

THORNTON BECOMES "COLORADO'S NEWEST CITY"

To properly understand developments in Adams County School District 12 one must start at the beginning. In 1950 the Adams 12 area was still a very rural. The change began when the F and S Construction Company spoke to school board members about a new development in what is now Thornton. Norm Smith, who started teaching at Westlake in 1953, remembers that at that time the City of Thornton consisted of three show homes, the houses which are now off of Washington St. across from the shopping center just north of Russell Way. There was no I-25 back then. The Valley Highway did not reach 120th St. until about 1955-6.

Developer Sam Hoffman of Phoenix, Arizona, had announced in December of 1952 that he would build "Colorado's newest city" on a stretch of land seven miles north of downtown Denver, an area which was then mostly open prairie with a few scattered farms and gentle valleys. Hoffman's F & S (Father and Son) Construction Company bought 640 acres from Art Eppinger and broke ground in the spring of 1953 for the first 5000 homes. Newspaper articles of the day called it the largest single home building job in the state and the second biggest in U.S. building history.

The new "Miracle City" would consist of moderately priced brick homes on 1,5000 acres with planned areas for schools, churches and recreation. Hoffman envisioned Thornton as a complete city within itself with an eventual population of 20,000. On on April 28, 1953, the first three model homes officially opened. Several thousand people attended the open house, due in part to Hoffman's foresight in also inviting actress Jane Russell, three of whose brothers worked for F & S Construction in other cities. Later Russell Boulevard, the "curviest" street in Thornton was named in her honor.

In 1954 Hoffman's firm was considered the third largest home builder in the nation. Hoffman had previously built 1,900 units in Hoffman Heights, now a part of Aurora. F & S Construction had constructed similar projects elsewhere in Phoenix and Tucson, Arizona; Pueblo, Colorado; San Diego, California; and Cleveland, Ohio. The new Thornton homes sold for \$8,000 to \$11,000. A family could move into a two-bedroom brick home with a \$650 down payment and FHA payments of \$57 per month, or they could move into a three-bedroom home with a down payment of \$1,250 and monthly payments of \$67 per month.

Over 300 homes were sold in a matter of weeks. The new community was named after then-Governor Dan Thornton. In January 1954 the Glassman family moved into their new home at 1921 Emerson Street, becoming the new city's first official residents. All homes were

served by one well, located at 91st and Clarkson Street. The Thornton Community Association was formed in April 1954. Each city block selected a representative block leader for the TCA Board which addressed such issues as recreation, streets and lighting. By June of 1954 the first shopping center had opened, at 88th and Washington, housing such tenants as Miller's Supermarket, Woolworth Stores, the Bonebreaker's Toggery, and Thornton Barber Shop.

With the building of the Hoffman development in Thornton, there came a great need for additional school buildings in that area. In 1954 residents approved an Adams County School District 12 bond issue to build Thornton's first school, now known as Meritt Hutton Junior High School. Thornton area businessmen and residents also donated the materials and labor for the construction of a temporary frame building call The Annex at 901 Eppinger Blvd. Until The Annex was completed at Thanksgiving in 1954, the district rented space in the Eastlake Fire Hall for a few elementary classes and a central office.

By the end of 1955 there were an estimated 5,500 people and over 1200 homes in the Thornton community. On May 26, 1956 Thornton, with a then population of 8,640, was incorporated as a city. Oyer G. "Bill" Leary, now an Adams County District Judge, was the first mayor. Eight aldermen were elected, two to represent each of the city's four wards. The first city council meetings were held in the home of the city clerk, but soon a used military Quonset hut was erected on Dorothy Boulevard to serve as a temporary city hall and headquarters for the fire and police departments till a permanent building could be built.

The original fire and police departments in Thornton were volunteer organizations. Mike Dichter bought the first fire truck. There was tremendous *esprit de corps* among the volunteer firemen. In a very short time, the Thornton Fire Dept. became known as one of the best volunteer fire departments in the state. In a contest their first year, they took three places, a feat never before accomplished by a first year fire department. By 1956 the police department included six paid personnel.

