

# Camp George West: A History

*Writers Award Winner 2011*

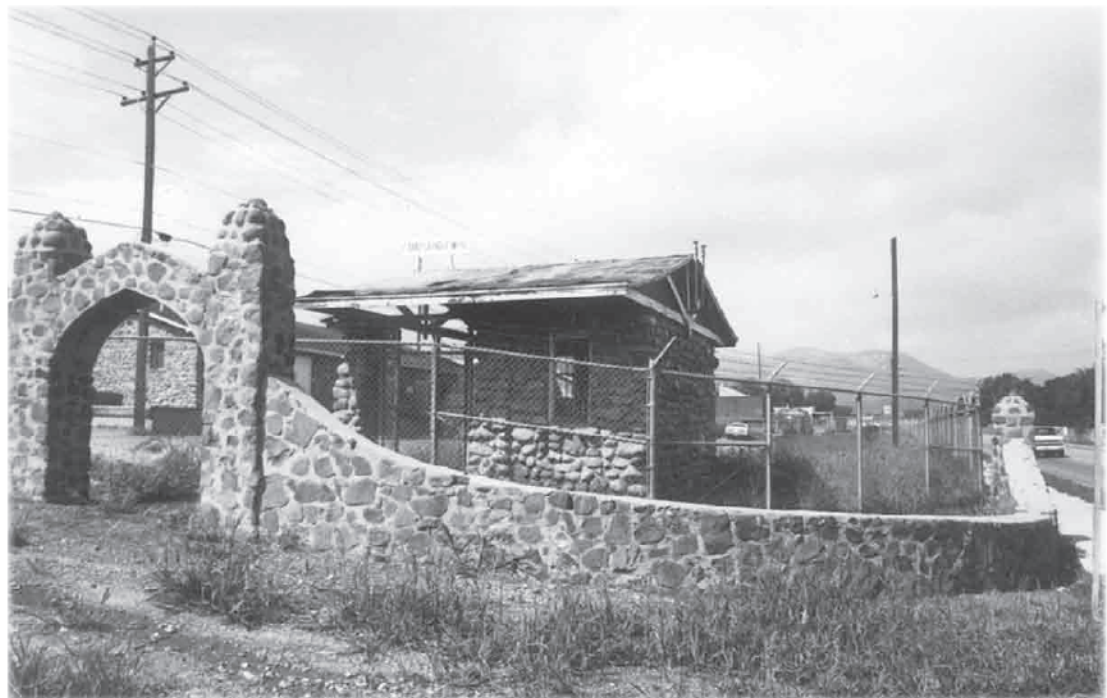
*by Jerry Grunski*

**H**ow would you train state troopers or policemen in the art of auto pursuit? You certainly couldn't cut them loose on city streets and say, "Go get 'em." Nor could you take them out to an Interstate highway and have them tramp on accelerators and weave through traffic at breakneck speed. What the 22 State Troopers headquartered at Camp George West in Golden, do is tear around on top of South Table Mountain. If you spot plumes of dust up there it is probably not wild-eyed youngsters playing NASCAR.

In another sense, South Table Mountain has played a significant role in the annals of Camp George West. The volcanic prominence served as a target for rifle shooters at the turn of the last century. If you couldn't hit the side of the mountain, you weren't much of a marksman. Lookout Mountain also absorbed some ordnance from firearms before the Denver Rifle Club – which had taken over the old picnic grounds east of Golden – sold 75 acres to the U.S. Army for National Guard training in 1903.

