The Crawford Family Returns to Steamboat Springs

The Crawford House
1184 Crawford Avenue
Steamboat Springs, Colorado

by

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THE CRAWFORD FAMILY RETURNS TO STEAMBOAT SPRINGS

Introduction

When James Harvey Crawford homesteaded in Routt County, Colorado in the 1870s, it is doubtful whether he could have envisioned how Steamboat Springs, the town he founded, would change over the next century. This paper describes Steamboat Springs in the early 1900s, when it was a remote mountain community with barely 500 residents, and compares it to what Steamboat Springs has become more than one hundred years later, a city with a population topping 10,000. It is both the story of a visionary pioneer family, and of the United States’ westward expansion, urbanization, and changes in community as manifested in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. The Crawford family’s third residence, their stone house, will serve as the medium through which this account unfolds.

Historic Context

The Settlement of the West

The Land Ordinance of 1785 required surveys of the new western lands before they could be sold. The land had to be laid out in townships 6 miles square, and each township was divided into 36 square sections, each one mile square (640 acres). The rectangular grid documented the natural landscape with few deviations all the way to the Pacific coast. Similarly, new towns in the west used the grid pattern for their street systems. Whenever speed of design or desire for land speculation guided the surveyor, a grid was the result (Reps 1965, 217). Not surprisingly, the original plat of Steamboat Springs was a grid along the Yampa River. The First Addition, Second Addition, and Light addition to the town were also grids drawn parallel to the Yampa River. As the town grew, the grids of new additions followed the section boundaries of the original property owners, not the contours of the land (Jim Crawford, April 10, 2009 email message to author).

In Raymond Mohl’s book, The New City – Urban America in the Industrial Age, 1860-1920, the author wrote that most rural populations, whether American or recent immigrants, moved to cities as mechanization changed agricultural practices and displaced farm workers in the late 19th century. Mohl also noted Frederick Jackson Turner’s theory that the availability of cheap western land provided a safety valve of opportunity for unhappy urban workers. Most settlers who came to the Steamboat Springs area at the turn of the 20th century, however, were from rural areas, mainly Missouri and Ohio, but also rural areas of Europe, particularly Switzerland and Germany. Urban immigrants were few and far between in this part of the state. Most could not or would not endure the long winters and rigors of frontier life.

Another impetus to western settlement was the end of the Civil War, a depressed economy in the East and the availability of open lands in the West. The 1862 Homestead Act allowed veterans to subtract a year from the required five-year proving up requirement for each year of their military service (Lamar 1998, 492). Many Civil War veterans took advantage of this homestead provision, including James H. Crawford.

The development of Steamboat Springs during Crawford’s time was in the American tradition of townsite speculation. A parcel of choice land was all that one needed to set up business (Mohl 1985, 69). The 1884 Steamboat Springs Town Company, financed by a small
group of out-of-town investors, employed James Crawford as its manager to promote and sell town lots. Crawford was a community-minded person, and unlike most townsiters speculators, often donated lots to newcomers who wanted to start businesses needed by the growing town, or accepted services in trade for the lot purchase. It was not a lucrative policy. Several attempts to sell the entire Steamboat Springs Town Company to wealthier investors failed, and several times Crawford had to resume his responsibilities as manager when the purchase fell through (Pritchett 2005, 30-34).

According to planning historian John Reps, the arrival of the railroad was the chief reason for rapid urban development of the West in the late 19th century. “The railroad men were no less urban boosters and town developers than the townsites speculators. Often they were one and the same” (Mohl 1985, 72). That was not the case in Steamboat Springs: David Moffat, founder of the Moffat Railroad, was first a banker, and later a railroad developer, but not a town developer. Crawford and his investors played that role in Steamboat Springs. Nonetheless, the arrival of the Moffat Railroad changed Steamboat Springs forever.

Northwestern Colorado

In 1877 state officials designated the northwestern corner of Colorado as Routt County. Ferdinand Hayden completed a survey of the area in 1876 for the new U.S. Geological Survey. That, and the removal of the Ute Indians to Utah in the 1880s served to open the land to new settlers, but they were slow in coming. Northwestern Colorado was remote and difficult to access, cut off from the rest of the state by high mountain ranges.

With elevations in Routt County ranging from 6000 feet to over 12,180 feet on Mt. Zirkel, the area’s extreme temperatures and sparse rainfall made the land more suitable for ranching than farming. Bounded on the north by the Wyoming border, on the east by the Continental Divide, on the south by the Flat Top Mountains, and on the west by the Utah border, Routt County was larger than the state of Delaware at the turn of the century.

What brought people to the area? According to the Historic Context of Routt County, the promise of gold near Hahn’s Peak in the northern part of Routt County and deposits of high grade coal near Oak Creek in the southern part of the county lured many hopeful miners to Routt County in the late 1880s. The gold deposits were small, unlike that elsewhere in Colorado, and many unsuccessful gold miners soon turned to other trades or left the area when the mines closed in the early 1900s. As one writer observed about these men, “They came to dig coal, but they remained to pitch hay” (Burroughs 1962, 251). The coal reserves however, proved to be vast. Outside investors recognized the opportunity and began to develop mines in the Yampa Valley coalfields in the early 1900s.

