

## **The History of Lost Canyon Ranch**

The entrance to Lost Canyon is two miles south of State Highway 86 on Ridge Road. There is an attractive stone gate through which you must drive one mile east to the westerly boundary of this picturesque, wild, square mile of natural beauty. It is part of a huge mesa, which was gouged out throughout the ages by Willow Creek and forested with Douglas Fir, Ponderosa and Willow trees.

The underlying rock is known as the Castle Rock Conglomerate. It is the same that forms the top of Castle Rock and the adjacent 400 square mile area. The remnants of these mesas can be seen by driving through the valleys. This rock has survived wind, rain, and ice for the ages and caps the surrounding flat top area. It is composed of many older rocks and looks like solidified gravel. Where the rock has been exposed for some time, it is covered by moss and lichen. On top of this rock is a layer of dirt on which the natural grasses and trees grow.

Willow Creek is a running stream, which has cut this over-laying rock and formed a deep gorge called Lost Canyon. It is a tributary to Cherry Creek and joins this stream just south of Franktown. There are sheer walls where the ancient rock displays the nature of its composition, which was formed some 35 million years ago at the bottom of a prehistoric ocean. Although this rock is terribly thick and hard, it was laid down after the age of the dinosaur. Geologically speaking 35 million years ago is a short period of time. There is not an abundance of evidence of life contained in the rock; but occasionally, a large petrified bone can be found.

This land is also known as a school section. In the year of 1875 the United States government gave two sections in every township to the Territory to be used for schools. These sections were always numbered 16 and 36 out of the 36 sections in a township. Lost Canyon is Section 16, Township 8 South, Range 66W of the 6<sup>th</sup> P.M. One of the provisions of the grant was that the principal or corpus of any sale of the land would be kept in tact and re-invested. Only the income from the rental of the land or the income from other investments such as securities would be used for school purposes. The State always retains all mineral rights.

Someone mentioned that there was a large dam built by the reclamation Department in the school section on Willow Creek. Curiosity prompted a trip with my jeep over the pastures, and the exploration of an amazing square mile of land. My interest was so aroused that I made an inquiry at the State Land Department. They outlined the customary procedure of purchasing land. The first step was to make an offer in writing with a ten percent deposit, 20% additional was due on closing and the balance payable over 33 years including 6% interest. After the board decided the offer was in line, an appraiser was appointed who verified the offer as fair and reasonable. Publication of the offer was made, and the date of the public auction of the land was set for a later date at the State Land Board offices.

The auction was very dignified and did not have the emotional atmosphere of an ordinary sale. There was one strange event. There was only one other bidder who forced the price up \$11.50 per acre. Later, the story got around that the bidder was with the State Game and Fish Department. He had no authority from any of the

State departments to bid, but had thrown in the bid for personal, sentimental reasons. He was evidently on the side of the former State Parks Department who had planned to turn this section, together with part of the Winkler Ranch, Castlewood Dam and other land into a huge state recreational area. This plan had been previously dropped when the State Game and State Parks were combined into one department. My purchase was completed April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1965 for \$88.50 per acre.

There were several elements of chance connected with this transaction, which discouraged most purchasers. An exceptional risk was that the State made it very clear they would not provide any access to this land, and the purchaser was on his own. The purchaser was buying an isolated island and had no legal right to enter the land. It was a happy day when a 60-foot easement was obtained after the sale from Albert Mikelson for one mile beginning at Ridge Road for \$500.00 an acre. A graveled road was installed over this easement and continued into the Section and crossed Willow Creek to the top of both mesas at considerable expense. During construction, a culvert 6 feet in diameter and several other culverts were washed out in the floor of '65. The culverts had been installed three days prior and were found in a mangled condition and covered with sand.

