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## History Comes Alive at Colorado's Vista Verde Ranch

by Sandy Bornstein / Apr 13, 2021 /



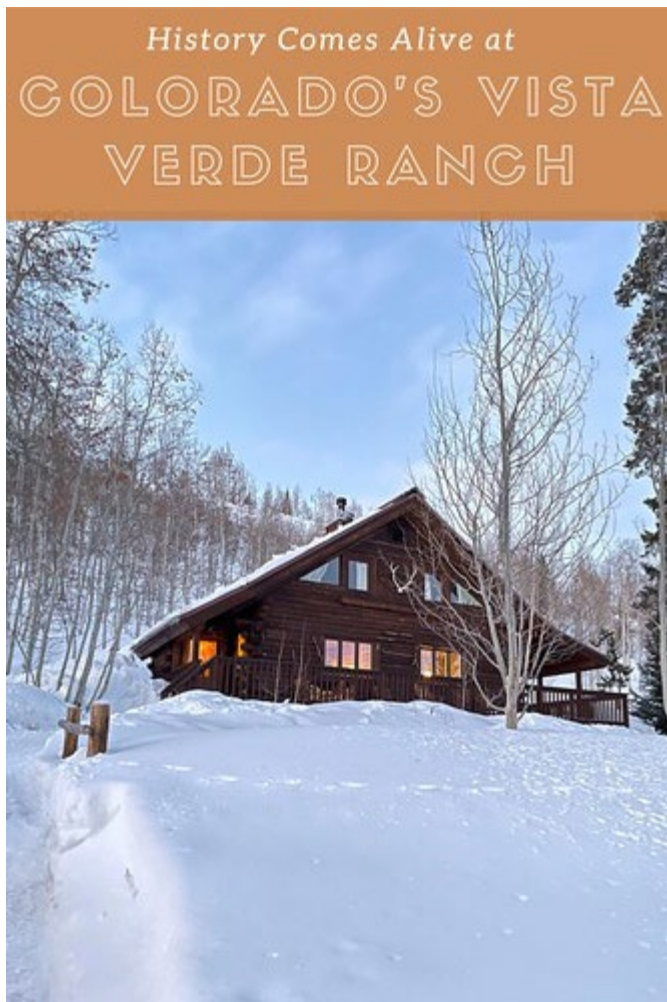
As we drove on the long driveway, bounded by deep mounds of snow, leading into Colorado's [Vista Verde Ranch](#), I admired the pristine beauty of the dude ranch's spectacular location, approximately 25 miles north of Steamboat Springs. I simultaneously began to wonder about the original settlers who were compelled to reside in this remote wilderness which is now surrounded mostly by the Routt National Forest. What lured these individuals to this snowy and frigid region before it became known for its world class skiing at [Steamboat Ski Resort](#)? Would it be possible to piece together enough facts so that I could write a **History Comes Alive at Colorado's Vista Verde Ranch** story? I wasn't sure.



*Snow-packed Driveway with Mounds of Snow*

## Mount Zirkel

After our possessions were deposited into our three-bedroom rustic cabin, I took a few moments to relax in the comfortable living area. A photograph hung near one of the cabin's windows. Apparently, our Zirkel cabin was named after Mount Zirkel, the tallest peak in the region. The nearby Mount Zirkel Wilderness Area, boasting more than 75,000 acres and 14 major peaks, was incorporated into the National Wildlife Preservation System in 1964.



## Native Americans and Early Settlers

Stacked on an adjacent end table, I found an assortment of reading materials. Two paperback books chronicling life in the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century caught my eye. On the third page of *Steamboat Springs and the 'Treacherous & Speed Skee'* (Steamboat Pilot: 1974) by Jean Wren, I started to read about life in the latter part of the 19th century.

"...can you imagine what it must have been like in Steamboat Spring during long winters before the coming of the railroad and automobile? For thirteen years after the first settler skied in to establish his claim in 1875, winter mail came in by sled, snowshoe, and skis from Hot Sulphur Springs, over sixty mountainous miles away. In 1888, the Wolcott Steamboat Springs, Hahns Peak Stage Line was established, serving the nearest railhead, the Rio Grande Station at Wolcott in the Eagle River Valley. When snow depth prevented the use of the lines tall concord coaches, freight and mail were brought in by horse sled. And when rising drifts made sled no longer practical, the mail was once more brought in on snowshoes or skis."

A few pages later, I learned that the conditions didn't change much with the introduction of the railroad.