Ranching and agriculture have deep roots in Routt County, and have shaped its western character. Before Colorado became a state in 1876, most of the territory was open range public land. By the 1860s cattlemen ran large herds of cattle north through northwestern Colorado from Texas and elsewhere to graze on the open rangelands (Winter and Company 1994, 5-1). Once fattened and ready for market, cowboys would drive the herds to Union Pacific trains in southern Wyoming, and in later years, to the Moffat Railroad in Steamboat Springs, for shipment to urban markets. In the first decade of the twentieth century sheepmen also began to use public land to graze their animals, creating conflicts between the cattlemen and the sheepmen. Concurrently, new settlers fenced off their homesteads and watering holes from the massive herds and the open range became increasingly fragmented, overgrazed, and eroded.
Fig. 1. Map of Northwestern Colorado, 2008 [Source: National Geographic Topo!]
A 1904 pamphlet promoting Routt County’s wealth in anticipation of the arrival of the railroad proclaimed there were 45,663 acres of patented agricultural lands valued at $434,665 and 143,859 acres of patented grazing lands valued at $343,555 in the county. Local livestock was valued at over $1,100,000 (more than $24,300,000 in today’s dollars) in combined cattle, horses, sheep, hogs, and elk production.

In 1911 for ease of governance, state officials split Routt County in two, creating Moffat County to the west and shifting Routt County’s western boundary east to the 107th Meridian where it remains today, yet Routt County remained large, with an area greater than the state of Rhode Island. Steamboat Springs became the official county seat in 1912. According to census records, its population remained steady at 1400 residents for nearly four decades.

The Moffat Railroad

In 1902 visionary Denver banker David Moffat attempted to build a transcontinental railroad starting in Denver and heading west through the mountains to access Routt County coal mines and continue to Salt Lake City. From 1902 until 1911 when he died, Moffat invested his entire personal fortune, more than $7,000,000 (over $150,000,000 in today’s dollars) to build the railroad through the Rocky Mountains, but was unable to complete the challenging route. The standard gauge Moffat Railroad out of Denver traversed “the most successful route through the most difficult country ever built in all of America” (FRASERdesign 1997, 82) reaching an elevation of 11,600 feet over Rollins Pass and requiring 56 tunnels, more than all the other railroads in Colorado combined. The project bankrupted Moffat. When there were rumors that the Moffat Road planned to bypass Steamboat Springs, local businessmen, among them James Crawford, raised the money to pay for the longer route through Steamboat Springs (Merrill 2008, 182; Richards 1976, 131). The Moffat Railroad reached Steamboat Springs in December 1908, and terminated at Craig, forty-five miles west, in 1913 for lack of funds. The railroad transformed the local economy, hauling coal, livestock, and produce to Denver and lucrative distant markets, and bringing consumer goods, passengers, and eastern tourists to the area.

(See Figure 2 on page 5.)

Steamboat Springs

Steamboat Springs, situated in the Yampa River valley in the center of the county, became the market hub of the region. Defined by the Yampa River on one side and surrounded by hills, Steamboat Springs was also home to many natural mineral and thermal springs. With the arrival of the railroad and passenger service, Steamboat Springs began to draw health-conscious tourists. Steamboat Springs, according to its first government census in 1910, had 1227 residents, two lumber yards, a brickyard, sawmill, cigar factory, steam laundry, three banks, two newspapers, several churches, post office, school, public bathhouse, drug store, hotels and liverys, stockyards and stores carrying a wide range of merchandise. After the arrival of the railroad, ranchers shipped more cattle from Steamboat Springs to market than from any other point in the United States for many years (Schaffer 2006, 35). It was a real “cow town.” By 1910 Routt County’s population was 7561, more than double what it had been just ten years earlier.

(See Figures 3 and 4 on pages 6 and 7.)
Fig. 2. Map showing location of Routt County Coal Mines and Moffat Railroad
[Source: Corona Telegraph 2005, 21]
The Person: James Harvey Crawford

James H. Crawford was born near Sedalia, Missouri in 1845. At the age of sixteen he joined the Union Army for a three-year stint, served in the Civil War, and rose in rank to First Lieutenant. He then returned to Missouri to marry his childhood sweetheart, Margaret Bourn. The newlyweds bought land near their parents, began to farm and started a family: Lulie in 1867, Logan in 1869, and John in 1873 (Crawford 2008, 1). Life was uneventful for seven years.

Crawford became restless. Glowing accounts of unexplored lands in the Colorado Territory with plentiful water, lush grass, and beautiful vistas inspired him to make an exploratory trip to the territory in 1872 (Richards 1976, 3). Crawford returned to Missouri and in 1873, sold the farm, packed his belongings and headed west to Colorado with his wife and young children, his livestock, and a cadre of potential homesteaders. Their wagon train journey took 35 days to reach Denver. Crawford ensconced his family in a mountain settlement west of the Continental Divide, while he and his party continued further west to explore and find a suitable place to homestead. He eventually staked a claim near a spring by Yampa (then known as the Bear) River in northwestern Colorado in 1874. In 1875 Crawford built his log claim shack, planted a vegetable garden and hired a surveyor to officially survey the parcel. This was the start of Steamboat Springs (Leckenby 1945, 14). Why the name Steamboat Springs? Mineral and thermal springs were abundant in the area. Along the river was an unusual spring, a geyser that made a chugging sound when it spouted. To early explorers it sounded like a steamboat, hence the name, according to Crawford’s account (Richards 1976, 9).

