

# Windsor Lake: Business and Recreation

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Lake Hollister remained an important source of ice until 1900, after which, mechanically produced ice rendered the winter harvest unnecessary.

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*Fort Collins Courier, January, 1891*



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30—Monkey Comedians—30  
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**SPECIAL FEATURES THIS SEASON**  
SEE THE TROUPE OF MUSICAL PONIES  
Only net of its kind in the world  
**THE NORMAN FAMILY**  
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(Seven in number)  
The highest Salaried Troupe of Japs in this Country  
**A BABY CAMEL AND ITS MOTHER** To be seen at each and every performance  
**SEE THE FUNNY CLOWNS**

## A Recreation Destination

Some envisioned Windsor Lake as being more than a water reservoir and ice supply. In 1903, Vernon McKalvy took the first steps toward making Windsor and its lake a recreation destination. McKalvy's Windsor Resort Grounds had ball fields, a dance pavilion, bath houses, an opera house, and a bandstand, which was moved from 5<sup>th</sup> and Main Streets. He stocked Windsor Lake with black bass and ringed perch, provided boats for fishing and rowing, and built piers for easy water access. It was a noble endeavor, but it would not last. The cost of operation required McKalvy to charge admission to his Resort Grounds, which many Windsoriters resented. The resort soon failed and the grounds were replaced with residential lots.



# Water comes to Windsor

The Cache la Poudre River held the key for establishing a successful agricultural community. The first irrigation efforts began in the 1860s, when farmers dug individual irrigation ditches using shovels or teams of horses. These ditches were only a few miles long and provided just enough water for farmers to water crops and raise livestock.



## Large-Scale Ditches in Northern Colorado

In 1870, Nathan Meeker, founder of the Union Colony, which would later become Greeley, planned the first large-scale irrigation project in the region. The plan was to build four ditches. Ditches No. 2 and No. 3 were both started in 1870. No. 2 ditch runs directly through Windsor. Ditches No. 1 and No. 4 were never constructed.

Not only was the Greeley No. 3 the first decreed ditch in the country, but it also set the precedent for water law. In 1874, conflict in northeastern Colorado over water availability led to the development of prior appropriation laws, or "First in time, first in right." This means that the first person to manipulate a body of water for their use has the first right to use that water.

## Climate

When the first military expeditions came through Colorado, map-makers dubbed this land "The Great American Desert." Northern Colorado's semi-arid climate with low humidity, moderate temperatures and four seasons make it an ideal habitat for adapted plants and animals to thrive.

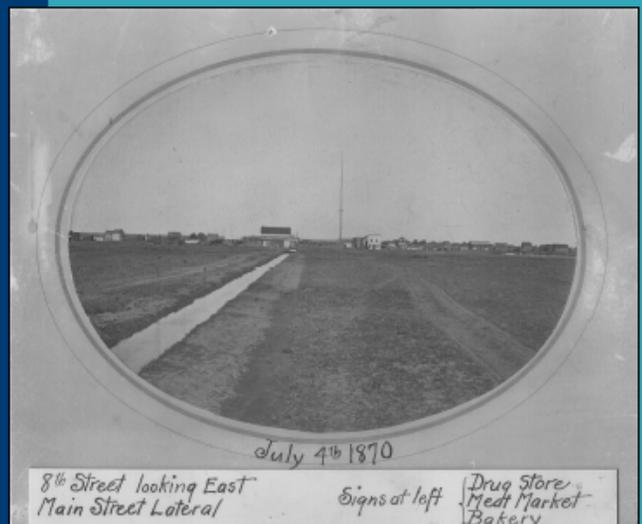
This part of the state averages only 13 inches of precipitation annually. From 1948 to 1990, the average total precipitation for Windsor was 12.39 inches.

## Windsor's Early Water Investors

**Fred Whitney** arrived in the Windsor area in 1860. By 1862, he had completed the first large scale irrigation ditch, naming it the Whitney Ditch. George Briggs, a ditch investor, nicknamed the Whitney Ditch the "Dead-Beet Ditch" because it took a long time for water to reach his farm which was located at the lower end of the ditch.