By 1957 there were an estimated 10,350 people living in the City of Thornton. An independent newspaper called "The Thunder" was started. The city got its first post office in 1958. Taxi service was provided by a single Volkswagon Bus which could hold ten passengers. In 1961 residents voted for a major change in their government and adopted a council-manager form of municipal government which allowed a professional staff to conduct the daily business activities of the city and to provide services for residents. In the mid-50's the Thornton Shopping Center was built at the corner of Washington Street and 88th Ave., providing the city with a

major source of income. The chart below is a list of salaries of the City of Thornton officials for 1958.¹

<u>City Official</u>	<u>Salary Per Month</u>
Chief of Police	\$375.00
Police Officers	\$325.00
Fire Chief	\$375.00
Firemen	\$325.00
City Clerk	\$250.00
City Attorney	\$175.00

Yet in 1958 the area north of Thornton remained open farmland. Linda Spruce remembers what it was like to attend Eastlake in the late 1950's. There was no kindergarten, so students started school in the first grade. It was a farming community. Everyone knew one another. Classes were traditional, very structured, with lots of direct teaching. Students read from basal readers featuring characters like Dick, Jane, and Spot. As a special treat on the last day of school students could ride their horses or bikes to school. Everyone loved fire drills because they got to slide down the fire escape tube from the second floor.

NORTH GLENN SUBDIVISION GROWS INTO NORTHGLENN

In the spring of 1959 the Perl-Mack Companies finalized plans for a large subdivision north of Thornton. Development plans called for a total community design centered around a regional shopping complex. As Perl-Mack was the sole land owner and developer, it was able to control the layout of streets, location and design of commercial and industrial areas, as well as planning recreational areas and the location of schools. Ground was broken in June, 1959. The first show homes were opened north of 104th Ave. and west of Washington St.

By 1960 there were approximately 500 residents in the North Glenn subdivision. For the period of 1960 to 1962, the subdivision grew rapidly and received national recognition and numerous awards including "The Most Perfectly Planed Community in America" and "The Best Home for the Money in the Southwest United States," as well as other awards for distinguished merit from sources such as *Life* magazine, *Look*, *McCall's*, *Good Housekeeping*, *House and Home*, and the National Association of Home Builders.

¹Addis, D.; Eskoz, R.; Maney, J.; & Schmidt, G. (1976) "City of Thornton," in *The Forgotten Past of Adams County*, vol. 1.



matches which would go on for days. Indians who lived nearby would dance and sing for the men they did business with, bringing with them women whose presence was most welcome.

Vasquez himself spoke eight languages and, because he could read and write, stayed in the Fort and did the bookwork while his men did the trading. In a letter believed to have been written while he was at Fort Convenience he asked for some novels from his brother, whom he called Godfather. While Vasquez was in St. Louis in 1832 to buy a year's supply of odds and ends used for trade, a newspaper there wrote, "The Old Mountainman, Louis Vasquez is in town. He is purchasing supplies for his newly established trading post at the foot of the Great Rockies."

Although Vasquez was only in his early thirties at the time, he had spent so much time in the mountains and had led such a hard life that he was, nevertheless, known as "The Old Mountainman." The fact was, in the old west an average life span was about thirty years. Life was hard. Sometimes a "bath" on the trail meant draping you clothes across an anthill so that the ants would eat the lice and bedbugs. Much of what passed for medicine was merely whiskey and syrup.

Due to its bad location, Fort Convenience was abandoned in about the fall of 1835. The river which had been intended to be used to float furs to market was not deep enough. There was competition from other forts. Fort Convenience had become "inconvenient." At its peak it was garrisoned by no more than 20 hunters. No physical evidence remains. Due to the fact that early trappers attached little significance to an outpost's name, the history of those early years is sketchy. Therefore the exact site of Fort Convenience remains open to conjecture. However the saga of the Vasquez Forts continued with the building of Fort Sarpy, Fort Lancaster, and Fort St. Vrain. The Fort which bears his name was besieged by Indians in 1842 and later burned and abandoned.

Early in 1859 rumours of gold in the Pikes's Peak country fired the imaginations in the Midwest, bringing eager gold-seekers to the Front Range of the Rockies. This gold rush petered out in a matter of weeks, but stubborn prospectors who stayed behind found placer gold in paying quantities, triggering a tidal wave of emigration. A boom-and-bust cycle asserted itself as the gold which could be easily washed out of stream beds or scooped up at the grass root level was quickly exhausted. Then the same story repeated itself when the discovery of pure silver veins sparked a silver rush to Georgetown in 1864. Soon enough the easy metal had been picked up. Prospectors wandered away from the Rockies, leaving their shacks to the elements.²

² Arps, Louisa Ward, *Denver in Slices* (Denver, Colorado: Sage Books) 1959, pp. 15-17.