By 1876 the entire Crawford family was living in Steamboat Springs, and were its first and only permanent residents for the next five years (Crawford 2008, 2). It was a man’s world, and Margaret often went for months without seeing another white woman. Nomadic Ute Indian families camped at some nearby springs and the Crawfords befriended them. This was prior to the forcible removal of the native Utes to a reservation in eastern Utah in 1880-81 by the U.S cavalry (Athearn 1982, 54).

With the Utes gone and the vacated Indian lands now available for settlement, pioneers came and the settlement slowly began to grow. The Crawford log cabin was the hub of the community, serving as its first post office, school, library, church, and newspaper office. In 1882, the Crawfords’ fourth and last child, Mary, was born. James Crawford’s community responsibilities continued to expand. He was appointed to be the first judge of Routt County, the first Postmaster, and the first Superintendent of Schools. Over the years, he was formally elected County Judge, twice elected to the Colorado State Legislature, and chosen to be the first President of the Routt County Pioneer Association.

Crawford organized the Steamboat Springs Town Company in 1884 with the financial backing of outside investors, and became its manager (Crawford 2008, 39). Noting the social refinement of its people, the company proudly advertised “No Saloons,” and each deed Crawford sold included language banning the production or sale of liquor. Not until 1939 was the ban lifted, six years after Prohibition had been repealed elsewhere of the nation (Pritchett 2005, 38-40).
The original town plat consisted of 40 acres, and included a portion of Crawford’s land. Lots along Lincoln Avenue were 50 feet wide and 140 feet deep. Crawford began to promote the new town, sell lots and to set up new businesses, including a brickyard and a public bathhouse built over the 103 degree Fahrenheit Heart Spring. With the establishment of a sawmill in 1883, the Crawford family built a new frame house in 1887. The frame house was the “claim shack” for Crawford’s second land patent, the adjacent 160 acres north and east of his 1874 Pre-emption Claim. The 1862 Homestead Act allowed Crawford to deduct the years he served in the military from the five years required to live on the land in order to prove his claim. He received the patent in 1890. (Crawford 2008, 19). 
The Crawford family moved into their third and final home, the Stone House, in 1896. Sited on a hill above town (Crawford Hill) it became the town’s social center, where the Literary Society met, where family and friends played musical instruments, where dignitaries stayed overnight, and where hospitality was abundant.

The year 1900 brought a major change to Steamboat Springs and the Crawford family. Two businessmen proposed to bring electricity to Steamboat Springs, but in order to do so, a franchise had to be granted by the elected officials of an incorporated town, which it was not. The Steamboat Springs Town Company organized a public election and voters agreed to incorporate in August that year. The vote was 68 yeas to 14 nays. Voters also elected James Crawford as the town’s first mayor, one of the 7 members of the original Steamboat Springs Board of Trustees (Richards 1976, 138). Steamboat Springs became the first town in northwestern Colorado to incorporate and to have electric lights.

Crawford pursued a variety of business interests throughout his life. During the 1880s he ran up to 300 head of cattle and 40 horses on the open lands around the town. He later reduced these holdings and kept only his horses and enough cows to provide milk for his family (Crawford 2008, 39). In the 1890s Crawford developed a coal deposit 14 miles northwest of town into the Elkhead Anthracite Coal Company, and discovered and operated the largest onyx mine in Colorado (Crawford 2008, 4). In the early 1900s Crawford platted the last of his homestead parcel into additional lots which the town annexed: the Crawford Addition and later the North Highland Addition, and the Yahmonite Addition (Crawford 2008, 39). The lots in the North Highland Addition, the Crawford House’s neighborhood, were 70 feet wide and 150 feet deep, although lots closer to the house were larger. The streets, as elsewhere in town, were platted 80 feet wide.
The depression after World War I impacted Crawford financially. The coal and onyx mines had petered out, the livestock market collapsed, and his new lots weren’t selling. Discretely, he mortgaged the Stone House in order to pay back taxes during the 1920s, but died before he could pay it off. James H. Crawford passed away in his home in 1930 at the age of 85. Margaret died in 1939. By the end of the 1940s, the four Crawford children had either moved from Colorado or passed away. Family heirs sold the Crawford House. The Crawford family was gone from Steamboat Springs.

Over the next fifty-four years the Crawford House had a number of owners. For extended periods the house was vacant and suffered from benign neglect. Owners changed the house in some way to meet their needs or were unable to maintain the property. Through family stories James Logan Crawford (Jim), great grandson of the first Crawford family, learned about his great grandparents and became interested in their Steamboat Springs house. In 2004 he and his wife Anna Fang were able to purchase the Stone House as a second home for their family. The new owners successfully listed the house on the National Register of Historic Places in 2005, and with a team of talented preservation craftsmen, over the next three years, meticulously restored the home to its original beauty.

Fig. 8. Photo of the Crawford House, late 1890s [Crawford 2008]
The Crawford House

Description

In 1893 James Crawford began to build a home that reflected his financial success. He contracted with a local stonemason, Charles Briggs, to do the work using sandstone from nearby quarries. The house was completed in 1896, nearly 3000 square feet in size. It was the first stone house in Steamboat Springs and was considered its finest residence. The house stands prominently on Crawford Hill overlooking the town and the Yampa River below, and the surrounding mountains.

