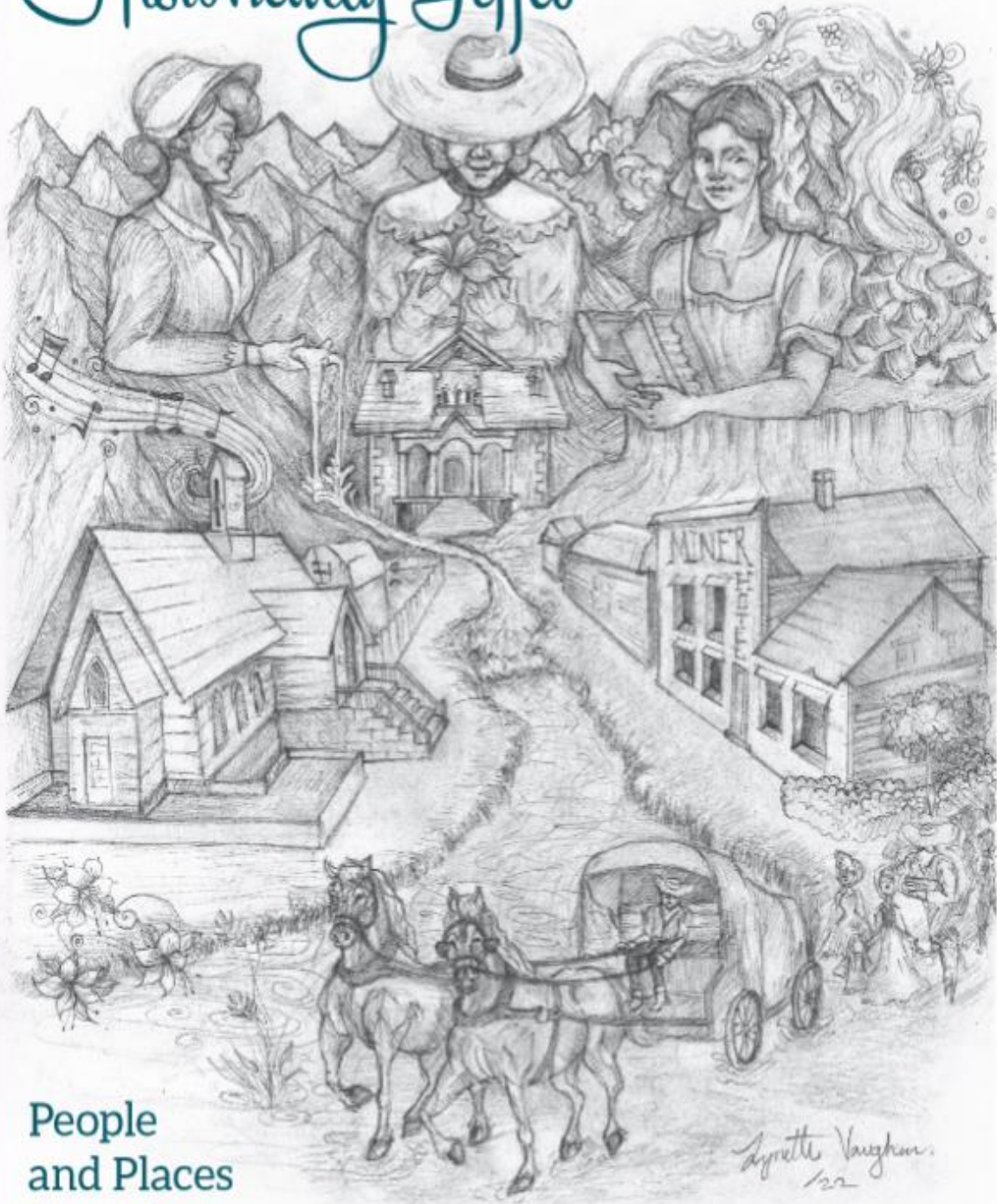


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Historically Jeffco



People
and Places
that Matter

Mount Vernon Builds a Barn: How Jeffco's Historic Mountain Community Turned Fire Danger into a Horse Haven

Page Lambert

The History—Conservation and Horses First Pair Up

Despite the occasional howling foothill winds that sway the trunks of the towering ponderosas in the foothill forests west of Denver, falling in love with Mount Vernon Canyon Club has always been easy. This nearly one-hundred-year-old community began in the 1920s when a group of forward-thinking men and women envisioned a village-like cluster of summer cabins nestled in the pines, the city lights of Denver flickering to the east, and the snow capped peaks of the Rocky Mountains beckoning to the west.