Denver, founded by gold-seekers who in the late fall of 1858 chose to establish a camp at the mouth of Cherry Creek instead of heading home for the winter, received a severe blow in 1866 when the Union Pacific railroad announced, quite logically, that it would route its tracks through the plains of Wyoming rather than over the mountains west of Denver. Aggressive local citizens led by Gov. John Evans quickly raised enough money to finance the Denver Pacific Railroad which tapped the main line at Cheyenne in 1870.³

In the early 1860's James Baker, a well known hunter, scout, guide and Indian fighter, built a toll bridge over Clear Creek just beyond the present corner of 53rd and Tennyson. The road from Denver to Boulder, known as the Salt Lake road, was heavily travelled. Denver was only four miles away from Baker's bridge while other crossings over Clear Creek were 15 or more miles from the rapidly growing city. The fee was said to vary according to Baker's mood, but in general was \$1 for a wagon and \$.50 for a horse. During some days traffic was so heavy that it would be backed up two miles, waiting to cross.

Hughes Station or Hughes Junction, located on old Brighton Road, where the gravel pit is today, was the first permanent settlement in the vicinity of Brighton. When first founded in 1860 it was used for stagecoaches instead of trains. The laying of track began in 1869 at the junction of the Union Pacific in Cheyenne and proceeded southward to the present site of Brighton. From this spot the Denver and Boulder Valley Railroad was being laid west to the Erie coalfields, and on into the mountains.

June 22, 1870, construction was completed into Denver. The next day the last stage arrived in Denver from Hughes station. The last run of the once-great Overland Stage was this one between Brighton and Denver. Before long the Denver Pacific and Boulder Valley Railroads were consolidated with the Union Pacific. Mrs. D. F. Carmichael changed the name of Hughes Station to "Brighton" after her birthplace in Brighton Beach, New York, according to her obituary. Union Pacific trains still pass through Brighton. Cotton Creek Elementary School stands on land originally purchased from the Union Pacific railroad in 1869.

Thomas Thompson, a chef in the Harvey Houses or train station restaurants run by the Santa Fe railroad, homesteaded 320 acres at what is now 104th and Lowell in 1882. His wife and three children lived in a dugout in what is now Wandering View while he continued to work for the railroad. The homestead laws at the time required homesteaders to live on the land for three consecutive years and to break sod on 60 acres of land. The sod was so hard that the horses could not plow uphill. The Thompsons

³ Arps, Louisa Ward, *Denver in Slices* (Denver, Colorado: Sage Books) 1959, pp. 17-18.

ran cattle on the land, grew hay and were the first farmers in Colorado to plant summer fallowed wheat. In 1884 Joseph Marion, who had been a scout with General Custer, homesteaded the area now known as The Ranch. A claim shack was built. Marion built a two-story brick house on the land in 1907, living there with his wife and three children until his death in 1927.

On June 14, 1891 it was announced in the Denver newspaper that a new Presbyterian University billed as the "Princeton of the West" would be built on top of Crown Point near the farming community of Harris, now Westminster. Construction began but the Panic of 1893 tightened funds and construction of Westminster University had to be delayed. Estimated construction cost had risen to \$1,000,000. In 1899 rumors were going around that the University would have to be abandoned but funds were raised in the East and construction continued. Colorado residents also donated funds, with Maxcy Tabor giving \$106,060 from the estate of his mother, Augusta Tabor, first wife of H.A.W. Tabor.

About sixty students were enrolled in coed classes in 1908 but every one of the teachers left the University in April. No records have survived to explain why the faculty disappeared. However a new group of teachers were hired for the 1909-1910 school year. By 1912 the school's debts were paid off, but soon new financial problems arose. Teachers continued to work without pay in an attempt to keep the school from closing. In 1915 the Board of Trustees changed Westminster to an all-male University. This proved to be the death knell for the school. World War I was then in progress in Europe and when the U.S. entered that war most of the Westminster students were drafted. In 1917 the University was forced to close.

In 1920 the building was purchased by the Pillar of Fire Church for \$40,000. The building was reopened as Westminster College and Academy. Five years later the name was changed to Belleview College, no doubt because of the beautiful view from Crown Point. Reverend Ray B. White, son of Mrs. Alma White who founded the Pillar of Fire Church, served as President till his death in 1946, followed by his brother Dr. K. White. In 1928 part of the main building was converted to a radio station, KPOF, which is the oldest radio station still on the air with its original call letters.

As far back as 1887 there were organized school districts in Adams County. Before Adam Patten, an early land developer, founded Westlake in 1901 there had been a frame school on the Westlake site. This school served the children of local farm families who produced wheat, oats, hogs, sheep, chickens and turkeys on their irrigated land. The present brick Westlake School, in what was then School District 34 (now a part of Adams County District 12), was opened in 1902 with 48 students. Westlake School got its name from a school that was supposed to be located west of the

school (actually it was more to the north of the school) but which is now dried up.

