

Durango Doings

Chapter 2: Interesting Historical Facts about Durango

This chapter (like other chapters of this book) is available as a free downloadable e-book in color—at <https://durangogov.org/1369> Sources include the City of Durango’s archives.¹



- Colorado Territorial Governor Alexander Hunt (and an official of the Denver and Rio Grande railroad and of the Durango Trust) gave **Durango** its name, after Durango, Mexico, which he had just visited. There also was a Durango Mine in 1880, which already had a tunnel that was over 300'. The name comes from the Basque word “Urango”, which may mean “watering hole” or “meeting place.” Hunt also named the city of Salida, Colorado.
- The original name of the Animas River is “El Rio de las Animas Perdidas”, which when translated from Spanish means “**The River of Lost Souls.**” The river was named after several Spanish ex-

¹ Informational e-books (guided tours, etc.) and thousands of primary source documents of the City of Durango (ordinances, resolutions, minutes, agendas, etc.) from 1881 to the present are freely available and keyword searchable at <https://durangogov.org/records> To view photos, visit the City’s website at durangogov.org and follow the links for [How Do I...?](#) [View...](#) [City Records](#), and select [Historical Photos](#) as your Search Type. To listen to 22 hours of digitized audio recordings of the *Durango Centennial lecture series, 1980-1981*, change the Search Type to [Historical Audio](#).

plorers were lost while traveling on the river. Their bodies were never found, and the remaining explorers, being devoted Catholics, believed the souls of the lost explorers who had not received last rites could not enter heaven and would be relegated to Purgatory.

- **Animas City** is now part of the City of Durango. Until 1948 it was a separate city. Its southern boundary was north of Junction Street, and it extended northward to 37th Street. In October of 1947 citizens of the town of Animas City and the City of Durango overwhelmingly voted to unite the two municipalities.
- The original Animas City was a log cabin gold mining settlement founded by the Baker Party around 1860, on the west bank of the Animas River. In 1873-1875, Animas City was re-established 12-14 miles south of its original placement, on land owned on both sides of the River by John Fowler, and populated by homesteading tracts. A governing body was established in 1876 for a population of approximately 3,000. The town voted for incorporation on October 5, 1878.
- General Palmer's **Denver & Rio Grande Railroad Company** founded the town of Durango. The Town of Animas City anticipated a boom from the Railroad's San Juan extension, but the residents and businessmen of Animas City raised the asking price for their land. Instead, the Railroad purchased land to the south under various names and built its own city, Durango (established on September 13, 1880), as a mainline depot. The train didn't even stop at Animas City on its way to Silverton. Durango was ideally situated, due to the proximity of water, a fairly good growing season (especially as compared to Silverton), and high-quality low-sulfur coal nearby at Perin's Peak and up Wildcat Canyon. Durango soon became the major shipping point and commercial center in the San Juan Basin, and Animas City began to face obscurity.
- General William Jackson Palmer's men set up the **Durango Trust**, which sold the lands in the Durango town site. The same people were members/officers of the Durango Trust and of the D&RG Railroad. The company officially started the land surveys on September 13, 1880 at 9th and Main and the price of lots quickly jumped in value. Historian Duane Smith said they made a lot of money off the sale of land (they started to post dividends to their investors after just 8 months), but they made a mistake in not surveying all of the land in the valley there. The land between the railroad and the river was not their land and quickly became a no-man's land with squatters and illegal activities. The town itself was planned carefully, using the natural features of the valley going up on benches. Durango was laid out in tiers: Main Avenue (then named 1st Street) and 2nd were intended to be the business streets, though the focus became Main. Second Avenue would have the government buildings and the high school and Third Avenue (initially named The Boulevard) would have the residences and the churches. General Palmer, who was behind all this and came up with the original concept of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, also laid out Colorado Springs, with an avenue similar to Durango's Boulevard.
- Implementation of Durango's city planning has always had its rough spots, however. Duane Smith recounted that some of the people who had thrown up wooden buildings had to use oxen to drag their buildings out of the railroad's right of way.
- Smith also told how **Peter Fassbinder** was the first man outside of the Durango Trust to realize that it was possible to make money on real estate sales. He was in his 40s and was older than most of the settlers (and perhaps wiser). He opened up two subdivisions, from the original high school site down to the river and across the other side to open up what was known as North Durango, and including the later site of the Fish Hatchery, which had good spring water. In the early days the Animas River was not potable; you drank it at your own peril. The taste of the river water changed flavors by the day, due to sewage being dumped into it and dead animals and the residue of mining

in Silverton. Fassbinder would sell a building lot in the Fassbinder Subdivision for \$150, with water provided. He wasn't here to make money *and leave*, though; he built a bridge across the Animas River so people wouldn't have to wade it. His bridge washed away in the 1881 flood, but he rebuilt it. Smith described Fassbinder as the ambitious, never-say-die typical frontiersman, the type of good solid citizens who built up Durango.