But their vision was not one of development—it was of *preservation*. By the 1940s, fifty families had converted their summer cabins to year-round homes. Many of these homeowners loved horses and enjoyed riding the mountain trails and open meadows. In 1950, a few hundred acres were set aside as horse pasture for the community's horse herd. These grasslands became the community's main "recharge area" used to capture snowmelt and rainwater for the community's private well system.

When a severe drought hit the foothills in the 50s, the homeowners, numbering more than seventy families, passed a moratorium halting further building. "Don't Outgrow Your Resources" became the adopted motto, and volunteerism the community standard. In 1954, our family moved into the community from "down the mountain." Too young to remember the drought, my early memories were of eating wild onions with my big sister and riding our brown and white paint horse Bingo.



Mount Vernon Corral Group with Bingo, 1950s (Page Lambert, center child).

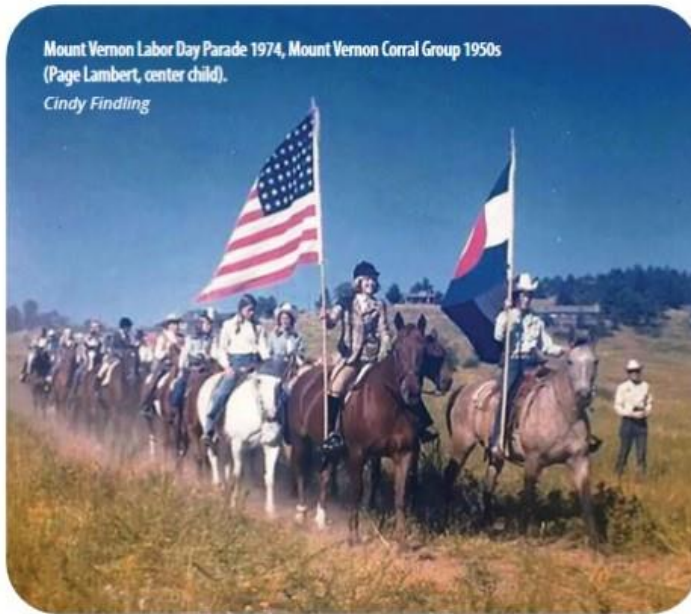
Photo courtesy of the author, Page Lambert (taken by her father, Loren Dunton)

When long-time residents Dick and Judy Cattell came to Mount Vernon in the 60s, they were impressed that their neighbors built, maintained, and enjoyed the hiking and riding trails. "You could tell where your children were by where they'd tied their horses," Judy said.

The building moratorium was eventually lifted. A limited number of homes sprang up and new residents

were urged to join various volunteer committees: long range planning, renewable energy, stewardship, open space, weed control, community gardening, and the horse corral co-op. The annual Labor Day Parade and Horse Show drew as many as one hundred horses and riders from communities all over. In 1995, the mountain grasses were so nutritious and the horses so plump that on July 4th, one of the mares surprised everyone by giving birth to a beautiful foal.

The foal, Diamond, grew into a beautiful copper-colored horse and eventually took over her mother's role as lead mare. Di is a much beloved member of the herd and still considered the matriarch. The corral group and the other horses also thrived, despite a dilapidated plywood structure for hay storage which provided only minimal winter shelter for the herd.



Mount Vernon Labor Day Parade 1974, Mount Vernon Corral Group 1950s (Page Lambert, center child).

Cindy Findling

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Rock Pring featured with Scott Dingle, Monte Deckerd, John Gritts and Kitty Pring.
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Protecting the Community

Many things have stayed the same since Mount Vernon's inception nearly a century ago. Our family moved away but my mother returned in the 80s, shortly after resident Dr. George "Rock" Pring (University of Denver Professor of Law Emeritus, and long-time president of Clear Creek Land Conservancy), wrote and spearheaded the enactment of a visionary Land Use Plan designed to protect and preserve the community's open spaces and forests.

