

CLARK COLONY AND THE POTATO KING OF COLORADO

Most Greenwood village homewoners living east of Holly Street will find that the legal description of their property says that it is located in Clark Colony. Curiosity led me to become acquainted with the story of Rufus Clark, one of our area's amazing early pioneers.

Clark was born on a Connecticut farm in 1834. As a teenager he ran away to sea. After serving 16 years on a whaling vessel, he jumped ship in California. Unsuccessful in the gold fields, Rufus gradually worked his way east to Colorado where in 1859 he filed a homestead on 160 acres of Platte River bottom land a few miles south of that collection of shacks and tents which called itself Denver.

Prosperity eluded Clark in the beginning. Tragically, his first wife (he had four) was swept away in a flash flood as she ran for their house; she was found later, her long hair entangled in a barbed wire fence. However, the farmer's fortunes changed when he began planting his acreage in potatoes. These starchy tubers were worth gold to the hungry miner working in the hills above Denver, and "Potato Clark" was able to supply them. Using the income from his cash crop, he bought more land and hired laborers to grow more potatoes.

Big and burly, with a bushy beard and loud voice, Clark was a rough seafaring man with a sailor's appetite and a vocabulary to match. He was a hard master who drove his worker as he drove himself. A contemporary critic described him as "steeped in sin and prodigious profanity and the curse of drink." Clark's fondness for the grape must not have clouded his judgement, because he continued to prosper, investing in more and more land until he woned over 20,000 acres south and east of Denver. Reports of the time rightly referred to him as "the Potato King of Colorado.

As the years passed, age and wealth mellowed Clark considerably. He "got religion," turned his back on the bottle completely, and became a respectable citizen. He even served two years on the Arapahoe County School Board, and in 1885 he gave eighty acres and \$500 to the struggling young Methodist College (later called D.U.) for a campus with the stipulation that no liquour be served there.

Clark County Begun in 1880's Rufus Clark was a man who thought big, and in the mid-1880's he persuaded English investors to finance an ambitious colonization project on 15,000 acres of his land which included almost the entire eastern half of the present Greenwood Village. Called Clark Colony, this land was divided into five and ten acre tracts. Several small reservoirs were constructed: one on the site of the Arapahoe County Airport; one just west of the Castlewood Fire Station; and one where Greenwood Plaza is now. An extensive system of irrigation canals and ditches were dug to bring water to all of the colony acreage. This canal system was soon connected to the Castlewood dam which was constructed in 1890 on Cherry Creek near Franktown.

Clark Colony was heavily advertised both in Colorado and in eastern cities to attract settlers. Immigrants came to the area, built houses, and planted crops and fruit orchards. Clark himself experimented with sugar beet on land at the present Denver Tech Center; but was unable to finance the construction of a processing plant nearby to make beets profitable.

By the early 1900's Clark Colony had many resident, and the area was thriving because water from Clark's efficient ditch system was plentiful and the land was particularly suited to fruit raising. Old timers tell me that "it looked like a Garden of Eden out here." The land was dotted with trim little white houses with maybe a garden or chicken coop out back and the hillsides neatly planted with hundreds of fruit trees, beautiful orchards of apples, cherries, pears and apricots which covered the

hills with a blanket of pink and white every Spring.

Castlewood Dam Collapses Disaster struck this bucolic rural community in 1933 when the Castlewood Dam washed out. In those depression years there was no money to rebuild it, and the farmers dependent on its irrigation water in this dry country suddenly found themselves out of business. One by one they moved away, abandoning their homes and failing orchards, and letting their land go for taxes. In the 30's and 40's much of the Clark Colony land could be had for as little as \$6 an acre. A few brave souls tried dry land farming, but most of the country was good only for grazing cattle. The little houses stood empty and tumbling down, and the fruit trees gradually disappeared.

Today, most of the old Clark Colony has been re-subdivided into one acre suburban lots, and many traces of the 19th century development have disappeared. However, on that land which still remains open in and around eastern Greenwood Village, a sharp eyed walker or horseback rider can still spot some old foundations under the native cover, and can see traces of Rufus Clark's old irrigation canals snaking along the hillsides. A few hardy old fruit trees have incredibly survived, overcoming tremendous hardships to thrust up their blossoms for perhaps their seventieth Spring. We discovered four of them on a dry hillside just east of Yosemite Street., their stunted branches covered with little green pears. Some of these old trees have been rescued by thoughtful suburbanities such as Carl Stoelgel of 9484 East Orchard Drive., who altered his house plans to move the building ten feet further east so that he would not have to disturb the gnarled old fruit tree in his back yard.