

# Friendfield Turkey Farm

Woodland Park, Colorado

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In the 1930s there was a large commercial turkey farm business that thrived in our area. The 301 acre Friendfield Turkey Farm was located on the east side of Woodland Park where Grace Episcopal Church's Thunderbird Ranch Camp was later located. The acreage also included the area where Gateway Elementary and the Woodland Park High School grounds are today and additionally stretched down to the Woodland Park Cemetery.



**Friendfield Turkey Farm, Woodland Park, Colorado**



*Laura & Betsy's 301 acre farm outlined in blue*

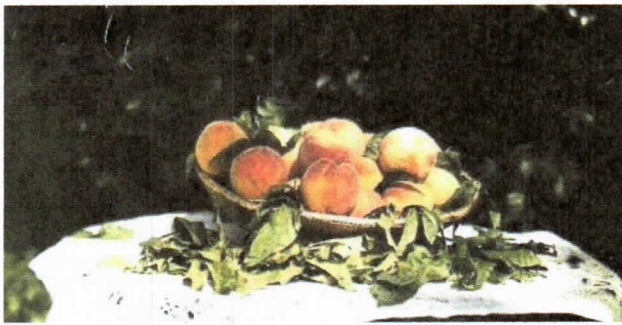
Thousands of turkeys were raised here in Woodland Park and shipped all across the United States during the years they were in business. According to a news article of the time, *"the high altitude, sunshine, shade, cool nights and expert feeding have combined to produce birds of exceptional quality...."*

Friendfield Turkey Farm was established by two Colorado Springs ladies, Miss Laura Gilpin and Miss Elizabeth "Betsy" Forster. Back in those days, the two women had to keep their love for one another hidden due to a strict intolerance and narrow-mindedness towards gays. The name "Friendfield" was used for the farm as it came from Betsy's heritage in South Carolina where her grandfather, Dr. Alexis Forster, III, ran the Friendfield Plantation.

The map to the left shows the roughed in blue outline of the 301 acre Friendfield Turkey Farm. This acreage originally was the James Baldwin Homestead. The Baldwin Family are known as the "founders" of Woodland Park.

# The Life of Laura Gilpin & Betsy Forster

Laura Gilpin was born in Colorado Springs on April 22, 1891. Her father Frank was a pioneer resident of Colorado Springs. He was a miner, rancher and was known throughout Colorado and the West for his handmade, hand carved furniture of rare woods. The family was well known in the high society circles of Broadmoor and Colorado Springs including friendships with Charles Tutt and the Spencer Penrose family. In the early 19 teens, Frank was owner of the 1800 acre "Figure Four Ranch" near Austin, Colorado but maintained his Colorado Springs home. For a time, Frank was also the manager of his friend Dr. Wm. Bell's Manitou Park Hotel north of Woodland Park.



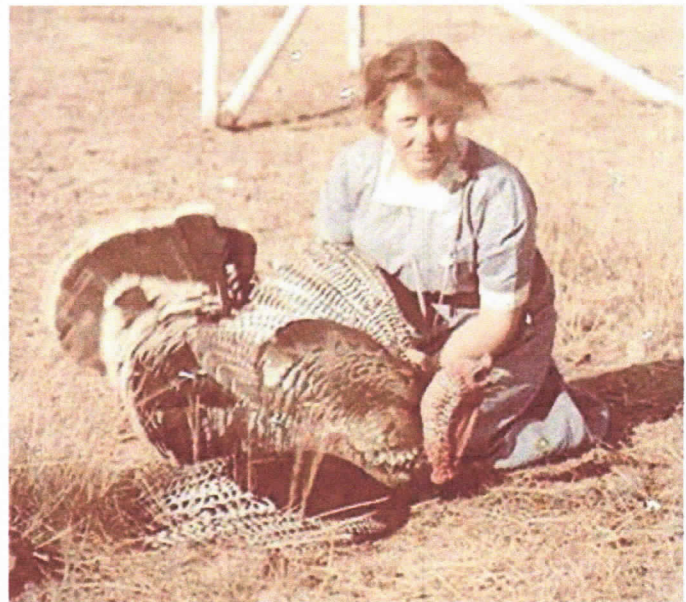
"Peaches", a 1912 Autochrome by 21 yr. old Laura

Laura became interested in photography when she got her first camera, a Kodak "Brownie" on her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday followed by a developing tank that Christmas. These gifts initiated her lifelong passion for photography. However her mother encouraged Laura to study music and enrolled her in the New England Conservatory of Music from 1904 until 1908 (13 years to 17 years old). Despite that education, she decided her life's path should be in photography after all. When Laura returned to

Colorado Springs in 1909 (18 years old) she refined her photographic techniques and taught herself how to photograph using the autochrome process. In 1909 she was professionally producing autochrome still-life's and portraits taken in and around Colorado.