Another risky feature was a year's lease, which had been given by the State Land Board to James Echols permitting the cutting of any and all timber on the section for \$160. The sale was to be made subject to this timber lease. Mr. Echols had the right to cut all the magnificent timber standing and leave the place barren and denuded. I offered Mr. Echols \$160 which was the total amount of his lease to stop from further cutting until the sale took place. If I purchased the land, he was to be paid \$1,550 and release all further rights to lumbering. Mr. Echols was paid \$1,550 when the purchase was completed. He had previously boughed at lease 150 trees.

Boughing is done by a man climbing to the top of a huge Douglas fir and cutting off all the branches as he descends. A top knot or a tiny Christmas tree is left at the top of the tree. The tall naked tree trunk is not a pretty sight and detracts from the appearance of the hillside. Mr. Echols was agreeable to cutting these trees and using them for lumber. He had a grey horse of non-descript breeding. The horse's head was huge and his feet were like buckets. This animal was essential for snaking out the logs. Mr. Echols would give a command and the horse would pull with all his strength, stop at an instant, back up, go gee or haw without any reigns. When the hard days' work was over, Mr. Echols tied the horse to the back of the pick-up and trotted him back some five miles to his stable.

The third risk was with the people who controlled the government dam. The State had unadvisedly given a lease over 280 acres or 44% of the land to install and maintain a dam. Maintenance meant that the government could take all of the soil, of which there was a scarcity, on the 280 acres without any payment and rebuild the dam. This dam was almost washed out and half filled with sediment in the 1965 flood. The lease made a large portion of the land unusable except for grazing. After many persistent trips, between County Commissioners, Uncle Sam, the surveyor and an expensive lawyer, and agreement was reached. The easement was reduced to include only the land lying 10 feet above the water line.

There were many rumors being tossed around. One was about an old Indian cave. Many unsuccessful days were spent by me looking for this cave. One day, Fred Hilburger happened to mention he had lived as a boy on the adjoining ranch and used to roam among the rocks and forest. He showed me the large cave, concealed under the thick conglomerate layer of rock, which faced the southeast. It was well-fortified and difficult to approach from any direction. Fred said that his father had leased the land and had run off some archaeologists from a university while they were digging. Inquiry was made at several universities and it was found that the University of Denver had been interested for a number of years. Professor Arnold Withers was contacted who discussed the cave briefly. The cave was occupied around the year 1000 or at about the time of William the Conqueror. It is known as a dry cave. Consequently, remains of perishable items are found such as: reed moccasins, buckskin and wooden stakes. There are at least 50 drawers of artifacts from this cave stored in the basement of the University. Professor Withers states that the Upper Republican Indian and perhaps older cultures occupied this cave. Don Harrison, a very capable amateur archaeologist, asked for permission to excavate the dump of the cave. We reached an agreement that his findings would be combined in writing with Professor Withers' records. Professor Withers refused to put his information in writing or allow any other person to use the information he has. People are now prostituting the caves. There have been petrified buffalo bones and other artifacts found lying on the rocks of which the tourist does not know the value. The story of these artifacts will probably never be known.

Another story described the rendezvous of the bootleggers in prohibition days. On the sloping sides of a smaller canyon, there was a small cave large enough for a still. A fire could be built in the main part and the smoke would go out through a small tunnel with an opening some seventy-five feet away from the central room. If the Federals came, they would go to where the smoke came out. The bootleggers would be warned and have time to escape. It was a good place to make whisky, because if a man were caught the government generally confiscated the land. The Federals could not confiscate land owned by the government.

On the other side of the canyon, there is a rugged valley and close to the upper part is a serene and beautiful grotto. The water is always dripping from above and falls off the underside of the cliff. The rocks abound with moss, ferns, and silent pools of water. It is cool, still and silent, even on the hottest of days. In wintertime, huge icicles cling to its walls.

Joe Kelly, who owned and lived in Lost Canyon three years, built a palatial home with extensive landscaping. In addition, he erected a large indoor riding arena and eleven adjoining stalls in 1969.