

Morgan County

Morgan County, a medium sized county by Colorado standards, is located on the high plains of Northeastern Colorado approximately 80 miles northeast of Denver. It is 36 miles square, the only square county in Colorado, containing 1296 square miles of mixed short grass prairie, sand hills, and river bottoms.

The South Platte River roughly bisects the county from west to east. The river is and was the controlling geographic factor for much of the past and present human activity and settlement in Morgan County. The Native Americans of the Arapahoe, Southern Cheyenne, Lakota, and Pawnee Tribes used the river valley as a migration corridor and the uplands as buffalo hunting grounds. The area along the river and its tributaries also was a resource for plants and animals not found on the prairie. Water worn and polished stone tools and projectile points are still found in the river gravels.

The first Europeans to travel through Morgan County were likely fur hunting mountain men following the river to its headwaters in the Rocky Mountains to hunt the beaver found there.

With the discovery of gold in the mountains and the founding of Denver in the 1860s the South Platte valley became a major corridor from the Oregon Trail in Nebraska to the “Pikes Peak” goldfields and Denver City. To avoid Indian attacks along the Oregon Trail in Wyoming the Overland Trail was established. Its route ran through Morgan County along the South Platte. Many immigrants and passengers on the Overland Stage Line heading for Oregon, California, the Mormon settlements in Utah, as well as the “diggings” of the Rocky Mountain goldfields passed through Morgan County on the way to their destinations.

The relative quiet and safety for immigrants on the Overland Trail did not last. By 1864 the Indian attacks had become common enough to justify the establishment of a military post at the present site of the City of Fort Morgan to protect the travelers and to suppress the hostile Indian war parties. The post was known successively as Camp Tyler, Camp Wardwell, and, finally, as Fort Morgan in honor of Colonel Christopher A. Morgan. The fort was located on the bluffs on the south side of the river about a quarter of a mile east of the present Main Street exit (Exit 80) on Interstate 76. Nothing remains today except a granite monument. An unusual aspect of the fort is that it was constructed and partially garrisoned by “galvanized Yankees.” These were Civil War Confederate prisoners of war who had agreed to join the Union Army on the condition that they would not be required to fight their former comrades in arms. Regiments of these “US Volunteers” were recruited in eastern prisoner of war camps and were sent west to provide security on the western trails and to fight Indians which in turn allowed other Union volunteer and regular troops to be sent east to fight the Confederates.

By 1867 the Indian threat to travel on the Overland Trail had subsided and Fort Morgan was abandoned by the Army and its buildings sold to civilians.

The increased security from Indian attacks led to the start of permanent civilian settlement in Morgan County with the establishment of large and small ranches and the beginning of homesteading along the river and its tributaries in the 1870s. The Goodnight-Loving cattle trail which brought herds of cattle from west Texas to Wyoming and Montana crossed Morgan County from south to north and passed near the present city of Brush.

By the early 1880s railroads reached Morgan County, the Union Pacific on the north side of the river and Missouri and Colorado Railroad (now the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad) on the south side. The railroads brought the opportunity of settlement by many more settlers and homesteaders and with them came the concept of irrigated agriculture. The Fort Morgan Canal, built to supply up to 25,000 acres with irrigation water, was completed in 1884 and the town of Fort Morgan was founded in the same year. Most of the present towns in Morgan County began as railroad towns. Hillrose, Brush, Fort Morgan, and Wiggins were established along the present BNSF route and Snyder, Weldona, Goodrich, and Orchard grew up along the UP line.

The increased settlement justified the organization of Morgan County with the county seat at Fort Morgan from a portion of Weld County in 1889.

Irrigated agriculture supported by canals and homesteading continued through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this time agriculture became, and remains, the primary economic basis of Morgan County.

The early 20th century saw a major increase in sugar beets as a crop and the building of sugar processing plants in both Fort Morgan and Brush. The Western Sugar Company, seeking farmers with experience in the raising and harvesting of sugar beets, sent immigration agents to Russia where they recruited ethnic Germans, whose ancestors had immigrated from Germany to Russia in the 18th century, to immigrate again, this time to America. Many Morgan County families trace their roots to these “Volga Germans.”

Morgan County sent a significant percentage of its young men into military service in World Wars I and II. During World War II a glider pilot training facility was based in Fort Morgan. The pilots who trained there flew their unpowered, aluminum tube and fabric aircraft in the airborne assaults in Normandy, Holland, and Germany.

The 20th century saw the start of exploration for and production of oil and natural gas in Morgan County. “Booms” of various sizes came in the 1920s, 1950s, 1970s, and a resurgence of activity in the first decade of the 21st century. Oil and gas production peaked in the 1970s and has declined since that time but enhanced recovery techniques and some new production insure that there will be some production well into the present century.

After weathering the depression and the dust bowl years agriculture has continued to expand and diversify in Morgan County. Crops grown include corn, sugar beets, winter wheat, onions, sun flowers, and millet. Irrigation techniques have also evolved with the

introduction of center pivot sprinklers, utilization of ground water, and augmentation of ground water return flows to the South Platte River. Dry land crops, particularly winter wheat, are generally grown without irrigation. Animal husbandry has changed since the early open range grazing of the 19th century. Morgan County is home to a number of cattle feed lots, ranging in size from a few hundred head to tens of thousands of animals in a single operation. During the 1990s and the early 21st century new dairy operations opened and existing dairies expanded.

The agriculture processing industry is also significant in the county. This industry includes beef slaughter and processing, cheese production, sugar beet refining, and milk processing and condensation.

Morgan County has become a major energy center with the construction of the coal fired Pawnee Power Plant (500 megawatt capacity) in the 1970s, the natural gas fueled Manchief Plant (300 mw) in the 1990s), and the natural gas fueled Co-Generation Plant (150 mw), which also uses its waste heat to heat green houses raising hydroponic tomatoes. Several ethanol production plants have been proposed. Natural gas, produced elsewhere, is stored underground at several sites.

Morgan County has progressed from being merely part of the journey to somewhere else to a place offering its residents unique and exciting opportunities. It has all the advantages of small town and rural living while urban amenities are little more than an hour's drive away. Few places can offer such a combination.