"The coming of the Denver and Salt Lake & Pacific railroad in 1909 did not do a great deal to relieve the valleys

mid-winter isolation. Until the Moffat Tunnel was completed in 1927, under the Continental Divide West of Denver, tracks crossing the high Corona Pass were sometimes buried beneath snowslides for days, even weeks at a time. For a long time, no attempt was made to keep automobile roads open across mountain passes or to outlying towns and the long white months passed slowly for Steamboats two or three-hundred inhabitants who were unable to 'go outside' for the winter." (Page 6)

In the *Shepherdess of Elk River Valley* (Golden Bell Press: 1982) by Margaret Duncan Brown, I read about some of the hardships Margaret endured as a widowed sheep rancher who prospered in the region for decades after her husband's unexpected death during the flu pandemic of 1918. Understanding the harsh and desolate climate, I applauded her perseverance.

These passages along with others helped me understand the challenges associated with enduring long winters without the aid of modern conveniences. I felt comfortable and pampered inside my cozy, baseboard-heated cabin while nighttime temperatures began to dip below zero. Now, I was left with tracking down the history of Vista Verde Ranch.

Long before the westward movement to the Colorado Territories, Ute tribes inhabited the western territories. In the Elk River Valley, the Yampaitika (Laughing People) men hunted deer, antelope, elk, buffalo, small mammals and birds while the women gathered the local vegetation and prepared for the anticipated long winters. After the introduction of horses, cattle and sheep, the Ute tribes used the livestock in their daily lives.



*Image of Utes found during visit to Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum in Ignacio, Colorado*

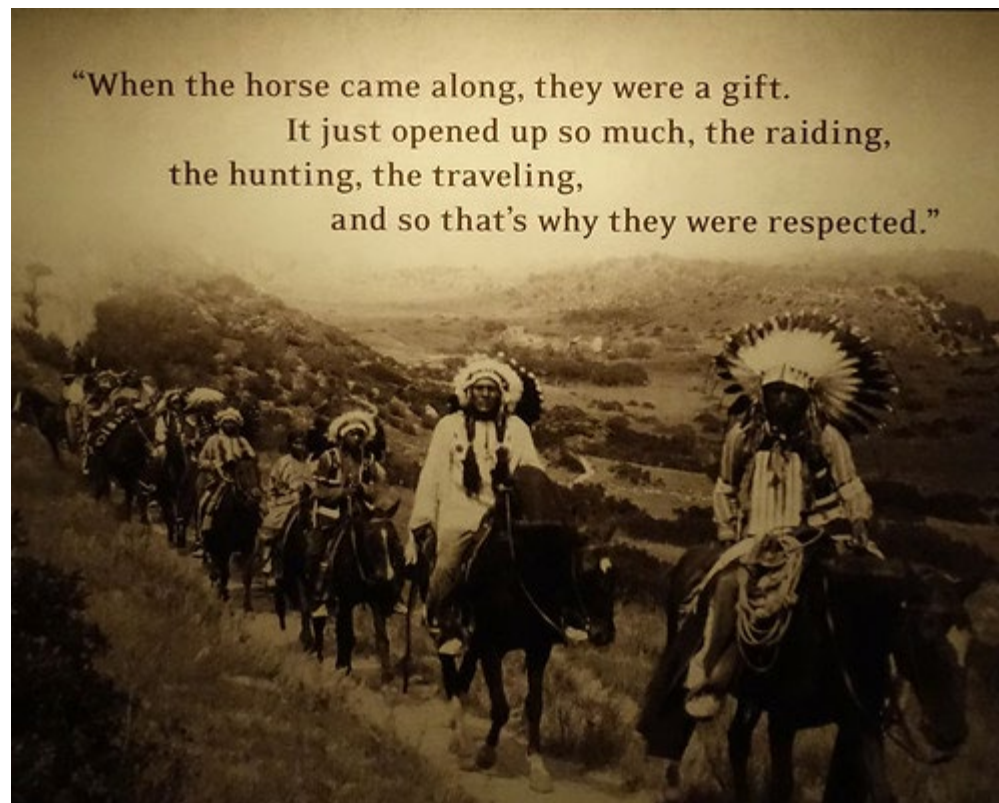
During the first half of the 19th century, the Yampaitika began encountering fur traders hunting beavers along the Yampa and Little Snake Rivers. Natural resources in the Hahns Peak and Clark area lured miners in search of gold, silver, red garnets, and coal. Small mining communities developed, and the local trees were used in



building the necessary structures. Others came to take advantage of Steamboat's hot springs, a place that the Ute's called "Medicine Springs."

