Gunnison Country - Recreated 1894 - Present

Diversifying Economy

With the dreams of the Gunnison Country becoming the Pittsburgh of the West in the past, the economy diversified into mixture of mining, ranching, higher education, and tourism. The Big Mine (1894) in Crested Butte kept producing quality coal, which kept the trains coming. This allowed the ranchers to easily export their cattle and hay. The coal industry employed over 600 men on average over the years. Ranching emerged as the steadfast industry of the basin, while mining had various starts and stops. Taking advantage of the excellent trout fishing, resorts opened up along the Gunnison as early as 1885. The College opened in 1911 as the Colorado State Normal School bringing new thinking to the valley. During the depression years, the college had over 300 students but after World War II in 1947 enrollment jumped to 600. It steadily increased to 3,000 by late 1960s. Another economic slump occurred with the Big Mine closure in 1952 and abandonment of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad in 1954. However, this slump was short as uranium mining surged from 1955-62. Tourism got a lift with the Crested Butte Ski Resort opening in 1961, but an even bigger boost came in 1965 with the Curecanti National Recreation Area. Another brief mining boom occurred in the late 1970s with uranium mining at the Homestake mine and the planning stages of a large molybdenum mine (AMAX) near Crested Butte. The plans were scrapped due to falling mineral prices before any mining commenced. Now recreation is the dominate industry, especially in the form of second homes (about 60% of all residences). A 2006 study showed that second homeowners bring significantly more money into the economy than tourists, especially given they build, pay taxes, and are often the recreationists counted in the tourist industry. Along with remote internet enabled jobs, second homes import cash into the economy from diverse sources.

Agriculture Evolves

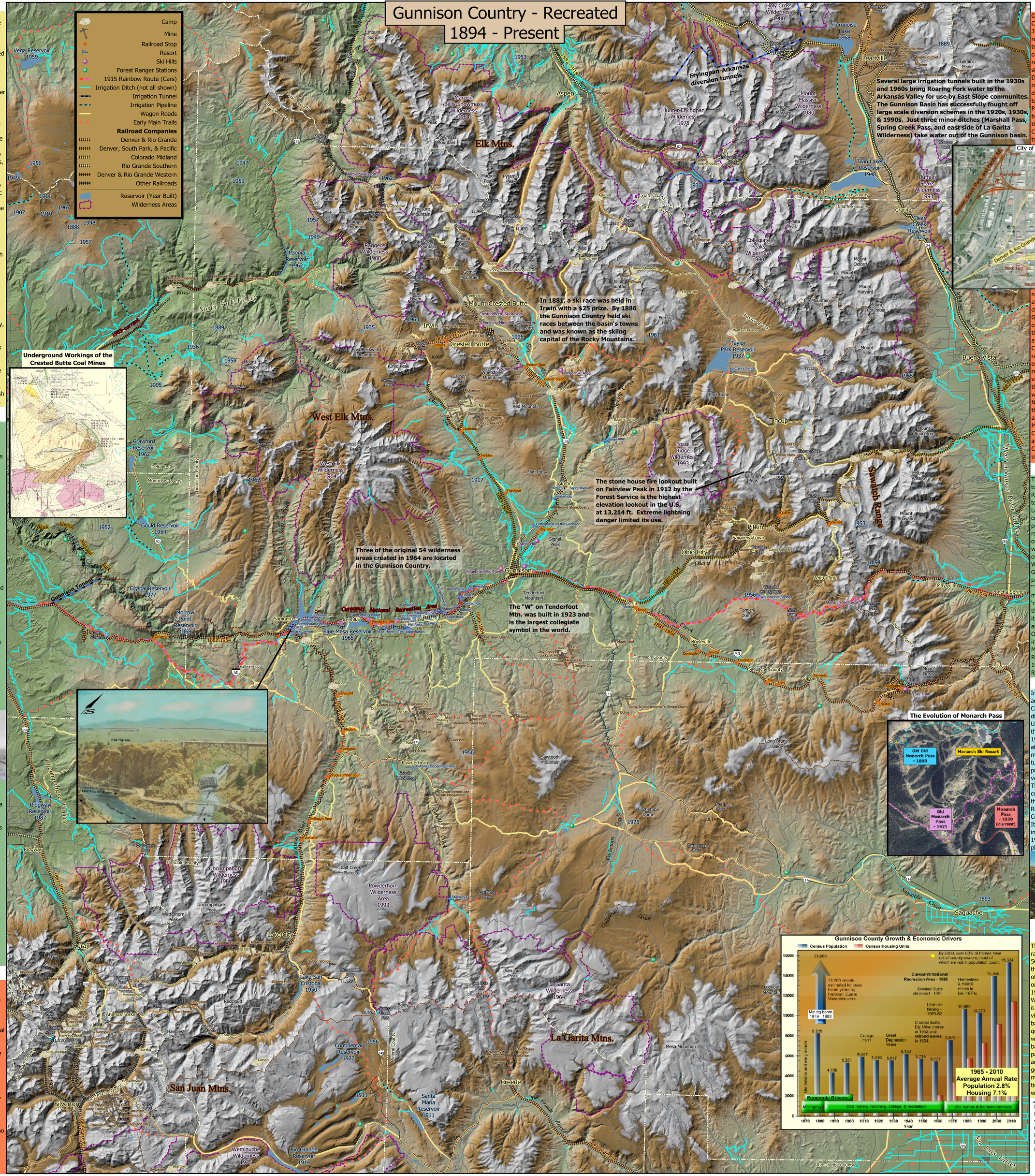
For centuries, the Ute Indians used fire to manage the range, encouraging grass production to benefit their meat sources: herds of buffalo, elk, deer, and pronghorn antelope. After the Utes were removed, early ranchers brought in cattle and enjoyed the excellent grasslands with little conflict. The days of open range in the valley floors would not last long as more people arrived, taking advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862. The law provided a way to obtain ownership of 160 acres of federal land by building a home and farming it for five years. Homesteaders quickly learned that the lack of summer rains made growing crops difficult and caused a lengthy recovery of grasses from grazing. The solution was irrigation ditches and cattle pools, both of which required a large amount of cooperation. As barbed wire (invented in 1874) became more available, it became practical to further reduce conflicts between livestock and crops. Irrigation ditches were often built that spanned entire drainages, resulting in a need for agreements specifying how to share the limited water. Uncoordinated grazing on the open range could easily cause destruction of grasslands as individuals tried to maximize their short-term gain. Soon, over a dozen major cattle pools were formed to better manage grazing on the open range and share resources.