The property’s National Register listing describes the Crawford House as a “unique combination of a traditional Foursquare with key Romanesque Revival features.” Constructed of blonde sandstone, the house faces south. It displays a keyed stone semi-circular archway over the front entrance, a character-defining feature. The ashlar cut stone walls have a belt course above the stone foundation and between the first and second floors of the house. Together, the separate inner and outer stone walls are over 18” thick. The house is a typical Foursquare design. It follows a square plan, is two stories topped by a third story under a hipped roof, and has unadorned exterior walls. A large central dormer faces the front and smaller dormers face each side. Decorative wooden brackets support the dormer roofs. The cedar shingle roof overhangs all sides of the house. A small wooden rear porch is set into the northwest corner of the house. In the early 1900s the family added a large porch to the front facade. Three Tuscan columns support the roof, with a pediment above the main entrance.

Beneath the stone archway, the front door displays a large carved wood door inset with panes of colored glass. Narrow clear windows flank the doorway. The doorbell on the right side was removed. Above the main arch, a flat arch frames the ten-over-one window on the second floor. To the left (west) of the entrance, a pair of two large one-over-one windows appears on both the first and second stories. All the large windows are identical, one-over-one with wooden frames and sandstone lintels and sills. The west elevation displays three windows on the first floor, and two more windows on the second floor. The east elevation displays two windows on each floor, and a small window that illuminates the cellar. The rear (north) elevation has two doors, one from the porch and the other from the kitchen, a narrow fixed window and large window on the first floor, and a single large window on the second floor. The front dormer has a center four-over-one fixed window flanked on each side by a six-over-one window. The large hip-roofed dormers are identical on the east and west elevations, each with two six-over-one windows. All the dormers display carved wooden lap siding.

Inside, the large entry hall is a paneled wooden staircase to the right, and opposite, a ceramic tile fireplace with an oak mantle. To the left of the hall, the parlor has another ceramic tile fireplace, topped by an ornamental cherry mantle. One wall of the connecting dining room displays large built-in cabinets for china and glassware. Both the dining room and entry hall access the kitchen. The second floor has three bedrooms and a sitting room. The third floor is a large room illuminated by the dormer windows on three sides, used by Crawford as his study. Storage closets are under the eaves. Throughout the house, the original woodwork, four-paneled pine doors, and cabinetry are still in place, as is the original decorative brass window and door hardware. The cellar has one room with stone walls and a concrete floor and a small window on the east side.
Steamboat Springs was remote when James and Margaret built their stone house. The building materials, stone, brick for the chimneys, and wood, came from local sources, as did the window and door frames and interior doors. The large decorative pieces, however, including the fireplace mantels, glass, tile, and ornamental brass hardware were brought in from elsewhere, hauled over the mountains by horse-drawn freight wagons, a rigorous three day journey from either Denver or the nearest railroad stop (Crawford 2008, 27-28).

*Outbuildings*

The south side of the house was its public facade, while the north side was where functional activities took place. Access to the well, outhouse, chicken coop, and barn were all out the back doors on the north side. The well was close to the house, about ten feet away.
Covered by a small gable-roof structure, the well was hand dug, 32 feet deep, 4 feet across, and lined with stone. The outhouse and chicken coop were 30 and 70 feet beyond, respectively. The wooden barn was further still, 100 feet to the north. Extending from the kitchen to the well and around the east side of the house to the front door and ultimately to the street was a wooden walkway. (Crawford 2008, 32)

Landscape

When the Crawfords settled Steamboat Springs the landscape was pristine. Wetlands, and mineral springs defined the narrow south banks of the Yampa River’s course through town. The steep tree-covered slopes of Howelsen Hill and Emerald Mountain stood behind them. The open meadows on the opposite bank rose uphill from the river. Groves of cottonwoods, willows, and alders framed the Yampa River and the mountain streams (from south to north--Spring Creek, Butcherknife [sic] Creek, and Soda Creek) that flowed into it. Low ridges extending out from the Continental Divide outlined the southern and northern limits of grassy meadow that was to become the original town. Distant snow-covered mountains provided a backdrop to the sage covered landscape.

The Crawford House dominated its 3 acre parcel on the hillside above Soda Creek and overlooking the Yampa River. It had an unobstructed view of the Yampa Valley, Emerald Mountain, and the Continental Divide. Historic photographs show the landscape around the building devoid of trees. The Crawfords were able gardeners. In addition to the family vegetable plot, they planted a cottonwood tree, transplanted two cedar trees from western Routt County, and cultivated lilac bushes from cuttings carried west from the family burying ground in Missouri, all of which remain today. Along the east side of the house, the Crawfords planted a white rose bush (“the Coquette”) purchased from a traveling salesman and renamed it Lulie’s Rose, after their oldest daughter. From her home in Missouri, Margaret dug up her prized yellow
rose bushes (the Harrison Yellow Rose) and planted them along the front porch in Steamboat Springs. (Schaffer, 2005; Crawford 2008, 80.) Before there was a porch, a lush vine framed the front entrance. The vine is no longer there. An unpainted wooden plank fence lined with chicken wire delineated the front and side yards. The house stood alone on Crawford Hill until 1902, when other prominent families began to build homes nearby. Over the years, subsequent owners subdivided the Crawford property into progressively smaller lots. Today the parcel is approximately 118 feet wide and 130 feet deep, similar to the neighboring properties.

