

## BEAR CREEK REGIONAL PARK SITE HISTORY

Bear Creek Regional Park, situated at the mouth of Bear Creek Canyon, has a varied history, including utilization as a hunting ground, then as a crucial crossroad for explorers and settlers, a gateway to the gold mines, a ranch, a place of refuge, and is now enjoyed by all as a regional park.

According to numerous accounts, the original inhabitants of the Pikes Peak region were the Ute Indians, who lived in the mountains and valleys of Colorado, Utah and part of New Mexico and Arizona. One band of the nomadic Utes roamed from the foothills of Pikes Peak to the valleys west of the Peak. They had a summer camp near Glen Eryie and probably hunted in Bear Creek Canyon during the summer. They called themselves “Nuche” or “the People”, and were credited by early pioneers with establishing the first trail to the summit of Pikes Peak. This trail, the Old Bear Creek trail, became the primary route to the summit of Pikes Peak until 1877 or so when the Barr Trail was established.

In May 1899, El Paso County purchased the Liebig Ranch for \$18,000. The property would eventually become Bear Creek Regional Park. The early 1900’s was the beginning of the Progressive Era, a time for social reform where concern for public health and safety was raised.



*Poor Farm 1909*

In October of 1900, El Paso County constructed a Poor Farm facility for \$25,000 on the Liebig Ranch site where Park Headquarters stands today. It was dedicated as a place to shelter the homeless, which included the elderly, mentally ill and addicted members of society. At its height, the Poor Farm consisted of one main residential building, several outlying buildings serving as dormitories for nearly 80 people, and a 500-acre working farm complete with hogs, chickens, and dairy cattle.

Alfalfa and rye were the main crops, and a garden was maintained near the present day garden plots. The Poor Farm was run by a full time staff with the help of able-bodied residents. The residents of the Poor Farm came for a variety of reasons that included poverty, mental illness, mental retardation, or alcoholism and drug addiction. Also, the elderly who were unable to care for themselves were given care at the Poor Farm.

In March of 1901, the golden spike was driven into the completed Colorado Springs and Cripple Creek District Railroad (“The Short Line”) runs through Bear Creek Canyon. The main purpose of the railroad was to transport gold ore from the mines in Cripple Creek to the Golden Cycle Mill in Colorado Springs. It also became a popular way for tourists to travel to Cripple Creek. President Teddy Roosevelt was a prominent passenger. He described his experience as “the trip that bankrupts the English language”. In 1920 the Short Line Railroad went bankrupt since there was little gold to transport. It was sold at public auction to W.D. Corley in 1922. He turned the railroad bed into the Corley Mountain Highway, a toll road. The highway operated from 1924 to 1939 when the use permit from the Forest Service expired. In 1940, the road was renamed Gold Camp Road and operated by the U.S. Forest Service as a public road.



*Colorado Springs and Cripple Creek District Railroad*

The county Smallpox Hospital was built on the site in 1901 and served as an isolation hospital for victims of smallpox. At the corner of 21<sup>st</sup> Street and Lower Gold Camp Road, the Paupers cemetery was developed for the final resting place for victims of smallpox. The Poor Farm closed in 1984 due to a variety of issues, including the poor conditions of the buildings.

In 1968, the county land that had been part of the original Liebig ranch purchase, except the buildings, was set aside for open space. In the early 1970s, a struggle ensued between developers, who were interested in constructing homes, and citizens, who wanted the property used as open space or a county park. In 1972, the land was turned over to El Paso County Parks and Recreation for use as a park for all citizens of El Paso County.



*Bear Creek Nature Center*

In 1976, the Solar Trails Center was constructed and completed. Its purpose was to increase awareness and understanding of the natural and historic environment of these foothills. In 1979, it was renamed Bear Creek Nature Center, and remodeled in 1993-1995 with a new emphasis on the foothills ecosystem. A fire destroyed much of the nature center in 2001. With the significant public support, the nature center was rebuilt and expanded to its present day form.

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During the 1970's the property west of 21st Street, then known as Bear Creek Gardens and now known as Bear Creek Terrace, was added to the regional park. The development of Bear Creek Terrace was completed in 1986.

In 1987 the Park Administration Office building was added to Bear Creek Regional Park. The Bear Creek Dog Park was added in 1996 to provide an off-leash facility for dogs and is one of the more popular facilities in the park. The Bear Creek Dog Park, although within the property boundary of BCRP, has become such a popular facility that it has its own "Friends" group, and its own separate master plan, and therefore the area is excluded from this master plan.



*Bear Creek Nature Center Entrance Sign*