

THE STORY OF THE METZLER RANCH

Douglas Land Conservancy acknowledges that the Metzler property is on indigenous land. It is part of the traditional unceded territories of the Southern Arapaho, Southern Cheyenne, and Southern Ute peoples.

Before any European settlers traveled to what is now Douglas County, Colorado, the nomadic Ute Tribe had been there. Smaller groups of Utes, known as the Mouache, moved through the area, living as hunter-gathers, following the availability of game and plant foods.

Spanish explorers entered the area in the mid-16th century, leaving their greatest mark by providing the Ute with horses. This new transportation enabled the Ute to expand their hunting from elk and bears to include bison.

There was no significant influx of Europeans until after the area was acquired by the United States as part of the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. The Government sent exploratory groups, including Zebulon Pike and, in 1820, Stephen P. Long. Long's assessment of the area as "The Great American Desert" no doubt delayed white settlement of the area by decades. However, mountain men began appearing in the 1820s.

In the 1830s, bands of Southern Arapaho and Southern Cheyenne, fleeing the encroachment of white settlers into their native lands, came to the Douglas County area. Initially, there was peace between the established Arapaho and Cheyenne, who often joined together to protect themselves from the occasional attacks of not only Ute war parties but also of Kiowa, Sioux, and Comanche raiders. The Utes saw them all as intruders in their ancestral land.

Hostilities broke out as more and more tribes made their way to the Front Range to escape the increasing numbers of white settlers. A tenuous peace between twenty-one Chiefs was achieved by the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851. That multi-faceted treaty recognized permanent lands for the Southern Cheyenne and Southern Arapahoe from the North Platte in the north to the Arkansas River in the south, and from what is now the western border of Kansas to the base of the Rockies.

The relatively peaceful times facilitated by the treaty came to an end as more white settlers arrived, encouraged by the discovery of gold in 1859.

Douglas County was one of the original seventeen colonial counties formed in 1861 when the United States Government created the Territory of Colorado. At its founding, Douglas County extended from the Platte River to the Kansas border.

In 1862, the United States Congress passed the Homestead Act, which granted lots of 160 acres to hopeful settlers able to pay a small registration. In return, the settlers were expected to stay on the land, building themselves a home and using the land productively by farming or ranching. It was a few years before there were significant numbers of white settlers in Douglas County, due partly to the challenging environment, and partly due to continued hostilities with the increasingly displaced tribes. In 1874, the eastern part of the county was broken off to create Elbert County. The citizens of Douglas County voted to make Castle Rock the county seat.

One of the earliest homesteaders in Douglas County was German-born Frantz (aka Franz) Metzler. He obtained his first homestead in 1871, with the acquisition of four quarter sections located between what are now Highway 83 and Russelville Road. In 1872 and 1866, he bought some neighboring properties from Anton Blum and Jacob Schutz, expanding his holding by 22-½ acres. When Franz died in 1886 his property passed to his son, Augustus (b. 1854).

In 1923, Augustus' son, also named Augustus but known as Gus, married Mary Lucas, whose family had homesteaded in what is now Castlewood Canyon State Park, in 1859. Gus and Mary had two children, Robert Franklin (Bob), born in 1923, and Rosemary Margaret born in 1929.

Gus and Mary moved their family sometime around 1933 to what we now know as the Metzler Ranch. Initially, they were renting the property from its fourth owner, Rose A. Benton. In 1944, the Metzlers purchased the land from Miss Benton, who had run a dairy there. The Metzlers operated a ranch and continued the dairy operation, running it as the Sunny Slope Dairy. Bob and Rosemary shut down the dairy in the 1960s after their parents' deaths in the 1950s. The original house, which was built in 1899 by the original homesteader, Mathias Ritchey, still exists, with additions having been made as recently as 1997. The landmark silo had been built in 1919 when D.N. Stewart owned the ranch.

Mary Lucas Metzler was one of the first women in the county to have a high school education, but she had to move to Denver to accomplish that achievement. She passed on her dedication to education to her children, both of whom became educators. Bob and Rosemary graduated from Castle Rock High School (aka Douglas County High School) in the 1940s. At that time, the high school was housed in what is now the Douglas County School District building on Wilcox Street. Rosemary later returned to the school to teach both regular and AP English, creative writing, and the works of Shakespeare. In 1962, she was appointed as the assistant to the Director of Primary Education by the U.S. Office in Wiesbaden, Germany. There, she developed in-service training programs and also taught English to Turkish University students. After that assignment, she returned to Douglas County High School, where she was a much beloved (if a little feared due to her high expectations) teacher in the English department. Her career there spanned 33 years. She was also active in professional and community organizations. Rosemary continued to live on the ranch, joined by her partner Gaye Lankenau, for the rest of her life.

Bob's early experience teaching in a one-room schoolhouse led to his developing an educational philosophy based on individualized learning for each student. That recognition of each student's particular needs, especially in a larger school setting, was rare, if not unique, in the 1950s. In 1952, he was elected Superintendent for Douglas County schools. In 1964, he became superintendent of Clear Creek County Schools and moved to Idaho Springs. He made his home there in the Dupont Castle, known locally as Castle Eyrie. He traveled widely to speak at professional conferences about new educational techniques. He was an early advocate of the use of computers in education. Under his influence, the Clear Creek Secondary School had a state-of-the-art media center, which he called the Tower of Learning. It was commonly said to be the best of its kind between Chicago and Los Angeles.

With their busy professional lives, Bob and Rosemary could no longer maintain the huge property. When the siblings first came to the ranch with their parents, the family owned 770 acres. The ranch extended westward from the current property to the west side of Interstate 25; east of the interstate, the property reached not only to where Murdoch's is now, but south as far as the Black Feather Apartments. Parcels of the ranch were sold over the years.

After Rosemary's death in 2017, Robert contemplated what he hoped would happen to the family property. He wanted to save the remaining 60-some acres from development and to preserve the natural beauty of the area while honoring his family's history. To accomplish this goal, Robert met with the Town of Castle Rock to discuss his vision for the family home. Douglas Land Conservancy was granted a conservation easement on the property. The Town Council committed to several conditions made by Bob for the land's use and management. Thanks to the combined efforts of these partners, the Metzler Ranch's meadows, plentiful wildlife, varied topography, and sweeping views are preserved for all to enjoy.

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