**Steamboat Springs Today**

*Population*

In the early 21st century northwestern Colorado was no longer the undifferentiated expanse of sparsely settled land it had been at the start of the 20th century. Population growth, urbanization and economic development changed the landscape and character of Steamboat Springs and Routt County. According to census records, Steamboat Springs officially became urban shortly after 1970, when the town had only 2340 residents, and the county’s population was 6592. After the 1961 opening of the Steamboat Ski Area on Mount Werner by a group of local visionary skiers, the town began to change. First dubbed “Ski Town USA” in 1947 (Towler 1987, 44), the name gained wide acceptance by locals as the ski industry expanded and the cattle industry receded. Wealthy outside investors purchased the Mount Werner Ski Area in 1969 and promoted it as a major destination resort (Rothman 1998, 256-264). The population and guest accommodations began to grow. By 1980 Steamboat Springs had 5098 residents. Twenty years later, Steamboat Springs reported over 9815 residents, an annual increase of 3% since 1980. The population increase in Steamboat Springs was not limited to residents. Tourism was growing as well. In 2000 there were over 18,000 official guest pillows in town, more than the local population. By 2005, Routt County had over 21,521 residents, including the 10,846 inhabitants of Steamboat Springs (Steamboat Springs Chamber Resort Association 2008,10).

*Economy*

More than 47% of Routt County land is still publicly owned, most of it designated as Routt County National Forest. Tourism, agriculture, and coal mining have been the region’s economic engines over the past century, albeit in varying proportions. In 1970 revenue streams were equally divided among the three categories. By 2005 tourism and related businesses generated more than 70% of local sales tax revenues (Steamboat Springs Chamber Resort Association 2008, 8). Steamboat Springs is the county’s largest community, the county seat, and its economic engine. It is home to Colorado Mountain College, a two-year community college. Two private K-12 schools augment the public school system. Based in Steamboat Springs are several nationally known businesses, TIC (The Industrial Company) and Smartwool. In 2005 the Steamboat Ski and Resort Corporation was the county’s largest employer with over 1800 winter employees. Other major employers include the Yampa Valley Medical Center, U.S. Forest Service, and local governments. Five banks, two locally owned, serve the area. Since 2000 the county has attracted over 700 location-neutral businesses (telecommuters). In 2005 these businesses generated over $35 million in revenues to the local economy (Steamboat Springs Chamber Resort Association 2008, 13).
Government

Originally funded by a five mill city property tax in 1900, (Richards 1976, 143), by 2000 Steamboat Springs had replaced its property tax with a 4.5% city sales tax. The structure of city government became more responsive to local needs when the citizens of Steamboat Springs voted to become a home-rule municipality in 1973, as its population passed the “urban” (over 2500 residents) threshold. That year the town exchanged its original statutory town board for the council/manager form of government, established zoning regulations, and appointed its first planning commission. It was a time of change and expansion. The community doubled in size that year when the city council voted to annex the new ski area at the base of Mount Werner south of town. Now there were two local ski areas: Mount Werner, operated by the Steamboat Ski and Resort Corporation on 3000 acres of the Routt National Forest, and Howelsen Hill, owned and operated by the City of Steamboat Springs since 1913. In one hundred years the town had expanded from its original 40 acre plat with less than 5 miles of unpaved roads and alleys, to over 6535 acres in the city limits with 69 miles of paved streets and alleys in 2001 (City of Steamboat Springs 2003, 10). Like many other western communities concerned about losing their rural character to sprawl (Nicolaides and Wiese 2006, 469-470), the local governments enacted new legislation. The Steamboat Springs City Council and Routt County Commissioners jointly adopted an Urban Growth Boundary in 1995, beyond which the City does not provide municipal services. Review of the boundary occurs every five years.

In 1900 the town had no full-time employees. In 2000 the city employed 183 full-time and 58 part-time staff. By 2005 city services included public safety and police protection; snowplowing and snow removal; fire suppression and safety; water treatment; wastewater treatment; free to rider bus service; operation and maintenance of the Howelsen Hill ski lifts and trails; operation of the city’s general aviation facility airport; maintenance of city parks, ball fields, rodeo grounds, and trails; as well as tennis center and golf course operations and maintenance. Municipal services had grown exponentially. As an example, the 1911 Sanborn map noted that the Fire Department consisted of the fire chief, seven volunteers, and two fire carts. City records in 2002 show there were 31 firefighters, including 5 full–time staff, and four fire engines.

As Steamboat Springs grew in population and became more complex, the city council authorized volunteer boards and commissions to help guide and implement city policies, among them the Parks and Recreation Commission, the Howelsen Hill Committee, the Golf Committee, the Airport Commission, the Historic Preservation Commission, the Art in Public Places Committee, and ad hoc committees as needed.

Infrastructure: Then and Now

Transportation

Access by road to Steamboat Springs and the Yampa River Valley was a challenge in the early 1900s. Unpaved wagon tracks from the south or west and Indian trails winding through the mountains were the only routes into the area. 1914 saw the construction of the steep Rabbit Ears Pass (named for a prominent rock formation) road east over the Continental Divide, but there was no winter maintenance. Matters changed when the privately funded Victory Highway (US Highway 40 today) linking New York to San Francisco came through the town in 1923 (Tread of Pioneers Museum 1979, 19). The two-lane highway over Rabbit Ears Pass is still the most direct
east/west route to Steamboat Springs. Now maintained by the Colorado Department of Transportation, the highway has four lanes within the city limits, and an oversized interchange to access the Steamboat Ski Area and the nearby shopping center built in the 1990s.