But despite the Land Use Plan and conservation-minded ethics, the ongoing threat of wildfire had not diminished. In 2009, four communities—Mount Vernon, Cody Park, Rilliet Park, and Moss Rock—applied for Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Grants from the Colorado State Forest Service. Thanks to the extraordinary grant-writing efforts of Mount Vernon residents Catherine (Kitty) Pring and Rod Vaughn, the communities were awarded the funds. None-too-soon, as in September 2010, 135 homes and 138,000 acres burned in Boulder's Fourmile Fire, a tragic reminder of the danger of wildfire.

Bark-on slabs used for exterior siding.
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When I found out that Kitty and Rod had applied on behalf of the community for fire mitigation funds, I reached out to a close family friend who lived in the Black Hills of South Dakota. A woodsman, Jim had a small sawmill on his ranch and carefully tended the pine trees on hundreds of acres surrounding his meadows. I phoned him and asked, "Jim, would it be possible to build a barn from green-cut timber?" He replied, "Absolutely, but this is what you need to do..."

I immediately talked to Cindy Findling, a long-time corral group member who owned a pipe and concrete company. She embraced the idea and we put together a detailed proposal which outlined all the phases of construction. Our vision was born—a new barn, built from pine trees gathered from Mount Vernon's own forests. Other members of the Corral Cooperative embraced the idea. I reached out to the Colorado State Forestry's Wood Utilization and Marketing Program and invited staff to come to Mount Vernon and inspect the trees we anticipated us-

ing for the barn project. Two men toured the area with us and gave the idea a thumbs-up: a designated number of trees felled as part of the strategic fire mitigation could, indeed, provide timber for a new barn. Cindy and I put together presentations for the MVCC financial planning committee, the board of directions, and the community.

The Design

In September of 2010, the Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Mitigation Grant was approved, and Mount Vernon moved forward with fire mitigation efforts. A young woodsman raised near Golden was hired to carry out a 4-stage cutting plan. By October, the strategic cutting had begun. Trees were marked and felled to prevent crown fires and improve wildlife habitat, create shaded fuel breaks, and carve out staging areas for fire fighting equipment.

The planning continued with the design of two pole barn style buildings. The timber would be milled on site, with bark-on slabs hung vertically on the outside of the structure to shed moisture. The interior siding was composed of wooden planks hung horizontally. The smaller structure would store hay; the main





Josh Pearson milling timber on site.
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Cindy Findling's mare Kalia and Beth Fiorino with young community member.
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structure would include a tack room, wash area, sick bay stalls, small indoor exercise area, pens for supplemental feeding, and storage for fencing supplies.

We envisioned a "kid friendly" barn, with a design that allowed children or less-experienced adults to help with the feeding chores without being in harm's way. The upper corral, facing southeast, would be warmed by the winter sun. One hundred-twenty linear feet of feed bunk, covered with a nineteen-foot shed roof, would protect the horses from the weather.

Construction Begins

With Jim's help, I calculated the board feet of timber needed. The young sawyer felling the fire mitigation trees was asked to limb the "barn" trees but leave them in sixteen-foot lengths (rather than bucking them into shorter lengths that could be stacked into fire-resistant pyramids). A member of the corral group painted a beautiful rendering of what the facility would look like draped in snow, and a professional architect in the community helped us envision the finished structures by creating a digital mock-up.

Questions reared their worrisome heads. Does the project require a Land Use vote? Will we have enough volunteers; more importantly, enough *young* volunteers? It wasn't just the horses who were getting older. How will we get the logs from the forest to the barn area? How dangerous is an on-site sawmill? Trusses will need to be ordered, stalls built, cement poured. What about the budget? What if there's a cost overrun?

