Remembering Dearfield: A Study of an Early 20th Century Black Community

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Remembering Dearfield: A Study of an Early 20th Century Black Community

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Abstract

This thesis explores the different meanings of Dearfield, an early 20th Century black farming colony in northeastern Colorado, from the way the settlers’ conceived of their community, to the way that it was portrayed by the founder, to the way that it is remembered today. Through analysis of archival data and government records I show that there were two sides of Dearfield, that remembered by most of the settlers, and that portrayed by the founder O.T. Jackson. A magnetometer survey shows that the townsite was not as densely occupied as the common narrative of Dearfield would suggest, indeed many homesteaders lived up to a few miles away from the town center. By using place theory I show that Dearfield was not the bounded town that it is often portrayed as, but instead can be thought of as having blurry boundaries. The people themselves knew they were from Dearfield, even if they were not living in the townsite. The standing buildings are still important, however, as they aid in our contemporary remembering of Dearfield.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Along U.S. Highway 34, about 34 miles east of Greeley, Colorado, an abandoned diner stands on the south side of the road. A marker has been erected in front of the diner, commemorating the town of Dearfield, Colorado. The marker reads (in part), “Today Dearfield remains a symbol for western pride and empowerment for many African Americans.” If you took the road next to the diner you would see a garage, a false-front house, and another building that does not look like more than a shack. You would probably also notice the ruins of another two buildings. These are the physical remains of Dearfield. A pioneering black community that reached a population of around 200 people in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, Dearfield stands today as an important reminder of Colorado’s cultural history.
Oliver Toussaint Jackson founded Dearfield in 1910. Jackson envisioned a bustling economic center surrounded by farms and ranches. It would be a place of opportunity for black business men and women of Denver and others who wanted to live off the land. Settlers started moving out to the area, taking out claims on homesteads, and trying their hands at farming. The settlers did not have water rights so they relied on rainfall. The rain fell for a few years, and the farmers started to prosper. This did not last for very long. The end of World War I sent food prices down. This coupled with a drought, and later the dust bowl and depression, brought an end to the Dearfield community.

The Physical Setting of Dearfield

Dearfield is located in Weld County, in northeastern Colorado, east of Greeley. The area is a mostly flat, featureless plain. The land slopes slightly upward from Highway 34 to the south. The town lies south of the South Platte River, and west of its tributary, Lost Creek. There is no natural water source at the site.
Semi-arid shortgrass prairie comprises the major vegetation community in northeastern Colorado, although newly introduced weedy species are prevalent in disturbed areas. Common taxa represented include yucca, blue grama grass, and prickly pear (Slessman 1998:7). Climatic features of the plains environment in general include low precipitation (especially in the winter), irregular and uncertain distribution of moisture, pronounced daily and seasonal temperature ranges, low relative humidity, high evaporation rates, frequent droughts, and persistent winds. From 1893 to 1967 the average precipitation for Greeley was 12.03 inches (30.56 centimeters), with over half of that falling between April and September. Temperatures in the same period had an average high in July, the hottest month was recorded as 89.5 degrees Fahrenheit, down to 8.8 degrees in January (Western Region Climate Center 2013).

A variety of animals call this area home. Birds and cottontail rabbits are the most conspicuous fauna in the area, but a number of others make their home here. Skunks, gophers, mice, and a variety of snakes can also be found in the Dearfield area. Big game will forage in the area on a seasonal basis, including mule deer and pronghorns. (Slessman 1998:7)

My Dearfield Experience

I had visions of grandeur when I chose to do my thesis on Dearfield. Not only have I been interested in western history for a long time, Dearfield posed a mystery that I was sure I would be able to unravel. All of the information I could find on the town was contradictory: the population reached 700, the population was nowhere near that large; there were two churches, people went to church in the school; all the teachers were white but one, none of the teachers were white; everyone got along great, people hated the
founder O.T. Jackson. Even the name of the place was up for debate. It’s called Dearfield, but the post office was Chapelton, and other people just called it the Colored Colony. What was going on in this town? I was sure that it was just waiting for Mary Connell to come along and figure it all out.

I went out with my magnetometer, my assistants, and my ego, ready to figure out the truth about Dearfield. I made grids, I took notes, I took pictures, I spent endless hours in the Denver Public Library and the Greeley Historical Society. I was so excited about the fact that some of the buildings were still standing, and there were many oral accounts and written records of the town. I would write the definitive story of Dearfield.

Instead, every day I got more confused and disheartened. I stepped on a cactus at the site that went straight through my boot; I got scratched by thorns and bit by giant bugs; my sister wanted to disown me; and worst of all, I collected data that showed very little. What in the heck was going on here? Instead of understanding Dearfield, the more I learned about it the more in the dark I felt. I despaired of ever making sense of this place. I cursed Dearfield, and myself for choosing to do my thesis at this site.

I was on the verge of giving up and moving to New Zealand to raise goats. I went to my advisor and admitted I had no idea what to say about Dearfield. She gave me some new readings, never having lost confidence in me. It was then that I had my breakthrough. Karen Blu works with the Lumbee tribe in North Carolina. After reading about the how Lumbee people express their sense of place as something with blurry boundaries, something clicked for me. The Dearfield of today is nothing at all like the Dearfield of 1918. O.T. Jackson’s vision of Dearfield was not necessarily what Dearfield
was for the homesteaders who lived there. Suddenly, I had a way forward, a way to talk about the contradictions of Dearfield in a way that made sense.