An influx of farmers and ranchers arrived after President Lincoln signed the Homestead Act in 1862. Homesteaders had to be 21 years old and be willing to live and make improvements on the land. If they stayed for six months of the year for five years, a homesteader usually found two neighbors willing to sign a proof document vouching for their actions. The total cost to purchase 160 acres was an \$18 filing fee.

Clashes with settlers and soldiers, along with Nathan Meeker's desire to change the Native Americans' hunting and gathering lifestyle and their religious beliefs, led to the 1879 Meeker Massacre and the eventual relocation of the Utes to the Uintah Reservation in northeastern Utah. Wagon roads replaced the animal trails that were used by the Native Americans, hunters, and trappers. By the first decade of the 20th century, Routt National Forest was established by the federal government, and the railroad found its way through Routt County. Commercial life was enhanced by an improved transportation system and tourists found an easier way to reach Steamboat Springs. An abundance of rivers, lakes, forests, and mountain peaks became a draw for nature lovers, hunters, fishermen, hikers, and skiers.



*Image of Utes on Horseback taken during our tour of Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum in Ignacio, Colorado*

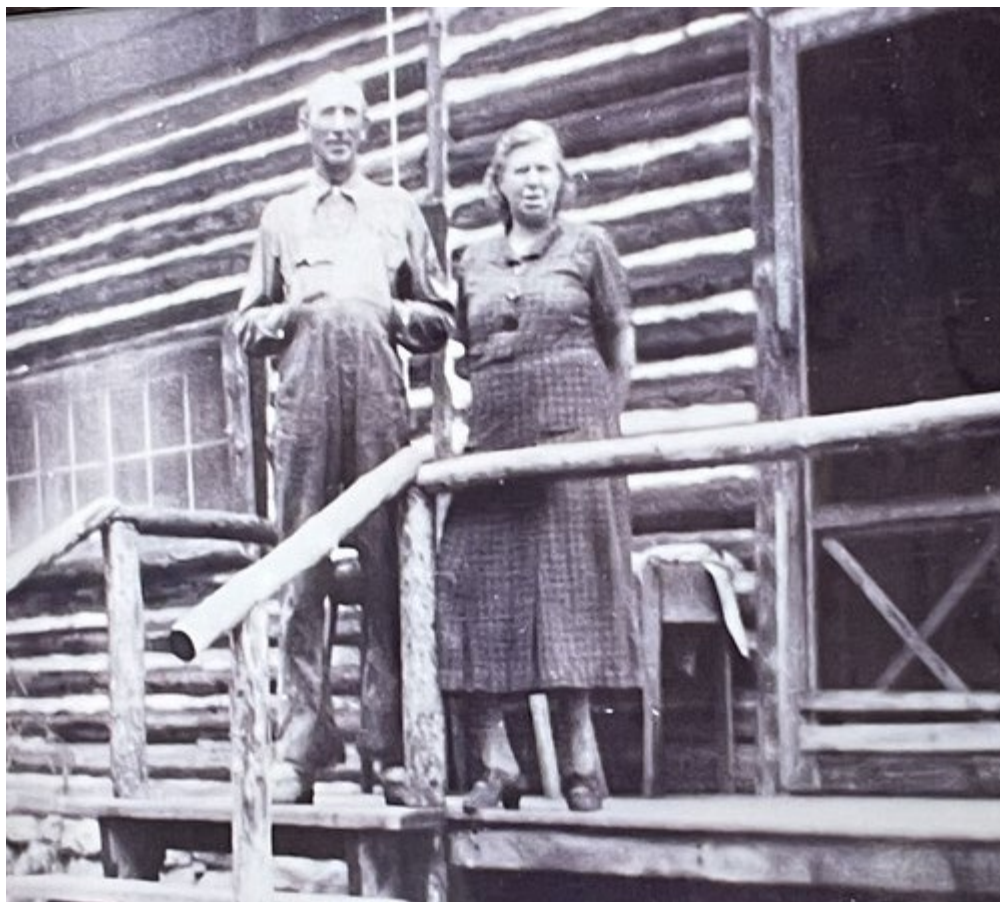
## Early History of Vista Verde Ranch

Loren Blair and John Hay built a small home and a barn on the current Vista Verde Ranch property. In 1919, they proved up their land and received a deed. Blair and Hay expanded their real estate holdings in 1921 when they purchased the adjacent 160-acre Hallet Homestead.