Not until the late 1980s was there any public transportation in Steamboat Springs. Having expanded to more than 10 square miles in size, the town was no longer walkable. City buses began to run between the original downtown, known today as “Old Town”, the Steamboat Ski Area, and residential areas on both ends of the city in an effort to relieve traffic congestion and to provide convenient transportation for tourists and locals.

The Steamboat Springs City Manager reported in 2000 the system operated 20 buses and vans and had more than 1,011,272 transit riders. He also confirmed the popularity of the recently constructed 24 miles of bike trails along the Yampa River in providing alternative pedestrian-friendly transportation routes.

After the discomforts of stagecoach, horseback or walking to town, residents were overjoyed when the Moffat Railroad began daily passenger and freight service to Denver in 1909, despite the delays often caused by winter blizzards and avalanches on the way. Travel times improved considerably in 1928 with the completion of the 6.5 mile Moffat Tunnel through the mountains. The new tunnel shortened the challenging railroad route by 27 miles and over 7 hours in time (FRASERdesign 1997, 87). Nonetheless, the increase in private automobile use after World War Two led to a steep decline in train passengers. The service ended in 1969. During the same period, ranchers began to ship their livestock to markets by truck instead of rail, causing the end of cattle shipments as well (Shaffer 2005, 35). Now owned by the Union Pacific Railroad, in 2005 a minimum of three daily trains carried shipments of high grade Routt and Moffat County coal to power plants throughout the country. The two counties are Colorado’s largest coal producers.

Air travel was unheard of during the Crawford years in Steamboat Springs, but has become an essential transportation service in the 21st century. Routt County built its first airport two miles west of downtown Steamboat Springs before World War Two (Tread of Pioneers Museum 1979, 19). In 1971 daily passenger flights began. Commercial airlines operated convenient 35-minute trips from Steamboat Springs to Denver on Twin Otter and Dash-Seven aircraft until the late 1990s, when costs became prohibitive. By 2005 the airport changed to a general aviation facility owned by the City of Steamboat Springs. In 1966 the county built a commercial airport 25 miles west of Steamboat Springs with federal and county funds (Tread of Pioneers Museum 1979, 19). Daily commercial jet service to Denver and locally subsidized direct flights to and from major cities during the winter and summer tourist seasons now fly from the Hayden Regional Airport.

Utilities

In the early 1900s Steamboat Springs was the most developed community in northwestern Colorado and has remained so a century later. 1911 and 1920 Sanborn maps documented the heart of town, from Fourth to Eleventh Streets, with outlying buildings described in the margins. Text on the 1911 Sanborn map noted the town’s ownership of a 440,000 gallon reservoir (approximately 1.35 acre feet) 1.5 miles northeast of town as well as 5.5 miles of water pipes, both cast iron, and the original 1905 wooden pipes. By 2005 the city maintained 58 miles of water mains and 534 fire hydrants. Fish Creek and Long Lake Reservoirs supplanted the town’s first reservoir on Spring Creek with a joint capacity of more than 4563 acre feet (Stantec 2008, 32).
The municipal wastewater treatment plant replaced outhouses decades ago. The city’s website reported there were 57 miles of sewer mains in use in 2005. Most storm water drains into the sewer system, although excessive snowmelt and rainwater sometimes flow directly into the Yampa River, creating potential water quality problems.

A coal-fired steam engine/generator provided electricity to the town. It began operations in 1901 in a brick building downtown. The company was privately owned. Electricity for lights started in the late afternoon and continued until midnight, and customers were billed for each light (Merrill 2008, 135). Businesses and residences quickly signed up for the new service, including the Crawford family. In those days customers used electricity for lighting, not for heating or power. In 1940 the Colorado Utilities Corporation purchased the electric company and eventually merged operations with the Yampa Valley Electric Association (YVEA) in 1952. YVEA then retired the downtown power plant. According to its web site, YVEA does not produce power, but purchases it from Xcel Energy and other suppliers.

Steamboat Springs executed its first franchise for natural gas in 1965 according to city records, but it was several years before the service became widely available throughout town.

In 1900 there was no trash collection. Some households had a trash pit behind the house, gave food scraps to neighbors’ hogs, and recycled what they could. Years later, a dump (today’s landfill) about 20 miles away accepted trash for a small fee, but there was no pick up service. Since the 1970s several vendors have provided residents with weekly trash collection and curbside recycling service for a monthly charge.

Communication with the outside world was difficult in the town’s early years. James Crawford established the Steamboat Springs Post Office in his cabin in 1878 (Leslie 2005, 42).
By the early 1900s the post office had moved to a downtown commercial building. Steamboat Springs instituted telephone service in 1901, when the town board granted a franchise to the Western Slope Telephone Company. Conveniently, the telephone exchange was in the same building as the post office. By 1905 phone lines extended to neighboring ranches, towns, and even to Denver. The monthly cost was $0.50 for residential lines, $1.00 for business, and $5.00 for rural ranches (Richards 1976, 163-164). Eight customers shared a line and could listen to each other’s conversations. An old family photo from the 1900s shows a wall-mounted crank telephone in the Crawford home. There was still only one local telephone service in Steamboat Springs in 2005, but customers had a choice of many long distance companies. In the late 1990s new providers introduced cell phone service to the area. Limited at first, by 2005 cell phone coverage had reached most of the county.