**Benjamin Harrison Eaton** was perhaps one of the best known and earliest irrigation developers in northern Colorado. His work helped to shape the Windsor community and build its identity as an agricultural town. Eaton built numerous irrigation ditches and canals throughout northeastern Colorado along both the Cache la Poudre and the South Platte Rivers during his lifetime. He built the B. H. Eaton Ditch in 1864, located a mile west of his original homestead near present day Windsor.

**Revilo Loveland, J.S. Arthur, David Davis, Simon Duncan, James Earnest, and J.M. Cobbs** began diverting water from the Poudre River in 1866, approximately three and a half miles northwest of Windsor. The ditch they constructed would serve as the precursor to the Greeley No. 2 canal, dug in 1870.



## Sugar Beets and the Economy of Windsor



The sugar beet industry had a monumental effect on Windsor as a town. Not only did it bring revenue to local farmers, but the industry encouraged the establishment of new farms, brought more farm laborers, necessitated new infrastructure, and attracted new businesses to Windsor.

By the 20th century, sugar beets were being planted on Windsor farms as a cash crop.

The construction of the Windsor sugar factory propelled and sustained the success of Windsor's economy in the early 20th century. Between 1900 and 1910, the population of Windsor nearly tripled from 390 to over 1,000 inhabitants, turning Windsor into a sugar beet boomtown.



Prior to 1903, sugar beets grown on Windsor farms were taken to the Loveland Sugar Factory to be processed. During the long journey to the Loveland factory, the beets, actually lost some of their sugar content. Because sugar beets have high levels of sucrose (sugar), the sugar levels decrease quickly from the time they are harvested to when they are processed.

The quickest way to get beets to the factory was by rail. In October 1901, Windsor constructed a beet dump, where farmers could deposit their crops directly onto freight trains for efficient transportation to Loveland.

## Home Technologies

Daily chores including washing, cooking, and cleaning consumed an exorbitant amount of time throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the time period between the end of World War I and before the Great Depression, women were inundated with a vast number of new technologies designed to lessen work time and improve the quality of women's lives. Their success within the home, however, depended upon the availability of electricity. In 1917, only 24.3% of American homes had electricity available. By 1920, this percentage had jumped to 47.4%.



Men at table in kitchen, 1943  
Windsor-Severn Historical Society Collection



Baking demonstration in electric oven  
Library of Congress

With electricity increasingly available, women began purchasing affordable appliances and placing them within their homes. Clothing irons, toasters, vacuums, mixers, cook-stoves, and washing machines ensured that the drudgery of housework was lessened somewhat. Equipped such, middle-class women were given time to pursue other interests and allocate time elsewhere.



Washing and ironing machine advertisement, circa 1948  
Library of Congress

## Paths to the Present

### Windsor's Ice Harvest

The warm days of summer are long gone and once again Windsor Lake is frozen, just as it has been every winter for decades.

The reservoir's water enabled local farmers to irrigate their fields during the summer, but surprisingly once the harvest was over and winter set in, the lake did not cease to contribute to the commerce of the town.

In a time when mechanical refrigeration was nonexistent, ice was a precious commodity. Windsor Lake, known as Lake Hollister until 1907, became the site of a plentiful ice business in the early 1880s.

By 1886, over 2,000 tons of ice from Lake Hollister was sent to Denver and used to refrigerate railcars for the Union Pacific Railroad. According to the *Fort Collins Courier* in January 1891;

“Everybody in town and country is cutting and hauling ice. No danger of an ice famine this year. Lake Hollister is alive with men these days, sawing the congealed waters of the lake into blocks ready for hauling, and teams are coming and going all the time. The Lake Supply Co. have a force of men and teams loading cars with ice for the Union Pacific railroad. They commenced last Thursday evening and have already loaded fifty-five railroad cars. Their contract calls for 6,200 tons, which they can easily fill. The ice is in excellent condition and the days are pleasant so that no one suffers with cold while handling the icy product.”

