

Under Yogi Bear, history hunters gather in search of Fort Lincoln

By Patricia Calhoun Tuesday, Apr 12 2011

The history hunters gathered under the giant statue of Yogi Bear, armed with maps and metal detectors, in what had to be one of the strangest mash-ups ever: Hanna-Barbera meets barbarism. The crew had convened on April 2 at Jellystone Park Camp-Resort, a franchise of the national chain located just north of Larkspur, to see if they could find evidence of Fort Lincoln, also known as the People's Fort and Oakes' Folly, a circa 1864 structure built in the tiny settlement of Huntsville by nearby residents who worried that Indians might attack.



On August 4, 1864, Olivia Oakes, a cousin of the man who would soon be known as Buffalo Bill and the wife of D.C. Oakes, a '58 pioneer, sawmill operator and Huntsville's first postmaster, had written her sister: "We are having a tremendous excitement about the Indians. The report is that they have declared war against the whites; they have already commenced their operations away south down at Fort Larned killed 40 persons and drove off all the government stock except 40 head. Col. Chivington came up last Saturday evening and said there were ten thousand combined and had declared war — they are still showing themselves down on the road and when they find the emigrants in small parties and not prepared they kill people and run off the stock...We of this neighborhood are preparing for the worst — we are building a fort — all the folks near are pitching in with all their might — all the families get together every night and have their guns and revolvers all ready....

"I am getting uneasy about it for fear we all will get killed."

The fort they built out of logs from Oakes's sawmill was ten feet high, with nine rooms around an open court and well. The settlers only occupied it for a few weeks — accounts of the exact period varies, although it was long enough for a marriage to be performed there — but it was still standing on November 28, 1865, when a traveler to Huntsville described it (complete with dramatic italics) for the *Rocky Mountain News*: "In this settlement is the fort built last year to afford protection against the kind and *pacific* attention of our *friendly* red neighbors. It is built of closely fitted pine logs...presenting twenty faces and loop-holed for forty rifles. Its interior, except an open court in the centre, was roofed with earth, under which the people of Plume Creek were in the habit of seeking shelter and protection for some six months *before* the 'massacre' at Sand Creek."

The good people of Huntsville were not killed by Indians, though. The actual massacre was of more than 160 native Americans camped along the banks of Sand Creek in southeastern Colorado Territory, most of them children, women or the elderly, all of them believing they were under the protection of Fort Lyon, with an American flag flying above the lodge of Chief Black Kettle. Colonel John Chivington, the former Methodist minister who'd chatted with Olivia Oakes on his visit to Huntsville, had recruited volunteers to fight the Indians for a hundred days; his 3rd Colorado Regiment, dubbed the "Bloodless Third" for its lack of action during most of that period, changed its reputation forever on November 29, 1864.

News of the bloody fight was quick to reach Denver, where the scalps of those killed were displayed on a stage during a post-Christmas show devoted to the glorious battle.

Not quite Hanna-Barbera, but plenty barbaric.

Ian Steyn, who bought the former KOA campground and turned it into a Jellystone franchise, acquired an adjacent piece of property "sort of by chance in 2005," he says, and was in the process of turning it into the Outdoor Experience, a place filled with activities for families, when he started hearing stories about a fort built around the time of the Sand Creek Massacre that had once stood nearby. "I started asking questions," he remembers. "Something said to me I just need to keep asking questions."

Those questions led him to the Douglas County History Research Center and archivist Johanna Harden, whose files include records from an 1866 General Land Office Survey of the area, conducted by William Pierce in accordance with the Homestead Act of 1862. The field notes for that survey give the location of the sawmill and fort measured from the section line between Sections 16 and 21, Township 9 South, Range 67 West, but also describe some of the surrounding terrain. "If you look at the field notes," Harden says, "you can get a feeling for the land. Sometimes they noted human activity when it was close to their line of work." And there had been plenty of activity around Huntsville: not just the fort and the mill and settlers' homes, but also Sarah Coberly's Half-way House, located on Plum Creek about halfway between Denver and Colorado City, then the territorial capital.

It had long been assumed that most of this settlement, particularly the fort, had disappeared when I-25 was built, burying history under gravel and concrete. In 1930, an assistant curator from the State Historical Society had visited the area with one of the Oakes daughters, who'd pointed out where the fort had stood within 200 yards of the "Colo. Springs-Denver highway, about midway between Castle Rock and Larkspur," the historian wrote, and where they "found a number of old irons, including a homemade ax, bricks and other things." Another document in the collection — perhaps left by a great-grandson of Sarah Coberly — offers a "Plan of Fort Lincoln," as well as this description: "built as a defense against Indians in August 1864 in 3 days, the Ladies giving valuable aid — contained for several days and nights about 25 families and over 150 men."

But as he pored over the documents, Steyn wondered if all evidence of this fort had really been destroyed. "Looking at the field notes and putting them over an aerial map, it occurred to me that the beginning point of the measurement that people were using was the wrong starting point," he says. So he hired a surveyor to retrace Pierce's 144-year-old steps and did some hunting last

summer. One Jellystone employee discovered a piece of what looked like an old shoe; another located an original surveyor's stake on the Outdoor Experience property — several hundred yards from I-25 and past the train tracks that run on the west side of the interstate. "We found some surface artifacts," Steyn says, "and that has led to this next step."

And that step was the gathering under Yogi's watchful eye, headed by the Pikes Peak Adventure League, the band of metal detectors who had helped locate the site of the actual Sand Creek Massacre before it was made a National Park Service Historic Site four years ago. "They're very professional about what they do," says Larry Schlupp, secretary/treasurer of the Larkspur Historical Society. "They have a professional surveyor. They've done a lot of historic work around Colorado."

So as the kids wandered around the outdoor trails where Steyn plans to add disc golf, a teepee village and baby goats, the historians — amateur and professional alike — headed south to the spot identified last summer as the likely site of the sawmill and fort. "Not the stockade type you see in Roy Rogers movies," Schlupp points out, but a fenced-off area that was close to the homes of settlers. And using metal detectors and other equipment, they methodically hunted through a marked-off grid.

"They found lots of goodies," Steyn reports. "They found some bullets, found a locket, found a large hinge. They know exactly where the fort stood, because they found the hinge right within the boundaries." And they located a real "treasure trove": the site of an outhouse, whose depths could contain countless artifacts.

"There's much enthusiasm and excitement for moving forward and digging up more," Steyn continues, although the date of the next search has not yet been set. "It's the metal hunters' call." And in the meantime, he's keeping a close eye on the site, which should allay some of Hardens's fears. Although she's generous in sharing the contents of her archives, she's less eager to have people dig up a real historic site. "It's a cultural resource for the state of Colorado," she says. "The property owner has every right to do with his property what he wants...but I'm concerned that more publicity puts this in jeopardy from artifact-seekers."

At this point, Steyn would probably welcome any attention; although it's not hard to get families interested in outdoor activities, those rarely extend to romps through history. "I would like to get the community involved," he says. "There are a lot of other things we could do."

Reconstruct the fort, for example.

Just as the past is always being reconstructed and reinterpreted to correct the record, especially when that past involves an event as dark as the Sand Creek Massacre. After all, even at Jellystone Park, there's often a Boo-Boo.