- Bob Ayres said **Durango's first water works** drew from this spring that Fassbinder owned. The City sold a barrel of water from the spring at 25 cents a barrel, hauled throughout the town on wagons. The City's first waterworks was a pipeline under the river near the Fish Hatchery to 2nd Avenue and included cisterns located around town to store water. (See Chapter 21, starting on page 403, to read details about the Durango Reservoir Grant that solidified the City's water source via the Florida River.) The City's in-town water storage reservoir was later built on the hill [mesa] where the College was later situated.
- **Durango and Animas City** faced legal issues surrounding both the railroad and water rights for many decades. In 1886, Animas City's town board attempted to press charges against the D&RG Railroad for failing to procure a right of way. Despite several land deeds and attempts to enforce the ordinances, the town declared Durango's land lease for the railroad null and void in 1896. The water rights posed another threat. In 1887, Animas City owned the water rights to Junction Creek and agreed to supply Durango's water for an annual fee of \$3,000, with pre-set limits on water usage and a statute of limitations of twenty years. The cost of laying pipe and maintenance were to be split between the two towns. However, by 1889 Durango was threatening to use the water from Junction Creek regardless of priority rights. Within a few years Junction Creek was no longer a sufficient water source and Animas City wanted to negotiate for a water supply from Durango's established reservoir on the Florida River. As water costs began to rise in 1926 with the installment of a water meter, Animas City struggled to meet the growing demands on its economy. The two municipalities were at an impasse.
- Finally, on October 28, 1947 voters in the Town of Animas City approved a ballot issue in favor of annexation into the City of Durango. By then, each municipality had a need the other could meet: Animas City needed funding for the infrastructure of its utilities services, and Durango needed access to Animas City's sewage treatment plant (which is no longer in existence). Animas City's population was about 500 at the time. 294 citizens voted for the annexation; 114 were opposed to it. Animas City was officially absorbed into Durango by January 1, 1948.
- On October 27, 1942 "the City Manager had informed the Council that he would turn the Sewage of the City into the new Sewage Disposal Plants on Monday Nov. 2nd." The City Council instructed the City Clerk and the City Attorney to write a half-page ad in the *Aztec Independent-Review* and the *Farmington Times Hustler* newspapers stating that "after so long a time Durango had at last completed their sewage disposal plants and **would not be dumping any more raw sewage into the Animas River.**" (Myrle Cornelius, Mayor of Durango in 1975-76 and 1978-79, recalled the sign in Durango bathrooms in the early days: "Please flush the toilet; Aztec needs the water.") The City had been working cleaning up its sewer discharges since September 13, 1938 when Council authorized the City Manager to apply for a federal grant from the Federal Emergency Administration for Public Works. On May 21, 1940 it selected Glenn Izett of Denver to draw up the plans. Sewage problems persisted, nonetheless: on August 7, 1945 four residents asked Council "how much longer the City would be in getting the North Side Sewage Disposal plant in working order as they thought they **would and could not stand the obnoxious odor very much longer.**" The City has continued to improve its wastewater management over the years; in 2003 the City adopted an ordinance regarding illegal discharges into the municipal sewer system

itself. The 2018-2019 Santa Rita sewer plant overhaul has brought the quality of water released from the sewer plant into the Animas to an even higher standard.

- The City's **sewage treatment plant** has been located at Santa Rita since about 1959 (City Council approved a Farmington NM company as the constructor for \$337,314 on Sept. 3, 1958; Dale Rea of Denver, who later became a president of Fort Lewis College, was the engineer). 50 years later, the City was facing the prospect of fines by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment if it did not meet the State's tighter limits for discharges of nutrients such as ammonia, nitrogen and phosphorus from the plant by March 1, 2018; a wholesale replacement of the plant was necessary. After nearly two years of public deliberation and studies, City Council decided to retain that site, and negotiated with Archer Western, the nation's largest builder of wastewater treatment plants, to do the work for under \$60 million, making it the largest public works project in the City's history. Voters approved a bonded debt issue of up to \$68 million in the November 2015 general election, and the State granted the City \$2 million for the project.
- Public toilet facilities were lacking in the early days. This was especially problematic for females. In 1915 the City responded to this need by installing a Public Comfort Station for Women on the first floor of the Century Building on Main Avenue.