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*Caitlin Heusser is the Museum Curator for the Town of Windsor.*

Photograph Caption:

Ice Harvest on Lake Hollister, circa 1890

*Town of Windsor Museum Permanent Collection*

Town of Windsor Museum  
Written by Caitlin Heusser, Museum Curator

## **Windsor Lake**

Windsor Lake has been a central feature of the Windsor community for over 125 years. The lake has been so much more than a water reservoir; it has played an important role in the identity, recreation, and commerce of Windsor.

Long before the establishment of Windsor, Windsor Lake was little more than a soggy depressed swath of land used by grazing buffalo as a wallow. With the last buffalo gone from the area in 1864, early pioneers saw the potential for the area and began to change the landscape for farming, irrigation, and homesteading.

Edward Hollister, an original Union Colony member, arrived in 1870, to begin homesteading in what would later become Windsor. At the northern most edge of Hollister's property the naturally depressed area held the promise of a water reservoir for the Lake Supply Ditch Company. With funding from local area farmers, the wallow was expanded to become the company's principle water reservoir in the early 1880s. The reservoir became known as Hollister Lake and as the demand for water increased over time with the establishment of farms, the size of Hollister Lake was expanded.

Hollister Lake had a thriving ice business during the 1880s to early 1900s. Ice from Windsor Lake was in such demand that the Union Pacific railroad added track and switch to the edge of the lake for train cars to be more easily filled. The ice was sent to Denver and used to refrigerate boxcars and sold to local ice houses. January 1891, the Fort Collins Courier wrote,

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In 1907, the Lake Supply Ditch Company reorganized as the Kern Reservoir and Ditch Company, at this point the lake become officially known as Kern Reservoir, named after local agriculture tycoon Lewis Kern.

Some envisioned the lake as being more than a water reservoir and ice supply. In 1903, Vernon McKalvy took the first steps towards making Windsor and its lake a recreation destination. McKalvy's Windsor Resort Grounds had ball fields, a dance pavilion, bath houses, an opera house, and bandstand which was moved from 5<sup>th</sup> and Main Streets. He stocked Windsor Lake with Black bass and Ringed perch, provided boats for fishing and rowing, and built piers for easy water access. It was an adventitious endeavor, but it would not last. The cost of operation required McKalvy to charge admission to his Resort Grounds which many Windsorites resented. The resort soon failed and the grounds were replaced with residential lots.

In the years to come Kern's contribution to the area diminished from memory and lake began to be called Windsor Lake. By the 1960s confirmation of the lake's name was established by the United States Geological Survey naming the body of water Windsor Lake.

Through the years, Windsor Lake has been dredged and expanded. It has continued to be a source of water for farms and a place of recreation for Windsor residents. From ice harvesting and ice skating during the winter at the turn of century, to boating, fishing, swimming, and sunbathing in the summer, Windsor Lake has been, and continues to be, a central feature of the Windsor community.

## **Paths to the Present**

### **Windsor: a recreation paradise of the past**

It is spring and with the warm weather we find ourselves itching to get outside and recreate. Things were not much different in the past for Windsorites. By 1882, Windsor was a destination for outdoorsman from Denver. Windsor Lake had a plentiful supply of fish for anglers and hunters had ample opportunities to hunt waterfowl.

Recreation was taken to a whole new level with the construction of Windsor Park Grounds in 1902. Vernon McKelvey, developer and owner of the Grounds, purchased a fleet of small boats for Windsor Lake which could be rented for 25 cents per hour. He stocked the lake with black bass, yellow perch and ringed perch to entice visitors. In addition, a large sports facility was constructed on the eastside shore of the lake and included various ball fields, a bandstand, dance pavilion, and bathhouses.

On May 23, 1903, a field meet for northern Colorado high schoolers was held at the complex with great success. The event was intended to be an annual occurrence, but was sparsely attended in the second year and was discontinued in the third year.

Windsor Park Grounds failed within a few years due to lack of an income source. Windsor residents did not want to pay to watch and participate in sporting events that they could do at no cost elsewhere, and McKelvey could not entice out-of-town visitors to attend.

The land was later platted for residential homes. The area became known as the "Park Addition," and homes were built on what were once ball and track fields.

*Caitlin Heusser is the Museum Curator for the Town of Windsor.*

Photograph Caption:

Boats on Windsor Lake, bandstand visible on the shore in background.