*Photo of original homestead cabin built by Loren Blair and John Hay, Demolished in the 1930s*

In 1933, the Blair/Hay homestead was sold to Arthur and Salome Tufly. Salome's sister was the first to use the term "Vista Verde" (green view) when she looked south from their homestead cabin. For a couple of decades, the Tuflys harvested hay and grazed cattle. In 1958, they sold their ranch to their son Hollis.



*Arthur and Salome Tuffy, 2nd Owners of Vista Verde Ranch*

After the Steamboat Springs Ski area was opened in 1968, Hollis capitalized on the increased tourism to the region by starting a modest hunting, fishing, horseback riding, and pack trips business. About 15% of his time was devoted to catering to visitors while the remaining 85% was spent focused on his cattle business.

In the mid 1970s, the property changed ownership again. Instead of following their initial dream to run a lodge at the base of a ski resort, Frank and Winton Brophy chose to leave their East Coast life behind to purchase Vista Verde Ranch. The learning curves for adapting to the dramatic climate and learning about hunting and running a ranch were steep. After getting a handle on the basics, they remodeled the lodge, which included an addition to the original building, and also built several new cabins. Along with these improvements came the desire to turn Vista Verde into a full-scale dude ranch. In 1978, the ranch became a multi-season operation with the introduction of a winter ski program.





*On Road between the Ranch and Steamboat Ski Resort*

## Vista Verde Ranch Enters Luxury Dude Ranch Market

Vista Verde Ranch entered the luxury market after John and Susanne Munn purchased the ranch in 1991. The entire property underwent a major makeover to align with a Mobil 4-star rating. All of the cabins were gutted and updated and the common buildings—the lodge and barn— were replaced. Additional activities were added along with an enhanced culinary program.





*Inside the current lodge*

Ownership changed once more in 2006 when Jerry and Peggy Throgmartin followed their aspiration to own a dude ranch. They enhanced the property by constructing a new indoor riding arena, building a swimming pool, and creating a Kid's Hut. They also made significant improvements to the cabins and lodge. The remnants of remaining historical structures were destroyed and one homestead building was relocated.



### *Horseback riding near the relocated homestead cabin*

We rode past this log structure during one of our trail rides. While in the lodge, we also glanced at the small collection of aging black and white photos. Considering the property's lengthy history and diverse ownership, we were surprised that more pictures were not on display.

The current owners, Laura and Chris Jones, purchased the property near the end of 2016. The intention of providing a memorable, luxury experience remains. Vista Verde Ranch is one of 21-members of the [Colorado Dude Ranch and Guest Ranch Association](#). This number is close to double the number of ranches that were part of the association when it was founded in 1936.



### *Ira working with a horse Inside Horse Arena*

## Overview

The affluent travelers who explored the west in the first half of the 20th century have little in common with today's dude ranch visitors. Back then, the word "dude" was used in a condescending way to describe the East Coast socialites who struggled to adapt to western life. Now dude and guest ranches cater to a wide range of visitors who are seeking an authentic western environment filled with plenty of activities, homecooked meals, and genuine hospitality. Positive experiences often lead these guests and their families to return year after year.





*Sandy and Ira Bornstein participating in private snow shoe excursion offered by the ranch*

A plethora of ranch owners with different objectives cannot diminish the feeling visitors have when they drive on the road leading into the Vista Verde Ranch, participate in ranch activities, or look up at the bright array of stars on a clear winter night. While modern conveniences have made the running of the year-round property easier, the ranch's pristine surroundings take you back in time when life was simpler. Exemplary service, delicious food, and well-appointed cabins add an additional layer to the overall experience. With limited cell service, minimal internet connectivity in the lodge, and no televisions, guests can easily unplug from technology and embrace the outdoors. It's also possible to take a few steps back to see how history comes alive at Colorado's Vista Verde Ranch.



*View of ranch from our Zirkel cabin*

Vista Verde Ranch hosted The Traveling Bornsteins for a 3-night stay. For more information regarding their stay, read [Reboot and Refresh at Colorado's Vista Verde Ranch](#). Information for this story was obtained from Vista Verde Ranch, [Tread of Pioneers Museum](#), [Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum](#), and the Colorado Dude and Guest Ranch Association.

**Sandy Bornstein**, the *History Comes Alive Through Travel Editor for Wandering Educators*, has visited more than 40 countries and lived as an international teacher in Bangalore, India. Sandy's award-winning book, [May This Be the Best Year of Your Life](#), is a resource for people contemplating an expat lifestyle and living outside their comfort zone. [Sandy](#) writes about Jewish culture and history, historical sites, family, intergenerational, and active midlife adventures highlighting land and water experiences.

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