- The **Animas River** is one of the last free-flowing rivers in the entire Western US. Its average yearly peak flow through Durango is about 5,000 cubic feet per second. During years of high runoff, the volume has reached 7,000 cfs (around 7,500 in June of 2019). In October of 1911 it peaked at 25,000 cfs, washing out bridges and turning the Animas Valley into a lake.



- The US Bureau of Reclamation constructed **Lake Nighthorse** as part of the Animas-La Plata (ALP) Water Project in Ridges Basin. Since 2007, water is pumped 2.5 miles, 600 feet uphill from the Animas River across from Santa Rita Park to fill and replenish the reservoir, which was named after former US Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell who pushed for the federal funding of the project to satisfy long-standing Indian water rights claims by the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute tribes. It cost a half a billion dollars, some of which was paid to Southern Ute entities who had preference in receiving construction contracts. The dam was topped off on November 9, 2007; it was the largest earthen dam construction project of its time. The reservoir was filled to capacity (123,541 acre-feet) for the first time on June 29, 2011. The lake, just two miles from downtown, covers about 1,500 surface acres and offers a significant recreational amenity to the area. Its 1,927-acre tract was annexed by the City of Durango effective Saturday, March 31, 2018, and was opened to public recreational use, managed by the City, the next day. (For more on this topic, read Chapter 22, starting at page 449.)
- The Lake Nighthorse reservoir is near the massive US Environmental Protection Agency burial site for Durango's **uranium mill tailings**. That federal project (part of a national cleanup effort costing a half a billion dollars) moved 2.5 million cubic yards of low-level radioactive mill tailings uphill towards Ridges Basin from the old mill site at the base of Smelter Mountain on the west bank of the Animas River just south of downtown Durango.

- **Lake Vallecito**, unlike Lake Nighthorse, collects water that is flowing downhill, and solely uses gravity to distribute it to land that is downhill in La Plata County, through a series of nearly 200 miles of privately owned ditches and canals and 150 miles of laterals that were all constructed prior to the dam, which was built in 1937-1940 by the Martin Wunderlich Company of Jefferson City, Missouri, for 2.1 million dollars. In 1938 the Weston Lumber Company of Denver contracted with the government for the purchase and removal of all saleable lumber (an estimated five million board feet) from the Vallecito Reservoir site.



- Durango has always been a **railroad town**. The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad Company (the D&RG--the first of a number of railroads in Durango; the Rio Grande Southern reached to the south and the west; the "Apple Line" went to Aztec and Farmington) founded the town of Durango in 1880, and finished building the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad to Silverton by July of 1882. Laborers were paid an average of \$2.25/day.
- Bob Ayres talked about the celebrations of the arrival of the railroad in Durango from Alamosa. The first telegraph lines (an enterprise of the D&RG) reached Durango on July 30, 1881. The D&RG sent a telegram that the railroad would reach Durango on August 1st, 1881 and that there would be a giant celebration on the 5th. The Governor arrived a day early and participated in the ceremonies, starting with a parade to the fairgrounds at the corner of 5th Avenue and 10th Street. The ladies of Durango put on a free barbecue of five oxen and a dozen sheep, two wagonloads of bread and biscuits, and four barrels of coffee, which was followed by races at the fairgrounds. Others coming from Alamosa were delayed by flooded rivers, so they did the whole thing over again the next day, after the rest of the honored guests had arrived.

- Throughout the course of many years the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad carried over three hundred million dollars in precious metals.
- In the beginning of the 20th century the region's railroad system faced many challenges; slides, floods, snow, war, and financial instability. When the US Government entered World War I, it assumed operation of the railroads for a time.



- During World War II the US Government requisitioned narrow gauge equipment from Durango to use in Alaska, and the Durango smelter re-opened. That smelter, which originally (1880-1930) processed lead, produced vanadium from 1942 to 1946, and then uranium from 1949 through 1963, for national defense programs in connection with the Cold War. Uranium mining had begun in the southwestern and western regions of Colorado in 1947, to supply raw materials for nuclear weapons and nuclear energy.
- The coal-fired, steam-operated locomotives used to pull today's train were manufactured between 1923 and 1925.
- The roundhouse burned on February 10, 1989. The fire destroyed the roundhouse and damaged six of the locomotives. Nevertheless, the train ran as scheduled that year, starting in May.