Yet another infrastructure component in Steamboat Springs unknown in James Crawford’s time was telecommunication. As late as the 1990s Internet services in northwestern Colorado were minimal. The completion of an innovative state-sponsored private-public partnership finally brought affordable high speed Internet to the region in 2000. By 2005 it was evident that this communication tool would transform the economy of Steamboat Springs and Routt County in the 21st century as much as the arrival of the railroad did in the early 20th century.

Streets, Alleys, Culverts

The 1911 Sanborn map recorded Lincoln Avenue, the town’s main street, as being 100 feet wide. This was because Steamboat Springs was a cow town, and cattle drives through the town to grazing allotments or the railroad stations for shipment were a regular occurrence until the late 1960s (Winter 1994, 5-3). The remaining streets were drawn 80 feet wide, and alleys 20 feet wide. None were paved. Marcellus Merrill’s hand-drawn map of the town in 1910 noted a ford through Spring Creek on Lincoln Avenue near 4th Street at the south end of town, pedestrian foot bridges over Butcherknife Creek at Lincoln and 7th Street (the Sanborn map indicates a stone culvert under Lincoln Avenue at this point), and finally, an iron bridge across Lincoln Avenue beyond 11th Street over Soda Creek. Historic photographs and Merrill’s map document wooden boardwalks with hitching posts along both sides of Lincoln Avenue between 5th Street and 11th Streets. There were no traffic lights. In the residential areas the unpaved roads and alleys were much narrower, and sidewalks did not exist. Only one culvert appeared on the Sanborn map, where Butcherknife Creek flowed under Lincoln Avenue. Streets and alleys throughout the city are now paved, but there still are no sidewalks and few streetlights in most of Steamboat Springs’ residential neighborhoods. In contrast, wide concrete sidewalks with curbs and gutters, street trees, and benches replaced the downtown boardwalks long ago. The hitching posts are gone.

In 2005 Lincoln Avenue, U.S. Highway 40, was still the only direct road through Steamboat Springs. The city’s 2003 traffic study documented more than 26,000 vehicles traveled through Old Town daily. The streams that once were problems to cross were now invisible, hidden in huge metal culverts under Lincoln Avenue. The first traffic light was installed in 1971. Now six stoplights control the traffic flow in historic Old Town, and additional traffic lights monitor busy intersections further along Highway 40 in both directions.

Public Buildings

The public bath house over the Heart Spring established by James Crawford over a hundred years ago continued to be a popular attraction in 2005. Now considerably larger, the
Old Town Hot Springs includes outdoor soaking and swimming pools, exercise classes, tennis courts, and a snack bar.

The town’s first public library opened in 1887 in the meeting room of the Union Church. According to Bud Werner Library archives, in the early 1900s the Carnegie Foundation denied the town’s request to fund a library building because the town was too small. Nonetheless, the library continued to grow over the years. In 2005 voters approved a multi-million dollar expansion of the facility, assured that the library would remain downtown.

Routt County justice facilities needed to expand in the late 1990s. Despite the guiding language of the Steamboat Springs Area Comprehensive Plan and popular support to keep the county courthouse downtown, the commissioners chose to build the new justice center on the outskirts of town. Fortunately, the historic downtown courthouse was completely restored and rehabilitated for the county commissioners’ county offices, staff, and meeting rooms.

By the late 1990s Steamboat Springs city offices were in need of additional space. To celebrate the town’s 2000 centennial, city council voted to rehabilitate the original electric power plant and adjoining property into the award-winning Centennial Hall. The facility is now the center of city government and the location of council chambers, the Crawford meeting room, City Cafe, and staff offices.

The Neighborhood: Then and Now

In 2005 Crawford Hill retained its small town character, despite the growth of the rest of Steamboat Springs. Even though city streets had been paved decades earlier, sidewalks were not required and residents walk in the streets. According to newspaper accounts, there were neither street signs in residential areas nor any house numbers until after World War Two, when the population began to grow and newcomers were getting lost. Mature cottonwoods, conifers, aspen trees and lilac bushes now grow along the streets and in the yards. Yards are not fenced, and the lawns are tidy but not manicured. Cuttings from Margaret Crawford’s yellow roses have proliferated over the years, and are a prized feature in local gardens. Many homes
have additions or garages in the back yards instead of the early outhouses, chicken coops, and barns for horses and cows. The only animals most people own now are cats and dogs. It is a stable neighborhood. Most Crawford Hill residents live there year round and range in age from retirees to families with young children. Young children walk three blocks down the hill to Soda Creek Elementary School, while the older students take the school bus or ride their bicycles to the middle school or high school. Colorado Mountain College is three blocks up the hill in the other direction.

![Map showing location of Stone House in Steamboat Springs, 2009](source: Google Maps)

Howelsen Hill, the bike trail, the river, the library, most government offices, and downtown businesses are all an easy walk down the hill. One of the two city fire stations is downtown as well, while the other station is located closer to the Mt. Werner Ski Area. The free city bus regularly services the community college a few blocks away, and stops in the neighborhood in its route through town.

