENTION AND VISITORS BUREAU/VISIT FORT COLLINS.

*Left: Horsetooth Rock.*



## CHAPTER 1

# THE CACHE LA POUUDRE RIVER ALWAYS ATTRACTED PEOPLE



*Archeological excavations at the  
Lindenmeier site in the 1930s.*

The human history of the Cache la Poudre River goes back at least 12,000 years when Folsom People used the area as a seasonal hunting ground. Evidence of their occupation and use was found at the Lindenmeier site, north of Fort Collins, on the city's Soapstone Natural Area. The location is considered to be a World Heritage archaeological site. Smithsonian digs during the 1930s uncovered tools, weapons, and animal bones, but no human remains. Other native tribes inhabited the area over the ensuing millennia following herds of game animals, prior to the seasonal occupations of modern tribes—Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Utes.

In the early 1800s, trappers, traders, and explorers traversed the area. The name, Cache la Poudre, comes from one of those early groups, with members of French ancestry, who hid some gun powder near the banks of a yet unnamed stream. There are a myriad of tales as to the source of the name. One of the simplest tells of a group of French-Canadian trappers along the river. When they were attacked by Native Americans, the leader yelled to the others, in French, “Cache la poudre,” (hide the powder!), thus creating the river’s name! Or is it the popular legend about trappers or traders from either the Hudson Bay Company or the American Fur Company whose wagon train was stopped by an enormous snow storm in November, 1836, forcing them to lighten their load? According to the story, they dug a large pit and hid (cached) some of their supplies including 100 kegs of gun powder (la poudre). This is a nice tale but it begs the question, how did General Dodge know to note in his journal, “...passed the mouth of the Cache la Poudre”, a year-and-a-half earlier, in July 1835? The river had no known name when Major Long passed its mouth in the summer of 1820, so sometime in those fifteen years between 1820 and 1835, the river acquired its name. It possibly received its name in the winter of 1824-1825 when traders with the Rocky Mountain Fur Company, led by William Ashley, made some temporary “caches” near the river while trading with local Native Americans for furs. As it stands today, the source of the name and when it was given to the river is lost in the mists of time.

The Poudre is one of three major streams feeding the South Platte River in Northern Colorado, the other two being Big Thompson and St. Vrain. The main stem of the river, starting at Poudre Lake on the Continental Divide in Rocky Mountain National Park flows north, then east down to its confluence with the South Platte, a



distance of 126 miles. Its main tributaries are the North Fork, the Big South, and the Little South, with lesser feeder streams like Box Elder, Fossil Creek, Joe Wright Creek, The Elkhorn, and Spring Creek. The river carries two national designations. Since the river has no impoundments, seventy-six miles of the upper Poudre was designated as Colorado’s only “Wild and Scenic River” in 1986. Because of its importance in both irrigation and in the development of Western water law, ten years later, the lower forty-four miles was selected as the “Cache la Poudre River National Heritage Area,” the first such designation west of the Mississippi River. In addition, the river through the canyon carries the state designation, “Cache la Poudre-North Park Scenic & Historic Byway,” as one of twenty-five state byways.



*Above: Caching (hiding) la Poudre (powder) along the river.*

*Bottom, left: The lower forty-four miles of the Cache la Poudre River is a national heritage corridor.*





Pleasant Valley near Bellvue, site of the first settlement, Colona.

Since the days of migrating Native America groups, the river has been part of many trails. People noted the ambiance of the Poudre in letters, diaries and in published journals. One of the earliest was written by later settler, Antoine Janis. He wrote:

On the first of June, 1844, I stuck my stake on a claim in the valley, intending the location selected for my home should the country ever be settled. At that time the streams were all very high and the valley black with buffalo. ...I thought the Poudre valley was the loveliest spot on earth, and think so yet.

Horace Greeley, publisher of the *New York Tribune*, visited the Colorado gold mining camps in 1859 and passed through Larimer County in June of that year. He encountered a bridgeless Cache la Poudre at flood stage, describing it as, "...by far the most formidable stream between the South Platte and the Laramie." He witnessed the difficult fording of

the Poudre by three heavily loaded wagons pulled by oxen. John Provost's ferry had been swept downstream two nights before. The Greeley party decided to overnight on the south bank until the next day. He writes of their adventurous crossing in his book, *Overland Journey to California in 1859*:

So the Frenchman (his guide) on his strong horse took one of our lead mules by the halter and the Indian took the other and we went in, barely escaping an upset from going down the steep bank, obliquely, and thus throwing one side of our wagon much above the other, but we righted in a moment and went through, the water being at least three feet deep for about one hundred yards, the bottom broken by boulders, and the current very swift.

Greeley continued his journey after safely crossing the Poudre, and wrote a little more of his impressions of the river and its valley:



Cache la Poudre has quite a fair belt of cottonwood, thenceforth there is scarcely a cord of wood to a township for the next fifty or sixty miles.... The high prairie on either side is thinly, poorly grassed, being of moderate fertility at best, often full of pebbles of the average size of a goose egg, and apparently doomed to sterility by drouth. ...It will in time be subjected to systematic irrigation....

Descriptions are varied according to whether the visit was made in a "wet year" or a "dry one." J. R. Todd, in 1907, related a



story, printed in Ansel Watrous' monumental *History of Larimer County, Colorado, 1911*, of his experience passing through the area in 1852:

The waters of the river were as clear as crystal all the way down to its confluence with the Platte. Its banks were fringed with timber not as large as now, consisting of cottonwood, box elder, and some willow. The waters were full of trout of the speckled or mountain variety. The undulating bluffs sloped gently to the valley which was carpeted with luxuriant grasses. It was June, the mildest and most beautiful part of the summer in the western country, when the days were pleasant, the nights cool and mornings crisp and bracing. The sky was scarcely ever obscured by clouds, and its vaulted blue, golden tinted in the morning and evening, was a dream of beauty. Not an ax had marred the symmetry of the groves of trees that lined its banks. Nor a plow, or spade, or hoe had ever broken its virgin soil. Wild flowers of the richest hue beautified the landscape....

Very contrasting descriptions! These vivid descriptions were as different as the groups who passed through, be they small groups, wagon trains, early cattle drives, or stage coach riders. Each saw the countryside through their own eyes, depending on the season of the year, and many left other colorful written narratives.



*Above: The Antoine Janis cabin at its original site.*

*Below: Antoine Janis, one of the founders of Colona and LaPorte.*





Right: *The Spring Canyon Stage Swing Station building near Spring Canyon Dam.*

Below: *Overland Trail Ruts from the 1860s—north of Fort Collins.*



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