- The Durango depot looks the same as it did when it was constructed in 1882. It is a National Historic Landmark.
- The last trip of old Rio Grande Southern railroad (including the Galloping Goose rail car) through Wildcat Canyon from Hesperus to Mancos, Dolores, Rico and Telluride was in December of 1951.



- [The Iron Horse Bicycle Classic](#) began in 1972, and is the longest continuously run cycling event in the U.S. Road

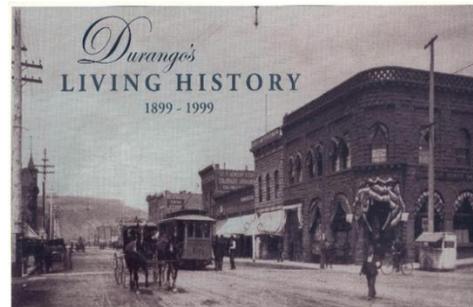


bikers race the Durango-Silverton Train to Silverton on the Memorial Day weekend.

- In 1913 the City of Durango hired a **dog catcher**, and allowed him to keep a dollar (paid by the dog's owner) for each arrest he made for violation of the City's dog license ordinance. In 1915 Mr. J. C. Rawlins was allowed five dollars a month as the City **Pound Keeper** and was instructed to drive all foreign horses

out of the City.

- Durango's first official **post office** opened on January 3, 1881. Until then (as Bob Ayres tells the story) a courier off of the train from Alamosa would deliver mail to the store owned by Harry Schiffer, who had a little box at the back of his store for the courier to dump the mail in, where anyone could go to look for mail. Schiffer's store was on "Railroad Avenue," behind First National Bank at 9th and Main, which was the **first bank** to open in Durango (1882) and the longest continuously operating business here until 2018 when it was bought up by TBK Bank of Texas for \$134.4 million.



- The **Durango Suburban and Street Railway** operated from Durango through Animas City to 32nd Street from 1896 until 1921. It was another venture of the Durango Trust (which was later named the Durango Land and Coal Company and continued into the 1910s). Bob Ayres tells that the streetcar originally was drawn by horses or mules and only went from the train depot north to the Animas River (near where the stone bridge of Main Avenue now crosses the river). Later on, it was extended by T. C. Graden and Mr. Dwyer (a rancher raising food for miners locally), adding the Dwyer track from Junction Creek north on the west side of Main Street to extend the line to Brookside (across from the current location of Durango High School) and subsequently to Animas City, after the Animas City town fathers originally said they wouldn't have it. There was a place in the 1700 block of Main Avenue for the streetcars to pass through Animas City to the terminal which was between 32nd Street and the Silver Spur Motel, just north of there.

- Art Wyatt recounted that a man who warned about the danger of the electrical poles being so close to the tracks died after leaning out of a streetcar window and hitting one.

- The first **automobile** in Durango arrived by train in 1902. Duane Smith talked about how the first cars were only used in spring, summer and fall, and how they sped from Durango to Trimble Hot Springs through Animas City (about 9 miles, on gravel roads). The speeds were published in the newspaper. Motorists sped through Animas City like a cloud of dust. They got it down to about 18 minutes. The people of



Animas City were displeased with this continued disdain for their town's peace by turning their main thoroughfare into a race track, and in about 1906 the Durango newspaper published a warning that Animas City had become a speed trap; motorists who sped through their town were liable to be arrested and fined.

