

Dead Man's Grave at Fort Carson

Category: Colorado Springs History

Published: Tuesday, 05 May 2009 20:17

Written by Super User

Hits: 11312

From “Wellsprings,” published in 2001 by The Gazette, here’s an account:

“‘Uncle’ Henry Harkens (from Buckskin) and three other men had set up a sawmill in what was then known as Sawmill Gulch, along today’s Colorado Highway 115, about five miles south of Fort Carson’s main gate. On March 19, 1863, two of Harkens’ partners found him slain and their cabin ransacked.

“Harkens’ friends buried him under a pine tree on a little knoll nearby. As they were digging his grave, a sheriff and deputies passed by and told them another sawmill owner had been killed near Pueblo the day before.

“More bodies turned up during the next two weeks. The trail of killings led through Ute Pass and into South Park, where a cluster of murders took place. By April 11 there were 21 victims.

“The killers were first thought to be Indians or part of a Confederate guerrilla force. But then they left a victim alive — a man hauling lumber near Fairplay, spared because a book in his breast pocket stopped their bullet. His story enabled lawmen to identify the assailants as Felipe Nerio Espinosa, 39, and his brother Vivian Espinosa.

“A posse was organized. After several days, the vigilantes found a camp in the rough terrain of northern Fremont County. They shot and killed Vivian Espinosa, but Felipe escaped. Felipe killed two more people on the way back to his home on the Conejos River in southern Colorado. There he recruited his teen-age nephew, Julio. The killings resumed. By early September, at least 33 people had been slain.

“Finally, the Army hired scout Tom Tobin to halt the Espinosas. Tobin killed them (near La Veta Creek), cut off their heads and presented them to his commanding officer at Fort Garland.

“No one is certain what prompted the reign of terror. Vivian Espinosa left a notebook with accounts of many of the killings and said his patron saint had directed him to atone for the sins of his father, who had been convicted of murder in Mexico. But historians have speculated that the loss of the family’s ancestral lands in New Mexico triggered the killings. (Another account said they had pledged to kill 600 white people in revenge for what they lost in the Mexican war.)

“‘Uncle’ Henry Harkens was memorialized by settlers who changed the name of Sawmill Gulch (or Sawyer’s Cañon) to Dead Man’s Cañon.”

Later buried there were Henry Priest, who as a young boy had helped bury Harkens, and two children of homesteaders: Bennie Legg and Milly Price.

Dead Man's Grave at Fort Carson

Category: Colorado Springs History

Published: Tuesday, 05 May 2009 20:17

Written by Super User

Hits: 11312

The graves were relocated when a hairpin turn on Cañon City Highway was straightened out. Now the graveyard, on a grassy knoll, is on the Army post and maintained by the Fort Carson Cultural Resources Program with assistance from a local group, Keeping History Alive.

Our thanks to Cultural Resources Manager Pamela Miller.