Cunningham School located near Highway 135 and Ohio Creek Road

While farmers in the basin were able to harvest over 20,000 bushels of grain by 1906 and potato farming had a period of success, ultimately ranching became the sustaining industry. Despite agreements, conflict sometimes turned violent, especially with those bringing sheep into the area. As the problem grew beyond the control of local agreements, local rancher L.H. Rouivere recognized the need for regulations. He was asked by the American Cattle Association to draft what ultimately became the national 1934 Taylor Grazing Act. This eventually led to the creation of grazing allotments, the creation of the Bureau of Land Management, and removed most of the land available for homesteading. Today cattle pools still exist, barbed wire fences keep livestock in place, and irrigation ditches keep the valley floors green.

Forest Reserves

The Gunnison Forest Reserve (forerunner of the Gunnison National Forest) was created in 1905. The main impetus to create the reserve was that fruit growers in the Paonia/ Hotchkiss area were running out of water in the summer. They blamed it on the removal of timber in the North Fork Valley, which increased rate of snow melt due to lack of shade. At the same time, the Gunnison Tunnel was being considered to water the Uncompahgre Valley. A report says that "the success of this gigantic scheme depends largely upon the preservation of the forest cover on the headwaters of the Gunnison River." In the early days, ranger stations and fire lookouts were created to help rangers who covered vast areas on horseback. While these are generally no longer needed, the challenges of conserving resources for long term prosperity between competing land users such as grazing, recreation, and timber remains just as necessary.



Several large irrigation tunnels built in the 1930s and 1960s bring Roaring Fork water to the Arkansas Valley for use by East Slope communities. The Gunnison Basin has successfully fought off large scale diversion schemes in the 1920s, 1930s, & 1990s. Just three minor ditches (Marshall Pass, Spring Creek Pass, and east side of La Garita Wilderness) take water out of the Gunnison basin.

In 1881, a ski race was held in Irwin with a $25 prize. By 1886 the Gunnison Country held ski races between the basin's towns and was known as the skiing capital of the Rocky Mountains.