- In May of 1910 May Durango's City Council established speed limits of 10 MPH in the business district and 18 MPH elsewhere.
- The City Council minutes of June 18, 1912 noted that there were many alleged speeding violations by "autoists." The City Marshal was authorized to rent a stop watch for 30 days or for as long as he needed, to enable him to enforce the speed ordinances and arrest the offenders.
- Durango didn't have its first traffic police until May of 1927, when City Council authorized the City Manager to put on an extra policeman who would furnish his own motorcycle. The City would provide the gas and oil and pay him up to \$110 a month. For one month, the City would try to enforce a new ordinance to regulate street traffic and automobile signals.
- In 1910 the Durango City Council approved the first Durango automobile licenses, issued to Dara C. White and The Pioneer Consolidated Company.
- Construction of the **highway** connecting Durango, Silverton and Ouray ("the Million Dollar Highway") began in 1917.
- By 1951, commercial traffic through the Central Business District on Main Avenue had become so heavy, the City built a Truck Bypass (much later renamed Camino del Rio) closer to the river, meeting up with Main at 14th Street, using thousands of yards of gravel from Burnett Construction to gravel the road 18" deep as per State Highway Department standards.
- In 2008 voters at City of Durango election approved \$17.6M indebtedness for the **Florida Road Reconstruction Project** bond issue. The road officially re-opened on June 20, 2011. It was (at the time) the largest City-funded public works project in Durango's history. The City's repayment cost was about \$1.3M per year for 20 years; the maximum total repayment cost, including interest, was about \$30M. This was in addition to the City's \$26.3M library construction bond issue in 2007 and the indebtedness to replace the wastewater treatment plant.
- Durango was one of the first municipalities in the U.S. to adopt the **Council/Manager form of government**—by charter election on September 3, 1912. A. F. Hood became the first City Manager of the City of Durango in 1915. He was an undertaker by profession (Hood Mortuary). (For more details about that, including primary source documents, see Chapter 8 on page 137.)
- As recalled on a nearby wall mural on the side of the El Rancho Tavern, heavyweight champion **Jack Dempsey** fought Andy Malloy on October 7, 1915 at the Jarvis Suites Hotel. Dempsey, born in southern Colorado, became the heavyweight boxing champion in 1919. Previously, he had arrived in Durango in a black limousine for the funeral service of his sister, Stella Dempsey, who worked as a prostitute at the Strater Hotel and died of suicide in 1910 (her gravestone is Item 60 on our *Biographical Walking Tour of Greenmount Cemetery*).
- **Purgatory Resort**, 25 miles north of Durango, began as the Purgatory Ski Area in 1965 as a venture by dozens of Durango businessmen. Purgatory Creek is near Lift 4 at the ski area. A previous owner had changed its name to Durango Mountain Resort in 2000; in 2015 the next owner reverted its name to Purgatory Resort and celebrated its 50th anniversary.

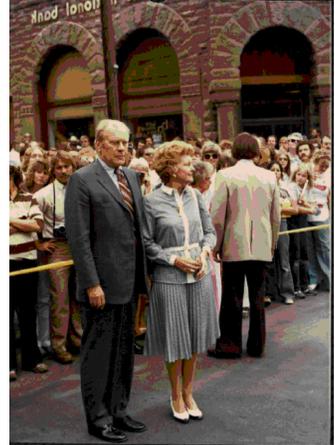
- In 1918 City Council passed an ordinance prohibiting the speaking of the German language in any public building or on any public street or alley in Durango, and also adopted Ordinance #557, requiring all males ages 18 to 55 to engage in some useful occupation.
- The flu epidemic ("Spanish influenza") hit the region in 1918-1919; 5 of every 75 people died. 10 percent of the population of the town of Silverton died in just six weeks. (You can read more about it in Chapter 14 on page 263, and print out the Greenmount Cemetery walking tour of flu-era burials in Chapter 16, starting at page 313.)
- In 1920 the population of the city of Durango dropped to 4,116.
- In 1929 the City selected Reservoir Hill (the later site of Fort Lewis College) for the Durango **airport**. The City bought 600+ acres of land there from various owners.
- When The Great Depression hit Durango in 1931, the City responded by spending \$1,200 on street work, paying 45 men so they could provide for their families. They earned \$3.20 for working an eight-hour day.
- In 1935 the nationally known humorist Will Rogers and newspaper correspondent Wiley Post flew into Durango and stayed at the Strater Hotel. Mr. Rogers quipped about Durango being off the beaten path, and proud of it. They died in a plane crash in Alaska several weeks later as they were headed for Asia. Apparently their airplane ran out of gas.
- In 1936 City Council agreed to fence the airport grounds on Reservoir Hill as soon as possible, "on account of livestock roaming, and automobiles running at random on the Airport grounds making it unsafe for the taking off or landing of Airplanes."
- In 1946 the Durango municipal airport started its move from Reservoir Hill to the Southern Ute Reservation. City Council adopted a resolution to pay \$12,000 to John Cameron for 420 acres located on Ute Indian lands about 12 miles south of the City of Durango, as the site for the new Durango airport. The City abandoned the municipal airport on Reservoir Hill in 1952.
- In 1954 City Council agreed to convey to the State Board of Agriculture 193 acres on Reservoir Hill (former site of the former municipal airport) for the use of the branch of the Fort Lewis Agricultural College at Durango, for a symbolic sum of \$8,400. The agreement states that if the lands ever cease to be used for educational purposes, the City has the right and option to purchase the lands, "together with all improvements thereon situate and all rights and privileges thereunto appertaining, for the sum of \$8,400 cash in hand."
- **Fort Lewis College** has its origins in a boarding school for Indian children, located on the Southern Ute Reservation about 16 miles southwest of Durango. It opened with 51 students in March of 1892 (shortly after Fort Lewis closed as a U.S. military base), with the stated purpose of educating and "civilizing" Indians. The 51 children ranged from kindergarten through 6th grade, and were Navajo, Ute, Sioux, and Apache.
- Fort Lewis College moved to Durango in 1956. The enrollment that fall on Reservoir Hill was 384 students (238 full-time and 146 part-time). The Old Fort Lewis College campus at Hesperus began to be used as an agricultural experiment station.