There has never been home mail delivery in Steamboat Springs. Historically, residents have had post office boxes and visited the downtown post office daily to get their mail. The city and post office installed cluster boxes in some newer neighborhoods to ease traffic congestion around the post office, but they are not available everywhere.

Steamboat Spring’s free daily newspaper is available on news racks throughout the town. The Steamboat Pilot, a weekly newspaper, is delivered to subscribers on Sunday, protected by a bright plastic bag and tossed somewhere in the front yard. There are no newspaper boxes in the city limits.

The two national grocery store chains that came to downtown Steamboat Springs in the late 1970s moved to auto-friendly locations between Old Town and Mount Werner Ski Area in the 1980s. Fortunately, two locally owned health food/grocery stores downtown have replaced the national chains and were doing well in 2005.
James and Margaret Crawford and their children were a close family, resourceful, hospitable, community-minded and talented. Thanks to the stories, paintings, and letters of Lulita Crawford Pritchett, one of their granddaughters, and the meticulous research of family archives, photographs, and other documents by James Logan Crawford, one of their great grandsons, it is possible to imagine what the Crawfords’ lives were like in the early 1900s. As young adults the Crawford children often stayed in the Stone House with their spouses and growing families. Son John later built his house several doors away. A family photo shows Clara, Logan’s wife, washing clothes outside the Stone House using large washtubs set on a long wooden table, close to the hand pump at the well. Another photo documents Mary returning from a hunting trip, surrounded by horses laden with fresh game, holding a gun in her hand wearing a divided skirt, bandanna around her neck, and a jaunty brimmed hat. For years the family kept chickens and milk cows and owned several dogs. Interior photos reveal hunting trophies everywhere, including an eagle, owl, cougar, elk, mountain sheep, antelope, and a huge mounted
bearskin on the wall of Crawford’s third story den. Another photo shows John and Logan playing the banjo and fiddle. The family also owned a piano.

Although Jim Crawford and Anna Fang do not live in Steamboat Springs year round, their home has once again become a gathering place for the extended family, now scattered around the United States. While train travel is no longer an option, this generation of Crawfords either drive or fly here from their distant homes via Denver. Siblings, children, cousins, uncles, and aunts visit the Crawford House to ski, hike, and enjoy life in Steamboat Springs and the company of their growing number of local friends. While here, thanks to the Internet, they are able to stay current with their professional and business activities. The tradition of generosity and hospitality embodied by the elder Crawfords continues today as the next generation of the family shares the Crawford House and its stories with the community.

Fig. 15. Photo of the Crawford House, August 2008 [Source: Crawford 2008, iv]

Closing Thoughts

Outside the time period covered by this account are the stories of two simultaneous and definitive chapters in the development of Steamboat Springs. In 1913, Norwegian stonemason Carl Howelsen introduced the sport of ski jumping and recreational skiing to Steamboat Springs. He also founded what grew into the Winter Sports Club training program for young athletes. Since then, Steamboat Springs has produced more than 56 individual winter Olympians: ski
jumpers, downhill racers, and cross country skiers, more than any other town in the United States, thus the name Ski Town USA. The arts, have also flourished near Steamboat Springs at the Perry-Mansfield Performing Arts Dance Camp, just outside the city limits, founded in 1913. It is now the oldest such facility in the country, where artists such as Julie Harris, Jose Limon, and Dustin Hoffman have studied. The arts and skiing continue to influence Steamboat Springs today.

Over the past hundred years, the isolation of Steamboat Springs in northwestern Colorado helped to preserve its western character, and delay, but not eliminate the impacts of urbanization. The Steamboat Spring, Colorado’s only geyser, was destroyed in 1908 when the railroad route was built. The Soda Spring disappeared decades later when Highway 40 was widened. The implementation of the Taylor Grazing Act in 1932 closed the open range, ended homesteading in Colorado, and changed settlement patterns in the county. On the other hand, Steamboat Springs did not experience the urbanizing influence of transcontinental rail service when the Moffat Railroad failed. It also avoided the negative impacts of the Interstate Highway in the 1950s when engineers sited the route elsewhere.

Yet new forces are bringing change. The ski resort industry has brought Steamboat Springs to the attention of a new generation of eager townsite developers and part-time residents. Despite the growth in population, there are more jobs than workers. Recent immigrants from Mexico and Latin America have changed the demographics of this once homogeneous population. Commuters from Moffat County and nearby towns drive to Steamboat Springs for work daily. In 2005, according to the Yampa Valley Partners 2005 Community Indicators Report, more than 21% of Moffat County workers were employed in Routt County. Elected officials struggle to understand and implement policies for inclusionary zoning. Residents and visitors alike are concerned about maintaining community character, historic preservation, and land preservation, and are actively engaged in local affairs.

The magnificent natural landscape provides the perspective and motivation for such involvement, and is one of the reasons the Crawford family has returned.
Fig. 16. Old Town Steamboat Springs and Mount Werner, 2000 [Source: postcard]
REFERENCES

Books and Other Printed Matter


**Archives and Databases**

City of Steamboat Springs Historic Inventory. [http://steamboatsprings.net/departments/planning_department/historic_preservation/historic_inventory](http://steamboatsprings.net/departments/planning_department/historic_preservation/historic_inventory)

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