The school included grades one through eight. One teacher was hired to teach all grades and was paid fifty dollars per month. Immediately the new Westlake School became the center of the community. Social events such as weddings, holiday celebrations and dances were held there. Most of the children belonged to the 4-H Clubs: boys worked on such projects as raising calves, chickens and other farm animals while girls engaged in cooking and sewing projects. Students attended school regularly and scored fairly high on the Stanford Achievement Tests. A boy from Westlake represented the county as one of the twenty-five best spellers in the state.

Westlake School originally had a coal furnace and two double outhouses outside behind the school were the only bathrooms. However the old Westlake School was one of the first rural districts in the area to have its own hot lunch program. In the 1930's Mr. and Mrs. Brown, a husband and wife teaching team who lived in the school basement, supervised a hot lunch program with the help of volunteer mothers. By the early 1940's the school was able to hire a cook for about three dollars per day. The teacher in charge of running the lunch programs kept a record of the money spent and collects. If the funds ran low the teachers would get together and arrange money-making projects to balance the cost of the lunch programs.

After they completed the eighth grade the District paid tuition for the Westlake students to attend high school in Lafayette, Colorado. Former Colorado Attorney General John Metzner attended Westlake School. By 1939-40 the number of students at Westlake declined to twenty. In 1952 Westlake was closed due to too few fire exits. However in 1953 the District had to reopen the school because of increases in population. In 1967 Westlake had an enrollment of a hundred and fifteen students. The Westlake School became the District 12 Alternative High School in 1974. Students took part in maintaining the school, just as they had in the old days. Classes were different, though. Students made out contracts and then worked to fulfill them.

Burn Lee School, a one-room school with students attending grades one through eight occupying the same building, was established in 1910. Heated by a coal stove and lighted by an oil lamp, Burn Lee served pupils living near the Blue Ribbon Mine in Brighton as well as students in neighboring communities. In addition to to classroom there was a small room and kitchen for the live-in teacher. Other structures on the property were an outhouse and a three-sided stable/shed for students who rode their horses to school. The property on which the school sat was owned by

the Nordstrom family, some of whom still live near the old school site and continue to be active in civic affairs in Adams County.

Located in the far northwest corner of Adams County in School District 6, one mile west of Huron on what is now 160th Ave., Burn Lee was named after its first teacher, Miss Brownley. The student body in 1910 included eighteen students. However fifteen years later enrollment had dropped to almost nothing, largely due to the closing of the Blue Ribbon Mine in 1925. At this time the Burn Lee School Board and County Superintendent decided to move the school. So Burn Lee was moved, using only one horse to do the job, to 160th and Huron. The move caused Burn Lee's enrollment to increase so much that a new room had to be built onto the back of the old structure.

Two new teachers, Miss Alice Wiggitt and Miss Sarsen, came to teach at Burn Lee in 1926. They shared the small living quarters and were paid a salary of \$80 per month. The school was divided into one classroom with grades one through four, another with grades five through eight. Miss Wiggitt taught the lower grades from 1926 to 1930. She retired in 1971 after 48 years of dedicated service to Adams County school districts. Due to decreased enrollment, in 1941 Burn Lee went back to being a one-room school. In 1950 when the present Adams County School District 12 was formed, Burn Lee was consolidated with Westlake Elementary, which made up a large portion of the district.

Mrs. Ruth Baxter, who served on the school board from 1935 to the time when Burn Lee was closed in the 1950's noted that "the same year Meritt Hutton was built was the same year Burn Lee ended." Another former pupil of Burn Lee, and a school board member, Peter Nordstrom recalled of the eight years he spent at the Burn Lee school, "there were not more than eight houses around at the time." Although the boundaries for Burn Lee stretched all the way from the Weld County line to 144th in Brighton, "There were no buses, so the kids had to walk."

In 1910 a railroad was built twenty miles east of Westlake. The population in the area began to increase. Adam Patten then developed Eastlake as a "planned community." Eastlake School was erected in 1920 to accommodate 110 students in the Eastlake area. A bond election for \$25,000 was held on March 31, 1919, to finance construction. The school included all twelve grades, graduating its first class in 1923. At first there were only two teachers, one for grades one through eight, another for grades nine through twelve. Eventually the school expanded to included four classrooms and five teachers: one primary, two junior high, one high school, and one principal who also taught.