- The first **school** in Durango met in the Episcopal Church, and then met in the four-room Longfellow School in February of 1882, with about 30 students at first.
- In 1960 the population of the city of Durango jumped to 10,530.
- Some of today's older residents of Durango were born in the Ochsner **Hospital** on the corner of 8th Street and 5th Avenue (now the Gable House Bed and Breakfast). Luis Silva and Dr. Leo Lloyd recounted how the hospital was on three floors, accessed by a spiral staircase. Surgery and delivery were on the top floor, in the same room, in the cupola. Two of Dr. Lloyd's children were born in the cupola. The Auxiliary made lined orange crates for the babies. A fireman or a policeman helped to carry the patient up the stairs to surgery, strapped to a stretcher. Pregnant women walked up to be delivered. OB patients' legs were kept tied together and held that way for 10 days (presumably, after the delivery). Nurses would start work at 4 a.m. to stoke the furnace, and would check alcoholic patients' boots for liquor bottles. Ochsner Hospital closed in 1958, after having been sold to La Plata County in 1946 by Drs. Martin and Lloyd when they were drafted into the Armed Service. They had bought it from Dr. Ochsner in 1936 with nothing down because it was the Depression and nobody wanted to take on a medical partner in those days, and Ochsner wanted to leave to go hunting in Mexico. They paid off a third of the debt in the first three months. It had 30 beds; better class patients were on the first floor. Dr. Lloyd described how patients paid in produce, though never the best quality, always second grade. Hospital staff were also paid in produce and chickens, because there was no money. When one person came, the whole family came, and stayed in the quarters on the back of the hospital.
- Dr. Lloyd, M.D., delivered 4,500 babies in the Four Corners region; that was the population of Durango when he arrived.
- Former Mercy Hospital administrator Mike Lawler told how Durango's Mercy Hospital has its origins with the Sisters of Mercy, a Catholic charity that was originated in the late 19th century to care for men in the mining camps of western Colorado. Four Sisters crossed the continental U.S. and opened the hospital in 1882, just four months after they reached Durango. The Sisters had to carry water in and out until they had private water in the 1890s and a steam heating system. They traveled by horseback to beg for small donations to sustain the hospital, and did fundraising carnivals and picnics. Patients bartered chickens and produce for medical care. The Sisters came up with a plan to charge each miner \$1 a day for all the health care he wanted.
- Due to L. L. Nunn's pioneering development of the use of alternating current at the water-powered Ames power plant near Telluride in 1881, Durango, along with other southwestern Colorado towns, was one of the first in the nation to have city lights. The Western Colorado Power Company made progress with **electrification** of the entire region in 1937.
- The City operated a sanitary landfill (i.e., dump) uphill/west of the Bodo Industrial Park site from 1967 until around 1987; it is now covered and naturally vegetated.
- In 1944 the City Clerk received signatures in support of an application by A. F. Christopherson for a beer, wine and spirituous liquors license for the El Rancho Tavern. Signers included Earl Barker, Nels, Newman, and Durango Mayor John Fankhauser. El Rancho apparently "takes the cake" for having a City of Durango liquor license for the longest time (to the present day).
- In December of 1945 the City wrote a letter of protest to the Commanding Officer of the 2nd Air Force at Peterson Field, Colo. Springs "in regard to the B-17 Bomber flying over the City of Durango at a very low and dangerous altitude."

