

For this week's writing challenge, "The Places You'll Go", I thought about the ghost towns of Colorado, of which there are nearly 1,500, and how their histories of boom and bust tend to follow the very human cycles of avarice and disappointment. In my research, one of those places emerged with its own story. I attribute much of the following to Doctors Bob Brunswig and George Junne, Jr. of the University of Northern Colorado, and to the Black American West Museum in Denver.

The Dearfield Dream

By Dennis Payton Knight

Oliver T. Jackson was a dreamer, not for the riches of Colorado's gold fields, but of dreams inspired by the words of Booker T. Washington to Black families, "Get a home of your own. Get some property...get some of the substance for yourself."

In 1910 O.T. Jackson established a self-sufficient all-Black colony in Weld County, Colorado, about twenty-five miles southeast of Greeley, using his own money to purchase acreage for the town. A Black medical doctor, Joseph Westbrook of Denver, proclaimed at an organizational meeting that "the fields will be very dear to us", thus Dearfield got its name.

J.M. Thomas of Denver, an elderly friend of Jackson, became the first settler, planting 100 acres of winter wheat in 1910, and introducing dryland farming to Colorado. Seven homesteading families came in 1911, surviving a severe winter living in two frame houses. By 1915 there were 27 families, 44 wood cabins, a concrete block factory, a dance pavilion, a grocery store and a boarding house. Many of the colonists came from Denver, but others came from states as far as California, Massachusetts and Virginia. Booker T. Washington himself visited the town often with photographs showing him in white shirt and bowtie with a shovel in his hand.

The production of Dearfield was diverse, including such dryland crops as corn, oats, barley, alfalfa, and hay. Some grew potatoes, pinto beans, sugar beets, melons, and strawberries. They raised cattle, horses, hogs, turkeys, geese, ducks, and chickens. Vegetables and fruit were purchased by the Kuner factory and a fruit and produce company in Denver. Beatrice Foods bought dairy products for Meadow Gold lines of butter and milk.

Dearfield boomed during the First World War when rainfall and crops were good, and prices were high. 1920 saw the largest crop ever, and by 1921 more than sixty families called it home and 20,000 acres were in production. Most of the men worked at jobs in Denver during the week, leaving women and children to do much of the garden and farm work. Entertainment purveyors would attract visitors from Denver's Five Points neighborhood for weekends of food, fun and dances at its Barn Pavilion. Some came by car, many by train.

The tide turned for Dearfield in the 1920's as prices inflated by war collapsed and the soil blew away in the Dust Bowl. O.T. Jackson's dreams had turned to dust. By the end of the Great Depression, most residents left for new opportunities, and by 1940 there were only a dozen left. O.T. Jackson tried to revive interest in his community, even offering the entire town for sale, but there were no takers, and he died in February, 1948.

In 1955, the town was put on the National Register of Historic Places, and in 1999, it was listed as an endangered site. By stabilizing existing structures and planning a park and history museum, the Black American West Museum is now working to memorialize a dream that has not died, the Dearfield Dream.