Underground Workings of the Crested Butte Coal Mines

The stone house fire lookout built on Fairview Peak in 1912 by the Forest Service is the highest elevation lookout in the U.S. at 13,214 ft. Extreme lightning danger limited its use.

Three of the original 54 wilderness areas created in 1964 are located in the Gunnison Country.

The "W" on Tenderfoot Mtn. was built in 1923 and is the largest collegiate symbol in the world.

City of Gunnison Railroads

The Evolution of Monarch Pass

Railroads

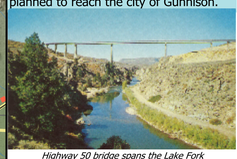
Originally most railroads in Western Colorado used narrow gauge rails set 3' apart to allow tighter turns and reduce costs. However, this required transferring loads to standard gauge cars used elsewhere. Narrow guage railroads were eventually converted to standard gauge or eliminated. The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad had two routes through Colorado. It was more difficult to convert the Gunnison route to standard gauge than the Tennessee Pass/Glenwood Springs route. While both routes are similar in length, the Gunnison route adds the 8,660' Cerro Summit climb and an exciting trip through the Black Canyon where numerous accidents were caused by avalanches and debris flows. These challenges sealed the fate of the Gunnison route. With the construction of better roads, improved trucks, and the closure of the Big Mine in 1952, all rails were removed in the Gunnison Country by 1955. In their day, railroads contributed greatly to the economy as well as offering travelers a relatively easy ride with spectacular vistas. While somewhat dangerous, the splendor of the Black Canyon route was part of the Rio Grande's famed Narrow Gauge Circle, a scenic loop through southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. The Curecanti Needle along the Black Canyon route was used in their logo.

Tourism Industry

The automobile was a boom for the tourism industry. In 1915, the Rainbow Route was designated as a tourist route from Pueblo to Salt Lake City. Gunnison and Montrose counties imposed a road tax of $4 per person to improve roads along the route. Signs were placed in trees and on telephone poles. From Salida, it went over Old-Old Monarch Pass, then over Black Sage Pass passing by Waunita Hot Springs, then into Gunnison and on to Montrose. A 1915 promotional book said it was called "The Rainbow Route" because of "the many colored hues and thousands of 'rainbow bends', not again to mention the Rainbow trout". The book claimed it was "the finest highway in Colorado and shortest route to Salt Lake City". Other notable tourism attractions include the Black Canyon National Monument in 1933, Crested Butte Ski Resort in 1961, the Pioneer Museum in 1964, and the Curecanti National Recreation Area in 1965.

Reservoir Building

In 1901, two men braved wild rapids and the unknown within the Black Canyon in search of a location for a diversion tunnel to irrigate the vast Uncompahgre Valley. Construction of the tunnel began from both ends in 1905, reaching each other in 1909 after the loss of 26 men. At 5.8 miles, it was the longest irrigation tunnel in the world. In order to provide a constant supply of water, various dams were built in the basin. The Taylor Park Reservoir was completed in 1937 primarily to benefit the Uncompahgre Valley. Blue Mesa Reservoir is the largest water body in Colorado and was completed in 1965. Its main purpose is to help satisfy interstate water agreements made in 1922. Blue Mesa was originally planned to reach the city of Gunnison.



Highway 50 bridge spans the Lake Fork of the Gunnison before the reservoir filled.

Spanish Flu Epidemic

The flu epidemic in 1918-19 spread rapidly across the country killing over 500,000. Towns tried to isolate themselves from the epidemic but often efforts were too late. Gunnison, on the otherhand, had only 58 cases in 1918, one-fifth the state average. While the isolated geography helped, it took a combination of fast action, vigilante effort, and luck. Gunnison banned gatherings, closed schools, and quarantined itself from the outside with lawmen blocking roads, turning back travelers, not letting train passengers off the train, and fining and quarantining violaters. Other geographically isolated towns fared much worse, such as Silverton at 12 times the state average, and Sargents with 40 cases and 6 deaths.

Mapping sources include a variety of historic maps, expedition journals, and written accounts, relying heavily on Government Land Office maps and surveys by Hayden and Wheeler. Mapping and historical research provided by Mike Pelletier & David Primus.

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