- **Caroline Romney** published Durango's first **newspaper** using a small used job shop printing press that had been purchased by Territorial Governor Hunt from the Leadville Clipper. The first issue of the weekly (every Saturday) *Durango Record* was produced in a tent on December 29, 1880 (because no building was available for rent or purchase) after shoveling out a foot of snow and adding sawdust for the flooring. It contained an account of two shooting scrapes that day.
- Durango Herald publisher Morley Ballantine recounted that Mrs. Romney reached Durango after traveling 350 miles by rail and 150 miles by wagon over Cumbres Pass at Alta, where the track to Durango was being laid at that time, by way of Chama, New Mexico, three days and three nights and at least 30 stream crossings (no bridges existed except of ice) to Durango from the end of the track. Romney was a widow when she arrived in Durango.
- Romney is described as having snapping eyes, a witty tongue, tireless energy, a good business head, and a nose for news. Fearing nothing that walked or flew, she gathered news on the streets and dashed back and forth to her press. She faithfully paid her workmen every Saturday night.
- Romney became unpopular by her reporting on activities of a gang of about 20 desperadoes known as the Stockton/Eskridge gang who had been rustling cattle, jumping claims and otherwise misbehaving, and finally murdered a man from Farmington. A number of Farmington cowboys rode up to Durango to get revenge for his murder; they arrived on Sunday evening April 10, 1881, just in time to see Henry Moorman (a murderer) being lynched by a Committee of Safety, a masked gang of 300, who hanged him from a big pine tree behind where Brown's Shoe Fit is now. The Farmington cowboys saw it and kept right on going around Durango to Animas City, but were recognized by members of the Stockton/Eskridge gang the next day somewhere near 2nd Avenue on their attempted return to Farmington, and two were wounded in a nearly hour-long battle. One of the bullets went through Romney's building. The Eskridge boys left town after City officials issued warrants for them and told them to get out of town. The Stockton boys both died in subsequent shooting scrapes. Romney refused to make a retraction of what she had published in the *Record* about these events. She also deplored the air pollution from the smelters--although a common thought in the first half of Durango's history was that if the smelters weren't belching smoke, the mills were closed and men were not earning wages.
- On January 10, 1881 the Durango Record moved to a building on 2nd Avenue and began issuing a 7-column daily newspaper. The Durango Herald, described as "a straight-out Republican [sic] newspaper" in those days, purchased the Record in 1882.
- Morley Ballantine noted that Ms. Romney only stayed in Durango from December 1880 to 1883, eventually dying of a nervous breakdown in 1914 occasioned by her work.
- The Durango Herald was originally called the *Durango Democrat* in the 1880s. Its printing press was buried under the concrete of the walk-in cooler of Carver's Restaurant. Its outspoken editor Dave Day had a running feud with the D&RG.
- The original corner portion of the **Strater Hotel** was built in 1887, by a young man, Henry Strater, who was a pharmacist. He started to build the Strater at age 20 (subsequent owner Earl Barker tells how Strater lied about his age to get a building permit). Many of the hotel's early customers were miners, trappers, explorers and peddlers who arrived by train and were met by wagons from each hotel, hoping to recruit business.
- [The Diamond Belle Saloon](#) at the Strater opened its doors in 1957. There is a bullet hole in the far east drawer behind the bar.

- Louis L'Amour wrote the Sackett Series, a set of western novels, while staying at The Strater Hotel. His room was on the second floor, above the Diamond Belle.
- The Diamond Circle Melodrama did its first production in 1962. Long before that, Tom Thumb performed in the Strater Opera House (later site of the restaurant)—which never had an opera.
- The Colorado State Democratic Convention was held in Durango in June of 1960; it was one of the first big events held at Fort Lewis College. Presidential candidate Senator John F. Kennedy was the keynote speaker, at the Strater Hotel.