*Town of Windsor Museum Permanent Collection*

## **Climate**

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## **Water**

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In the 1880s, several years of plentiful rainfall blessed northeastern Colorado with an abnormally wet climate that attracted many potential farmers. Yet by the early 1890s, the arid climate returned leaving many early settlers feeling “fooled.” Farming could not continue without irrigation, and droughts led to experiments with dry farming which involved conserving moisture in the soil and growing drought-resistant crops such as winter wheat and forage sorghum.

The drought of the 1920s and 1930s pushed Colorado State University to develop a device that would more accurately measure water flow. The Great Depression spurred the Colorado-Big Thompson Project which brought water over the mountains from the Western slope.

## **Dry Farming**

Weld County became one of the best dry farming regions in Colorado and farmers raised corn, melons, squash, onions, cabbage, potatoes, beets, peas and beans. Potatoes and wheat were among the earliest and

most successful cash crops grown in Windsor prior to the sugar beet. By 1882, an irrigation system had been developed that provided water to local farms allowing farmers to grow a wider variety of crops.

## **Ranching**

Stock raising was also an important aspect of northeastern Colorado's agricultural system. Livestock such as sheep and cattle were shipped from Windsor on a daily basis.

## **Benjamin Eaton (1833-1904)**

Benjamin Harrison Eaton was perhaps one of the best known and earliest irrigation developers in Northern Colorado. His work helped shape the Windsor community and build its identity as an agricultural town.

Eaton worked along both the Cache La Poudre and the South Platte Rivers during his lifetime to harness the water, and capitalize on its resources. He built the B. H. Eaton Ditch in 1864 about a mile west of his original homestead near present day Windsor.

As a public leader, Eaton was elected the fourth governor of the Colorado Territorial Legislature in 1884, and passed some of Colorado's first water rights laws. Eaton incorporated the Windsor Reservoir and Canal Company in May of 1890, and is also credited with having worked on the High Line Canal, and the Larimer and Weld Canal.

**Fred Whitney** arrived in the late summer of 1860, and was the first to settle in what would later become Windsor. Within two years, Whitney completed the first large scale irrigation ditch naming it the Whitney (Dead-Beat) Ditch. According to Roy Ray, the Whitney Ditch was "one of the best ditches along the river, and was the first irrigation ditch built" in the Windsor vicinity. George Briggs nicknamed the Whitney Ditch the "Dead-Beat Ditch" because it took a long time for water to reach his farm which was located at the lower end of the ditch.

## **Lake Supply Ditch Company**

The Lake Supply Ditch Company was influential in growing not only Lake Hollister as a water storage reservoir, but also in the establishment of Windsor as a town.

The company was started by local farmers C.M. McKelvey and L.S. Springer who funded and constructed Lake Hollister making it one of the earliest water reservoirs in Northern Colorado. Together with Edward Hollister, a Union Colony farmer and land owner, they platted the Town of Windsor and worked to draw businesses to the area.

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#### Agriculture/Farming:

The lands of northeastern Colorado are naturally dry, receiving only 9-11 inches of rainfall a year. In the early days of settlement, farmers had to use new methods of cultivation in the arid climate. Experiments with dry farming involved conserving moisture in the soil and growing drought-resistant crops such as winter wheat used in yeast breads, and sorghum grass for animal feed.

Windsor had an irrigation system by 1882 that utilized water from Windsor Lake and the Cache la Poudre River.

By the turn of the century, agriculture in Colorado accounted for more jobs than mining. Agricultural growth encouraged industrial growth as factories were needed to process meat and grain. These entrepreneurial efforts required a local railroad for profitable business operations.

Agriculture flourished in the Windsor area at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An unusually wet season, improvements to the irrigation systems, and a rapidly growing population led to a third of the plains being purchased and plowed for agriculture.

When the weather conditions changed, environmental challenges became catalysts for improvements.

### **Why Irrigation?**

The success of Colorado agriculture is directly linked to our ability to attain water from an unforgiving environment.

Northern Colorado only became an agricultural success because of irrigation. Irrigation is necessary in semi-arid climates for agriculture and farming, as regular rainfall cannot be counted on.