At 22 years of age (1913) Laura needed to subsidize her photography career. So she borrowed \$600 and started her first poultry business (Woodland Park was her second) at the family ranch in Austin. She started with 400 turkeys and that business ended up being a huge success. Two years later she sold it for a reported \$10,000.



Laura posing with one of her live turkeys

That same year of 1915, the Gilpin's attended the Panama-Pacific Exhibition in San Francisco and the Panama-California Exhibition in San Diego. This family vacation renewed her interest in photography. So with the profits from her poultry business she enrolled at the Clarence White School of Photography in New York City which she attended from 1916 to 1917 (25 & 26 years old). Laura left the White school only because of contacting a severe case of influenza in the beginning days of the 1918 Spanish Influenza Pandemic, coming back home to Colorado. At her parents' home in Colorado Springs, Laura suffered from a heart lesion brought on by her bout with the flu. So her mother hired a nurse to care for 27 year old Laura, that nurse was 32 year

old Elizabeth "Betsy" Forster. Betsy was a director for the Cragmor Sanatorium and president of the Visiting Nurses Association. The two women fell in love and among other travels together, would often stay at the Gilpin Family cabin in Woodland Park.

In 1919, fully recovered from the flu, Laura began her career in earnest. She started up a studio in the new arts center at 30 W. Dale Street (today's Fine Arts Center). By now Laura's photography skills were well acclaimed with exhibits in the U.S. and overseas. In 1920 she made her first trip to New Mexico and that started her relationship with the Navajo's and her documentation of them and the Southwestern landscape.



In 1925 she started up the Gilpin Publishing Company in Colorado Springs producing two books on photography, "The Pikes Peak Region" and "Mesa Verde National Park". During World War II, Gilpin was publicity director for Boeing Aircraft in Wichita, Kansas, where through her photography she promoted Boeing and discovered aerial photography.

Laura went on to become one of the most prolific female photographers of the 20th century with a career spanning over 70 years. She has 10 of her photos permanently housed in the Library of

Congress and to this day is still regarded as the only significant woman landscape photographer of her era. Ansel Adams referred to Laura as "one of the important photographers of our time."

The Amon Carter Museum of American Art of Fort Worth, Texas holds over 6,000 prints and about 20,000 negatives by Laura.

Laura died on the Navajo Reservation on November 30, 1979 and is buried in Colorado Springs' Evergreen Cemetery.



Laura's 1974 "Navajo woman with corn"

Elizabeth “Betsy” Forster was born on December 23, 1886 in Georgetown, South Carolina. Her parents, Charles and Fairinda Forster were very well known and respected. Betsy’s mother Fairinda was distantly related to George Washington and her father Charles was a 1874 graduate of the Virginia Military Institute.

Her grandfather was Dr. Alexius Forster, III. Dr. Forster was a large South Carolina plantation owner before the Civil War. Immediately prior to the War, he was a signer of the Ordinance of Secession which enabled South Carolina to succeed from the Union in 1860. During the war, he was a 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant with the 7th Battalion, South Carolina Reserves (Confederacy). According to the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Dr. Forster for a while owned the Friendfield Plantation which is a 3,305-acre property whose history dates ca. 1750 until 1946. First Lady Michelle Obama’s great-great-grandfather was a slave on this plantation.



*Betsy, August of 1946*

Betsy enrolled in nursing courses at Union Memorial Hospital of Baltimore, Maryland and graduated in 1912 at the age of 26. She then went on and furthered her nursing education at Johns Hopkins University where she studied public health nursing.

After John Hopkins, in 1913, Forster was hired by the Visiting Nurse Association in Colorado Springs and after two years was made a nursing supervisor. FYI, Visiting Nurse Association was Colorado’s first home healthcare agency and still exists today and is Colorado’s oldest and largest home health care provider.



*Mrs. John Billy teaching Betsy to weave, 1932*

It was while employed at the VNA during the flu pandemic that Laura Gilpin’s mother Emma hired Betsy to care for Laura. The two ladies really hit it off together and developed a deep friendship. At the end of 1918 with Laura now fully recovered, Betsy left to work briefly for the Red Cross but maintained her relationship with Laura. She returned to Colorado Springs in 1919 and resumed her employment with the VNA as a supervisor.

In 1930 Betsy and Laura went on a camping trip out west. While motoring their Buick through the Navajo Reservation they happened to run out of gas so Betsy stayed with the car while Laura started walking to find a filling station. While Laura was gone, a group of Navajo’s found Betsy with the stranded car and gave her water and kept her company until Laura came back. They

instantly developed a friendship with one another, a bond that would remain with both Betsy and Laura for the rest of their lives.

Betsy continued to work at the VNA until 1931 when she took a position as a public health nurse in Red Rock, Arizona for the New Mexico Bureau of Indian Affairs. Laura also moved there to live with Betsy and photograph her and her work with the Navajo's. That job lasted until 1933 when she returned to Colorado and went to work with the Emergency Recovery Administration in Fairplay, Colorado working there until January of 1936. The ERA was a Federal program established by President Roosevelt in 1933 and was dissolved in December of 1935.