Cindy and I shared a can-do attitude and, with the help of the corral group, eventually ferreted out the answers. Cindy offered to have her company do the demolition, concrete work, and water line installation at cost. A huge savings! We hired a small company with a truck, a flatbed, and crane to bring the logs from the woods to the building site. After an extensive, unsuccessful statewide search to find a miller with his own saw willing to come to the building site, we finally found an impeccable young man nearly in Mount Vernon's

backyard. Josh lived near Golden Gate, owned a TimberKing hydraulic portable band saw, and was willing to work by the hour. **Hired!**

Cindy expanded on the original proposal and created a site plan, supervising the old barn demolition and the dirt grading for the new facility. We put out bids to pole barn contractors who could provide treated support beams for the frame, onto which the green timbers would be attached. We contracted with a pro-



Camp Cook Monte checks the coals.
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fessional company to engineer the trusses. The cost of cement work, electrical work, water lines, etc., were calculated and an approved budget was put together. Corral group members provided an influx of cash donations.

The corral group created a work schedule of tasks to be done. Community volunteers stepped up to help. Josh milled the trees into lumber that was off-loaded onto stacks according to size. Pole barns were erected, trusses arrived, metal roof went on, exterior siding was hung, interior planking walled in the structures, feed bunks were built, and a small deck was added. Everyone in the corral group contributed time, labor, and expertise. Finally—after nearly two years—the barn was a reality. Time to celebrate!

Celebration Chuckwagon Dinner

A member of the corral cooperative, Monte Deckerd, had not only contributed endless hours of skilled labor to build the barn, but was an award-winning “camp cook” who owned an authentic, and beautifully restored turn-of-the-century Peter Schuttler chuckwagon. We wanted to thank the community and a chuckwagon cookout seemed like the perfect plan.

“The barn’s been raised, and we have a roof. Come rain or shine, there will be a shindig!”

Details came together for an October party. We put together an announcement, inviting the community.

“Come for Monte’s green chili chicken stew, made-from-scratch biscuits, and the world’s best Dutch-oven apple crisp! We’re even having a pie-baking contest!”

We swept out the barns and hauled in tables and chairs. Monte and his crew set up the chuckwagon and started cooking. On the day of the

event, over 135 neighbors came—eager to see the new barn, hungry for Monte’s camp cooking, and happy to see the horses in their new home. Curious, the horses poked their heads over the feed bunks and watched—perhaps wishing for a slice of carrot cake. Homemade pies were displayed and, after everyone had eaten, the judging began. Monte and his crew sampled them all—apple, cherry, strawberry rhubarb, lemon meringue, pumpkin, and more. A fierce but friendly competition ensued until the winner was announced and the pies were auctioned off.

After the neighbors headed home, the corral group relaxed on the deck. Josh had taken his sawmill home, but wood chips still scented the air. “We’ll need a new chore board,” someone mentioned, a reminder that, in a cooperative, the work is ongoing. We breathed in the pine and watched the horses explore their new corral. The herd’s lead horse Di, the little foal who had grown into that copper-colored mare, surveyed her domain. We were all proud that we had created this haven, helping in a small way to improve the land that we all stewarded, and helping to preserve Mount Vernon’s hundred-year legacy of community volunteerism.

The Ongoing Threat of Wildfire, Jefferson County and Beyond

In March 2011, Indian Gulch on the edge of Clear Creek Canyon caught fire and 1570 acres burned. The following year, in June, the High Park Fire in the Larimer County west of Loveland consumed over 50,000 acres. One woman died and dozens of structures burned. The 2022 Marshall Fire in Boulder County consumed more than 1000 structures and also took a life, injuring six others. These tragedies, and others—the CalWood, East Troublesome and



Page Lambert rings the dinner bell to announce pie contest winners.

Photo courtesy of Page Lambert

Pine Gulch fires—remain foremost on the minds of Front Range residents. For more information on Jeffco’s history with wildfires, please refer to past articles appearing in *Historically Jeffco*.

According to a recent article by Sara Wilson in *Colorado Newswire* (April 12, 2022), Interior Secretary Deb Haaland announced that:

“Colorado will receive over \$18 million this fiscal year from the federal government to treat thousands of acres susceptible to increasingly damaging wildfires, part of a strategy leaders hope will emphasize lowering fire risk before disaster strikes.”

The Mount Vernon Canyon Club and Mount Vernon Community celebrates their Centennial anniversary with various events beginning with a John King Concert at the Club to kick off the big event on June 3, 2022 and extending into August of 2023 with a one-hundred-year celebration dinner. To join Mount Vernon Canyon Club or for more information on the centennial celebration, go to <https://www.mountvernoncc.com>.