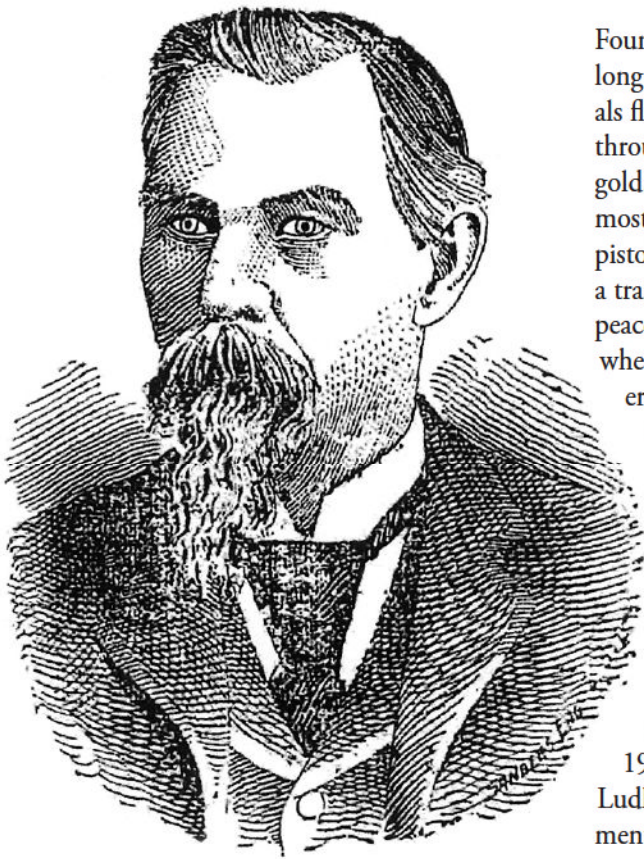
"If you know where to look, you can still pick up spent ammo on Lookout Mountain," said Lieutenant Ron French, Shift Commander at the present Corrections Center on South Golden Road, below the I-70 overpass and north of Colfax Avenue. He brought out a World War I rifle shell casing found up there, in a wooden souvenir box.

Basaltic rocks from South Table Mountain were also extracted for many of the 56 structures that are still part of Camp George West. Most of the one-story dwellings were private homes at first, begun around 1916, and later converted into military officers' quarters. Trainees were always housed in tents. Some river rock for the exquisitely engineered buildings also came from quarries in Lena Gulch. Smooth, water-buffed rocks used in construction were also harvested from Clear Creek, which the exploratory contingent of Major Stephen H. Long in 1820 called "Canonball Creek," because the hefty stones resembled artillery ammunition.



Camp George West  
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George West founder of Golden's first newspaper  
copyright Golden Globe Industrial Edition May 1893

Why is the Camp there and is there an opposite Camp George East on the other side of Denver? Well, no on that last count. Surprise. It's named for George West.

West was born in Claremont, New Hampshire, in 1826, and he became a newspaperman in Boston. He rose to be president of the Boston Mining Company, an organization formed by investors who wanted to take advantage of the gold rush to Colorado in 1859. Instead of prying rock out of the gulches beyond the foothills, George West founded a newspaper in Golden, which he called *The Western Mountaineer*. That name was changed to *The Transcript* in 1866 – still in circulation today – with West continuing as editor. West was appointed Adjutant General of the Colorado National Guard, serving only two years, 1887-89. Jumping ahead many years, West's grandson, Kimball, also editor of *The Transcript*, and also the Guard's Adjutant General, saw to it that the rifle range training ground on South Golden Road was named for his grandfather in 1934.

Founding of the National Guard goes back a long way, to 1860, when over 100,000 individuals flocked to the Colorado Front Range and up through the Hogback to “the diggings” seeking gold. The Camp three miles east of Golden, the most prominent small arms range – rifles and pistols – west of the Mississippi River, served as a training ground for militia needed to keep the peace when trouble arose among mining camps, when labor disputes erupted in coal mining operations, when Native Americans harassed pioneers coming into the territory, and when the nation went to war and required soldiers who were at least semi-skilled.

National Guard troops from Camp George West, according to a Colorado Department of Transportation Historical Brochure, “included crowd control during the dangerous labor strikes and civil unrest in Colorado’s mining industry in 1903-1914,” even participating in the infamous Ludlow Massacre of 1913 when the labor movement fought to unionize coal mines. Guardsmen also helped victims of the 1921 Arkansas River food in Pueblo when the downtown area was submerged in 12 feet of water and over 100 people lost their lives. Guardsmen from Camp George West were called to serve at the U.S./ Mexican border when Mexican General Francisco “Pancho” Villa struck American forces in 1916. The Guards also acted to control a riot “at the state penitentiary in Canon City in 1929, battling grasshoppers in southern and eastern Colorado in 1937,” and furnishing personnel in both WWI and WWII. “In July 1917 the Camp bustled with activity as 3,345 Guardsmen were activated for service in World War I.”

