

Skelton Ranch

By Steve Plutt



Some accounts credit the “Skelton Mountain Ranch” as the first Dude Ranch in the state of Colorado. At the very least, it was one of the earliest. It is also highly likely that the Skelton was the first dude ranch in the Woodland Park/Teller County area. Located north of highway 24 in the Tranquil Acres area of northern Teller County, it was owned and operated by Lizzie and William Skelton. He later incorporated the ranch with several St. Louis businessmen.

William T. Skelton was born in the state of Maine in 1854. He married Miss Lizzie Chapman of Peoria, Illinois on May 21, 1885. William Thomas and Lizzie Skelton were parents to one son, William Jr.

Prior to their dude ranch days William and Lizzy were longtime residents of St. Louis where he was an attorney for the Burlington Railroad. President Grover Cleveland nominated Skelton to be a Receiver of Public Moneys for the United States Government and was confirmed to that position by the United States Senate on December 21, 1893. While living in Akron, Colorado William was a District Judge of the Eighth Judicial District. In fact, even though he was a Democrat, he was very popular and was elected twice in a Republican controlled county to that position. Skelton was also a great benefactor to the poor. It was he who was responsible for and brokered a deal that provided free coal to destitute families of Akron that suffered from the major drought of 1894.



Both William and Lizzie had a great love for the outdoors and would take retreats for several weeks at a time traveling through Colorado’s mountains. It was during one of those trips that they decided on opening a guest ranch in the high country.

The Skelton ranch totaled 2000 acres but the dude ranch itself was concentrated in about 400 of that acreage. The resort consisted of over 50 small log cabins for guests, many out buildings and a very large main lodge with a magnificent view of Pikes Peak. The lodge consisted of a huge living room with a fireplace at either end equipped with a kitchen and dining hall. In the



evenings Judge Skelton would entertain his guests with lively stories of early western life. He was a very sociable and cordial host and always invited his neighbors and the people of Woodland Park to join in the happenings at the ranch. Entertainment at the ranch included horseback riding, games and activity's for guests of all ages. Visits to Colorado Springs by horseback was an options to all guests. Riding spirited horses led by the Judge, they would stay overnight at the Alta Vista hotel.

Guest arrived from many states but were regularly from the St. Louis area. They arrived by train in Woodland Park and were greeted by a Skelton Ranch Tally Ho and driven the rest of the way to the resort. Not uncommon were up to 200 guests at a time including El Paso County 4H groups and Boy Scout troops from several different states.

On Tuesday, June 23, 1908 a large forest fire erupted, supposedly started by campers near Woodland Park. It quickly spread and before it was extinguished by a force of 150 men, it destroyed the Skelton Ranch and reportedly came within a mile and a half of Woodland Park. False rumors in Colorado Springs were that lives had been lost and that the town of Woodland Park was in flames. In reality, when it was totally put out, the Skelton Ranch had lost 50 of its 75 buildings according to the Judge at the time.

Since it was early in the summer season, only about 75 guests were at the ranch and they all escaped unharmed as did all horses and other livestock. Skelton estimated his loss at \$25,000 (not counting lost timber) and planned to start rebuilding as soon as possible. The ranch was still able to accommodate about 100 guests and the Judge at once spent \$20,000 restoring the resort. Lizzy Skelton was credited as a hero when she dawned a wet blanket and on horseback risked her life to help put out the fire. Later interviewed, Judge Skelton said that the resort was booked for 250 guests that summer which he said would have been their best season on record.

FIRE SWEEPS SKELTON RANCH

Pike's Peak Resort, Frequented by St. Louisans, Damaged \$25,000.

SPECIAL DESPATCH TO THE GLOBE-DEMOCRAT.

COLORADO SPRINGS, COLO., June 23.—A fire started by campers last night swept over hundreds of acres of timber and destroyed seventy-five buildings on the 14,000-acre ranch of Judge W. P. Skelton, on the west slopes of Pike's Peak, near Woodland Park.

The fire was checked to-day by a change of wind, when within a mile of Woodland Park. The judge places his loss at \$25,000. He was formerly of St. Louis. The resort was popular with St. Louisans here for the summer.

That following spring a \$50,000, 64 room dormitory was built. It was two stories and 251 feet long. It was equipped with hot and cold running water in every room. Each room also had



Abandoned Cabins

porcelain baths. The lobby of the dorm was 38 x 42 feet in size with a large stone fireplace that could handle logs 5 feet in length. Additionally, twelve summer cottages and an impressive residence for himself was built.

The Skelton Mountain Ranch operated from about 1905 to about 1916 or so. The Skelton's sold out in 1917 to F.A. Sudholt who was an area pioneer for a reported price of \$40,000. William and Lizzy Skelton moved to Colorado Springs and spent the rest of their days living at 1127 N. Prospect Street.

In the year 1940 the Skelton Mountain Ranch had long since been abandoned. That year the United States Forest Service took back the land and placed it into the national forest. All of the remaining buildings, such as the old dance hall, several

guest cabins or any remnants of buildings were demolished and removed.

When I was growing up in Woodland Park the Skelton Ranch was one of our favorite places to ride our horses to. At that time there were still ghostly remains of the resort. Signs of the ranch such as the cement works of the chicken coop, a couple of cement slabs from the lodge and dance hall and a big fireplace was still standing.

**Famous Old Skelton Dude Ranch Will
Be Returned to the Primeval Forest**

U.S. Forest Service Takes Over Land and Buildings of Half-Century Old Resort Being Torn Down; Lack of Water Facilities Prevents Development as Recreational Spot

Colorado Springs Gazette & Telegraph, 8 Sept, 1940

William died at their home on July 26, 1932 after a short illness. Lizzy continued living there until her death on March 11, 1942. The Skelton's are both buried in Colorado Springs.

- In 1901 the Judge supplied legal opinion regarding vaccinations of school children. It was his opinion that during an epidemic all children should be vaccinated in order to attend public school.
- Several mining claims were filed on the Skelton Ranch following a report of a gold strike there.
- Judge Skelton and several St. Louis capitalist planned on erecting a \$25,000



mill with a capacity of 50 tons a day near the ranch on mining claims known as the Independent Nos 1 & 2.

- The Judge had a very large chicken house at the ranch.
- Additionally, on site was the huge barn and a herd of milk cows.
- All ranch photos credit to Denver Public Library



Wm. T. Skelton Passes Away Here

William T. Skelton, a resident of Colorado Springs for the last 19 years, passed away yesterday at his home, 1127 North Prospect street, following a short illness. He was well known in the city as a Christian Science practitioner.

He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth Skelton, and a son, William T. Skelton, Jr.