The original Eastlake School District 12 was organized in 1919 by consolidating the old Block School (East 120th and Colorado Blvd.) with the old Webster School (East 112th and Washington). Back in the days when

Eastlake also held high school students, baseball and track were popular. Basketball was played on an outdoor court as Eastlake never had a gymnasium. The school was once well known for its debating teams. In 1954 the Westlake School took grades six through nine, leaving grades one through five at Eastlake. Two years later, in 1956, things were changed once again with grades one through six going to Eastlake. Two classrooms were added to the building in 1959. In 1962 three additional classrooms, an office, lounge and restrooms were added.

The one-room Hutchinson School stood on the site where Gussie's Restaurant now stands.

###Need more specifics###

By 1950 the old schools of Bukoutz and Pleasantview were incorporated into the Eastlake District. In July of 1950 voters decided to form the present Adams County School District 12 (hereafter referred to as Adams 12) by consolidating all of District 20 Hutchinson and District 34 Westlake with parts of District 12 Eastlake, District 6 Burn Lee, District 16 Welby, and District 27 Brighton. The remaining parts of Districts 6, 12, 16, and 27 went to the new District 27J Brighton.

Early Years of Adams County School District 12

By 1953 Adams 12 had grown to 238 students and 11 teachers housed in two schools, Eastlake and Westlake. It was still a very rural area. Norm Smith, who started teaching at Westlake that year, remembers that at the time the City of Thornton consisted of five show homes, the houses on Washington across from the shopping center just north of Russell Way. There was no I-25 back then. The expressway did not reach 120th St. until about 1955-6.

After World War II many veterans had moved into the Denver area, beginning a population boom which transformed the region. In 1953 Sam Hoffman, under the direction of Mike Dichter, bought land from the Eppinger and McElwain families who owned large amounts of land north of Denver. Hoffman and his F & S Construction Company began to build homes. Over 300 homes were sold in a matter of weeks. All homes were served by one well located at 91st and Clarkson Street. The new community was named Thornton after Colorado Governor Dan Thornton. Streets were named after important people in the community. Hoffman Way and Eppinger Boulevard are examples. Russell Boulevard, the curviest road in Thornton, was named Hoffman's daughter-in-law, the "curvy" actress Jane Russell.

With the Hoffman development in Thornton, there came a great need for school building in that area. In 1954 Thornton area businessmen and residents donated the materials and the labor for the construction of a temporary frame building call The Annex at 901 Eppinger Blvd. Until The Annex was completed at Thanksgiving time in 1954, the district rented space in the Eastlake Fire Hall for a few elementary classes and a central office.

The original police and fire departments in Thornton were volunteer organizations. Mike Dichter bought the first fire truck. By the end of 1955 there were an estimated 5,500 people and over 1200 homes in the Thornton community. On May 26, 1956 Thornton was incorporated as a city. By 1957 there were an estimated 10,350 people living in the City of Thornton. Thornton got its first post office in 1958. In the mid-60's the Thornton Shopping Center was built at the corner of Washington Street and 88th Ave., providing the city with a major source of income.

In 1963 Thornton decided to buy the Utilities System from Northwest Utilities Company. At this time the System was providing water for about 30,000 people, both inside and outside the city limits. The city sold \$7,870,000 in bonds to purchase the utility. There were problems since approximately 60% of the customers lived outside the Thornton city limits. These customers, especially Northglenn residents, had to contract with Thornton Utilities because Northglenn had made no provisions for contracting with another company. The contract, which ran till 1988, guaranteed that users outside the city limits of Thornton were to agree to contract only with Thornton for the duration of the contract. Northglenn residents claimed that the period of the contract was too lengthy. However, as they were not Thornton residents, they had no official representation in the administration of the system.

Listening to such complaints, the Public Utilities Commission (PUC) questioned the validity of the sale by Northwest Utilities Company. In 1964 the PUC took the issue to the Colorado Supreme Court, claiming that it should have jurisdiction over the system in order to protect Thornton water customers who lived outside Thornton. The Colorado Supreme Court declared that the sale of the system by Northwest to Thornton was invalid since outside customers had no representation in its management. The PUC took jurisdiction over the system. However less than a year later the Colorado Supreme Court reversed its earlier ruling, declaring that the PUC had exceeded its jurisdictional powers and had no right to interfere with matters of municipal improvement. Thornton regained control of the Utilities System.

The system has been greatly expanded and is now providing better service for customers who do not live in Thornton. In 1976 approximately