Personnel from Camp George West have served in every American military skirmish and war since it was formed in 1860. But the Camp experienced a pivotal thrust in the 1930s when its land-locked status prevented expansion to meet the needs of advanced firepower. Up to that point, however, the remarkable stone buildings continued to be constructed, with manpower supplied by the Depression era Works Progress Administration (WPA). Previously, in the 1920s, the one-story stone cottages (at one time there were 29 mess halls) had been erected by



homeless men under an organization called the Federal Emergency Administration. The number of individuals gathered for this purpose varied between 200 and 500, a surprisingly large assemblage. Discouragingly, they were compensated a pittance: a dollar a week and 21 meals.

In 1993 Camp George West was placed under the National Register of Historic Places by the Legacy Resources Management Program for Cultural Resources, and a plan to preserve the structures was initiated. In some respects the stone buildings are valuable examples of pioneer architecture. Today, the Camp has morphed into functions of a far different kind than military training. In fact, the National Guard is hardly a presence any more. Camp George West is simply a storage facility for this home-based arm of the military – one huge warehouse and an abandoned red brick armory – for Army green cargo trucks. No training takes place there according to Captain Darin Overstreet, Commander of the present Colorado National Guard. The summer of 1939 saw the final military training programs. Today, recruiting and training does take place in 30 other units throughout the state, in 24 communities (some cities have more than one unit).

Trainees housed in tents circa 1916  
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Historical Society.

It is far from being abandoned, though. As indicated earlier, there is a Colorado State Troopers regional headquarters, fronting on McIntyre, with nearly two dozen highway patrolmen, a training building, and a dozen vehicles. This entity began in 1935. The day the site was visited, a jeep was tipped over in the grass and dummy bodies were strewn about. Troopers from around the state were handling scenarios of accidents.

A standard gauge 13-mile railroad was built in 1891, running between Denver and Golden. Tracks ran along what is now South Golden Road (a stone shelter, a train stop, still stands on the south side of the road near the Camp entrance). This railroad, electrified after 1908, established a 45-minute daily schedule and was an important conveyance of supplies for the military operation.

During World War II the federal government leased the Camp to train Military Police and 100 police guard dogs. The purpose was to combat sabotage. “Thirty-two German prisoners of war were temporarily housed at the Camp during this period.”



With diminished Guard activities after WWII, plus building conversions, the Colorado Department of Transportation set up its Maintenance Training Academy at the Camp, with about a dozen instructors. You don't hand a set of keys to a newcomer, have him climb into a four-wheel-drive Oshkosh truck and tell him, "Go plow snow." A lot of unfortunate things would get plowed over and plowed under. Highly specialized classroom instruction and practical vehicle handling takes place at this facility. The Academy also focuses on repair and maintenance of highways, emergency responding, graffiti eradication, and resurfacing. Instructors have a 500 seat auditorium to explain which type of aggregate (crushed rock) is required as a support base for four-inch blacktop. Operations in CDOT can be significantly technical.

As Camp George West has undergone major changes in function perhaps the most radical of all is its transformation into a corrections facility. The razor wire atop fences is apparent, but the place looks positively benign. It could