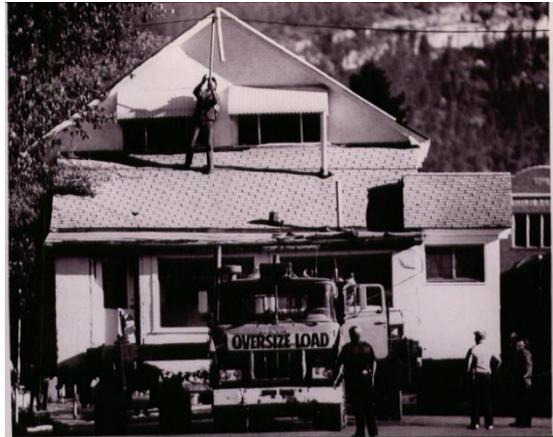
- **President** Gerald Ford helped Durango celebrate its centennial on August 13, 1980. So far, his has been the sole US Presidential visit. He dedicated the Animas Museum in the morning and the Main Avenue Historic District in the afternoon, followed by the dedication of the Hillcrest Municipal Golf Course Expansion ceremony, with USGA President Will Nicholson also participating. The City's digitized recordings of the events are all available at durangogov.org in the Historical Audio along with a few oral histories.
- Duane Smith explained how **Durango's first buildings** were erected quickly. A frame building in the 1880s was not insulated and had no plumbing or electricity, and may not have been painted.
- The original 1881 plan was to have the central business district built of brick and stone (which earned lower rates of insurance, and greater fire protection) but in the rush of the spurt of growth the city's planners had to scrap that requirement. That decision had ramifications in 1882 (as described below) and in 1889 when "a terrific conflagration swept over the business portion of the town, completely wiping out eight blocks and eating into several others" along Main Avenue and beyond. After the 1889 fire, many of the buildings in [historic downtown Durango](#) were constructed with stone and brick, to comply with an ordinance City Council adopted afterwards.
- Frank A. Shry has chronicled the history of Durango fires and the fire department (available in the Histories at durangogov.org), which began with the use of volunteers as early as 1881. Its establishment was accelerated by the 1882 Durango fire that took out 60 or so buildings from 9th Street, including theaters and other structures in the Red Light District. Soon after that, the Fire Department positioned cisterns and bought a steam pumper to pump water from the river into the cisterns, and installed a gravity-fed water system in 1884/1885. It eventually became a paid fire department, the third in the State of Colorado and the first on the Western Slope, and built the fire station where the City Hall parking lot is now. One Saturday night some pranksters laid a telephone pole across 2nd Avenue at the Elks Club. The bay horses that were pulling the fire wagon saw the pole and jumped it, but the wagon got hung up on it.
- In August of 1974, Durango's worst fire in recent memory destroyed buildings on the west side of 800 block of Main Avenue, where the Durango Main Mall was built.
- **City Hall** at 949 East 2nd Avenue was built in 1963 (the old one was demolished). The new building (shown here under construction on 6/10/1963) had/has no



insulation—just two layers of brick and no crawl space below.

- The City has been posting notices and statements on a bulletin board in front of City Hall for 105 years (the practice started in December of 1913).

- In 1990, the "Old Willis House" was moved from the lot south of City Hall, bound for its new location at 1033 Avenida del Sol. The house would become the new Durango community shelter, "a haven for 20 homeless people." The lot south of City Hall became a parking lot for City employees.



- A number of well-known **movies** were filmed in Durango, including *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), *City Slickers* (1991), *Ticket to Tomahawk* (1950), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956), *Night Passage* (1957), *How the West Was Won* (1962), *True Grit* (1969), and *Cliffhanger* (1993). Also, *The Scarlet West* (1925), *Across the Wide Missouri* (1951), *Denver and Rio Grande* (1952), *The Naked Spur* (1953), *Three Young Texans* (1954), *Run For Cover* (1955), *The Maverick Queen* (1956), *Downhill Racer* (1969), *The Good Guys and the Bad Guys* (1969), *Support Your Local Gunfighter* (1971), *Avalanche* (1978), *Vacation* (1983), and *The Prestige* (2006). Twenty-one movies in all—and that's not all of them.

- Railroad conductor Alva Lyons recounted the difficulties of getting Paul Newman onto his horse at the Florida River east of Durango in the filming of *Ticket to Tomahawk*. He just couldn't get on. At Lyons' suggestion, a bit of a trench was dug so that the horse would be lower, so that the actor could get on. He still couldn't get on. Everyone laughed, including Newman. Next, they placed a box, disguised as grass by a green rug, alongside the horse. He still couldn't get on. After all was said and done, Hollywood cut out all of that footage anyway, and only showed Newman riding three miles away, going over the hill.

- On the topic of riders: **Olga Little** was one of Durango's notable female pioneers and its most famous mule skinner (also referred to as a muleteer). Using her burros, she brought supplies to mines in the San Juan Mountains of Southwestern Colorado, and brought ore back. She freighted with a wagon and teams and a big bobsled. Little charged \$5/ton for transporting coal on burros, in three 70-pound sacks, one on each side and one on top of the animal.



Sources: Online City of Durango records (including photos, audio histories, ordinances, resolutions, and minutes of the Durango City Council), at <http://durangogov.org/records>
 Historical notes by Todd Ellison in Fort Lewis College Southwest Studies Center collection inventories at http://swcenter.fortlewis.edu/finding_aids.shtml
<http://www.durango.org/durango-area/fun-facts.aspx>
<http://www.durangotrain.com/history>