However, in 1935 both Betsy and Laura were living at the Gilpin Family cabin in Woodland Park while Betsy worked in Fairplay. Even though the Great Depression had ended in 1933, the couple



Elizabeth plucking a turkey at their Woodland Park farm

### **Raised by Two Women**

these choice turkeys show that Thanksgiving is just around the corner. Three years ago two well-known Colorado Springs women, Miss Laura Gilpin and Miss Elizabeth Foster, surprised their friends and poultrymen by launching into the turkey business on a 100-acre ranch near Woodland Park with the idea of producing quality birds. This year they are preparing to market 1,500 birds, declared by experts to be among the finest ever raised anywhere. The high altitude, sunshine, shade, cool nights and expert feeding have combined to produce birds of exceptional quality and this year many a Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Years dinner on the eastern seaboard will have as the chief dish Friendfield turkeys. Miss Foster and Miss Gilpin have designed special individual cartons for shipment and are planning to develop a business of the kind. The above photograph shows some of the bogglers who are awaiting the ax but who show no signs of the impending doom for them and glorious holidays for purchasers.



*Gazette and Telegraph, November 14, 1937*

struggled financially. That was when they decided to go into the turkey business since Laura had done so well in it before. So they started the Friendfield Turkey Farm in Woodland Park. For the next few years that business thrived and succeeded. They raised thousands of turkeys and sold and shipped them to customers all over the United States.

The farm did well but in 1939 they shut it down. They then operated a guest house until 1942 when Betsy went back into nursing during World War II and Laura went to work as a photographer for the public-relations department at the Boeing Company in Wichita, Kansas.

In August of 1944 Betsy was diagnosed with acute encephalitis and later polio as well. Her health deteriorated and ended up being declared legally incompetent and was

moved to her sister's home in Nebraska. Laura insisted on caring for Betsy herself but the two were not recognized as a "married couple".

In 1945 Forster mostly recovered and her mental incompetency was voided. She and Laura sold their Woodland Park acreage to Bishop Kennedy of the Grace Episcopal Church of Colorado Springs. The church then formed the Thunderbird Church Camp. This is when Laura and Betsy moved permanently to Santa Fe, New Mexico where the town was tolerant and accepting of the gay couple.

In Santa Fe, Betsy remained too ill from polio to do much of anything. Laura wrote books on photography and kept earning money from commercial photography as well, although they both struggled financially.

Betsy's health continued to go downhill and Laura was now in her 70s and facing her own health problems. In the fall of 1971, after a 50 year love affair, Laura was forced to place Betsy into a professional care home. She died there just a few months later on January 1, 1972.

She is buried in Evergreen Cemetery, Colorado Springs.



Forster's Friendfield Plantation in South Carolina

This narrative just scratches the surface of the work Laura and Elizabeth did on the Navajo Reservation. It also just barely touches on the photography awards earned by Laura.

It does however give an insight into the lives of two remarkable women that for a while lived in Woodland Park and ran their turkey farm. I'm sure no one living here today has neither heard about nor remembers this couple or their farm. Hopefully this essay will secure their place in Woodland Park's history. ~Steve Plutt

**Monday, April 17, 1922**

While working on a project in New York City, Laura writes to Betsy, which in part reads:

*"Bets My Darling,*

*....I miss you most dreadfully.... My one sensation is when I am just going to sleep. It is the most precious one. I feel myself surrounded by yellow. I feel your arms creep around me, I kiss you and--- I'm asleep. And oh Bets my beloved, I'm finding out every day just how big a part of me belongs to you."*


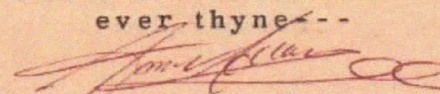
July 8, 1959 letter from Ansel Adams to Laura

*July 8 1959*

Dear Laura----Just a rushline to thank you for your letter. I hope you got home safely. My back is STILL out and I am MAD. But, otherwise all is well. It was WONDERFUL having you with us. I shall write at greater length just as soon as I can.

Please phone Witter Bynner and tell him I am thinking of him and will write! Thanks a lot!

Love from us all AND COME BACK SOON!  
ever thyne---



April 29, 1971 letter from  
John Wayne to Laura

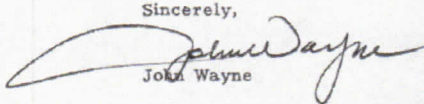
JOHN WAYNE

April 29, 1971

Dear Miss Gilpin:

At this time, when the Industrial Photographers of the Southwest are honoring you with a Special Award, I, too, would like to pay tribute.

My compliments and congratulations to you for your wonderful work in documenting, photographically and in books, the life of the American Indian for us and generations to come.

Sincerely,  
  
John Wayne

Miss Laura Gilpin  
c/o Mr. Robert H. Martin  
1206 Camino Cacto  
Santa Fe, New Mexico