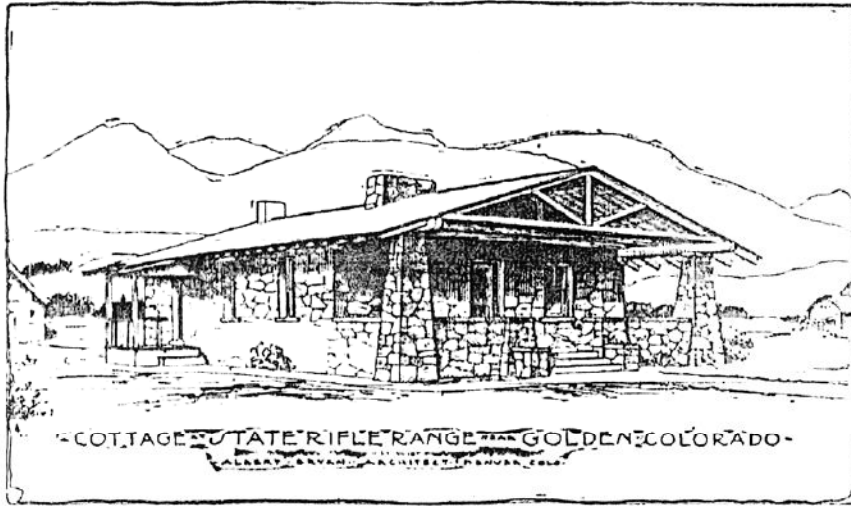
be landscaped a little more attractively, though. Hundreds of people drive by every day without realizing that 150 offenders are housed in nine former mess halls and possibilities for individuals inside to become productive and model citizens upon release is very high. Nomenclature is extremely important to people in the system. Individuals about to be placed on parole are not inmates or prisoners, the proper term is offenders. They've made mistakes and are paying for them. (No one incarcerated at Camp George West has been convicted of spousal abuse or is a sexual offender.) Each "case" has a case manager. Each convicted person entering the Camp undergoes a series of processes that are designed to assess aptitude and educational background. A company called Colorado Corrections Industries – an independent, privately owned and profit-making enterprise – not supported by taxes – provides 49 avenues of career possibilities for the men going through the process. "If you work to be an auto mechanic, a fire fighter, or furniture manufacturer, the opportunity is there," said Su-

Birdseye view of Colorado National Guard Camp circa 1903

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Officer's Club for the state rifle range in 1911

copyright Denver Republican  
November 12, 1911.

san Hale, the Corrections' headquarters Executive Secretary. Recent forest and grass fires in the foothills were partially doused by Camp George West offenders who are apprenticing in forestry.

"All State Trooper vehicles at the Corrections campus are serviced by offenders," added Lt. French. Shops for repair and construction are across South Golden Road. Personnel can move through a 250-foot tunnel to access the manufacturing and repair shops on the south side.

"They're always being supervised by Correctional Officers," Lt. French said. "We take roll three times a day. There are 16 cameras aimed at corridors on the post. Occasionally someone will get out. The cameras are not foolproof. There are no bars on the barracks windows. Fear is the usual motivator, the result of threats from fellow offenders. Once in a while a man may elude surveillance cameras or slip away on an outside job such as picking up trash along a roadway. But if they go home to straighten out a wayward child, they often return on their own," he said.

The offenders wear pale green physician's "scrubs" while on duty in the compound. All maintenance and food preparation is handled by offenders. When they exit after serving their time, they have a parole officer to report to, but they also get placement help in securing a job in the field for which they have prepared. "You go to a restaurant and a former offender may prepare your meal," said Lt. French. The industries make a profit on dormitory and office furniture, making fly rods, producing honey in bee-keeping,

shrimp farming, and printing services, among many more fields of profitable endeavor. Calculations demonstrate that the work of this organization saves state taxpayers \$9 million a year. Yes, they make license plates too.

Lieutenant French took me to a rock structure near the Camp office, tulips growing around the perimeter, complete with a water wheel and waterfall. "A rock specialist – we develop landscapers too," French said. "Proud of his work. Look at the plaque. It reads 'Adie's Garden.' That's his mother." ☺

**Works Sited:**

*Camp George West, Historic Resources Survey, R. Laurie and Thomas H. Simmons, Front Range Research Association, Inc., Denver, 1992*

*CDOT, a three-page brochure, "History of Camp George West," undated, anonymous*

**Interviews**

*Lieutenant Ron French, Shift Commander, Colorado Corrections Center, Golden, Colorado, Friday, April 15, 2011*

*Executive Secretary Susan Hale, Main Office, Camp George West Corrections Center, Friday, April 15, 2011*

*Patrolman J.R. Geninger, State Patrol Office, Monday, April 18, 2011*

*CDOT Public Relations Representative Stacey Stegman, phone interview, Monday, April 18, 2011*

*Colorado National Guard Commander Captain Darin Overstreet, phone interview, Tuesday, April 19, 2011*