**Theoretical Perspective**

My analysis of Dearfield is based on two aspects of place theory. Place theory holds that places are spaces with meaning to a group or groups of people. Spaces do not have meaning. Places can have different meanings to different people, and different people can experience places differently. The meaning of a place can change, as well. This thesis examines the place of Dearfield, how those who lived there ascribed meaning to it, and how this meaning has changed over time.

Today, Dearfield is presented as a town. The settlers did not see Dearfield in the same way. Like the Lumbee people of North Carolina, the community of Dearfield was not centered on the townsite. The people lived on large homesteads all over the area. Their sense of Dearfield was one of shared experiences, expectations, and history. The stories from the people who settled at Dearfield focus on their hard work, their faith, and the cooperation and fun they had. Where they lived on the landscape was not a factor in their identity as a resident of Dearfield.

The townsite is the focus of the popular memory of Dearfield. Memory requires repetition of a story, but this repetition does not need to be exact. Even though the settlers’ Dearfield was not necessarily rooted in the townsite, it has come to stand for the community today. Having a physical, bounded space, which we can use as an anchor for our modern meaning of Dearfield, makes it easier to construct this meaning.
Chapter 2: Methods and Theory

Methods

My methods were chosen because of the nature of the site and my original research questions. Archival research was a necessity in understanding Dearfield. The information from the archives helps to put the site in a larger historic context. It is also where the people of Dearfield come to life. The letters, oral histories, and newspaper accounts give depth and a more complete understanding to the story of Dearfield. My original research questions had to do with notions of identity and how people make places into homes. Outbuildings, garden plots, and dugout houses could be indications of these how these ideals were put into place at Dearfield. Magnetometry can detect these features and is well suited to cover large areas of land. While the results from this magnetometer survey could not answer my original questions, they led me to ask new questions about Dearfield.

Archives

Historical documents always have bias. The author, purpose, and context of each document must be taken into consideration in order to understand the bias of each document (Galloway 2006:7). The kinds of documents preserved in archives are also biased towards more official sources. I found more newspaper articles quoting only O.T.
Jackson than personal letters or other communications revealing the thoughts of other residents. This could be because O.T. Jackson was the public face of Dearfield, and therefore would have been the person that newspapers sought out, and his papers would have been deemed more important. As a result of this, Jackson’s vision of Dearfield is most prominent in these sources.

The Denver Public Library has two main collections pertaining to Dearfield. One is at the main branch of the Denver Public Library, in the Western History and Genealogy Collection. The other is at the Blair-Caldwell Branch, in the Five Points Neighborhood. I also visited the Greeley Historical Society. These collections contain advertising material, letters, pictures, and interviews with previous Dearfield residents. I made careful notes of each document, and made photocopies when permitted.

Oral histories can provide further context for a site and provide a richer and more detailed story of Dearfield. The Denver Public Library Western History and Genealogy Collection has several recorded interviews with former residents of Dearfield done by Paul Stewart and Margaret Pitcher in 1976 and 1978. These were used for a documentary and centered mostly on people’s perceptions of O.T. Jackson, who lived at Dearfield, and what people did at Dearfield. Two Masters theses by Margaret Pitcher and Melvin Norris also contained parts of interviews with the authors. These sources were invaluable for getting the thoughts and memories of the residents of Dearfield. They provided a balance for the more “official” sources of the newspapers and advertisements in the archives. I was constrained, however, to the subjects that the interviewers asked about, and of course to what the interviewees wanted to talk about.
The background of the interviewees is important because of the biases they have. The four people interviewed by Paul Stewart and Margaret Pitcher were Olietta Moore, Charles Rothwell, Eunice Norris, and Walter Groves. Olietta Moore’s grandparents owned land at Dearfield and she spent summers at Dearfield but came back to Denver for the school year. Born in 1903, she was only 7 when her grandfather moved to Dearfield, and she continued visiting him until she was in her late teens. Charles Rothwell was one of the most successful homesteaders at Dearfield, moving there in 1910 and staying through the 1920s. Eunice Norris moved to Dearfield in 1920 when she was about 18 with her family and stayed until 1929. Walter Grove’s father moved to Dearfield during the 1930s, after the heyday of Dearfield. He was only ten when they moved, and only lived there for two years until his father died in 1939. All four were relatively young, and Charles Rothwell was the only one working his own land. Olietta Moore did not live there year round.

Government records provide an important source of information. The 1920, 1930, and 1940 U.S. Censuses provided names, ages, and other background information about the residents of Dearfield. I also used the Bureau of Land Management General Land Office records. These are records of land patents, the original transfer of land from the federal government to individuals. These record the section or lot number, Township, and Range of the transferred land. I compiled a list of names from the census and Melvin Norris’s thesis data. By searching for these names in the Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records I was able to map the location of the homesteads of these settlers.
Magnetometry

Magnetometers are instruments that use sensors to measure the strength and direction of the Earth’s magnetic field as a function of buried materials in broad areas (Kvamme 2006:206). Some archaeological features produce their own small magnetic fields, which then distort the Earth’s magnetic field. This distortion is measurable. Most of these features have remnant magnetism. Remnant magnetism in archaeological sites is usually caused by the effects of heating (Breiner 1973:8-9). Areas of burning, such as hearths and kilns, are usually the easiest features to detect with a magnetometer. Fired bricks and pottery can also be seen in magnetic maps, since they usually have been fired at a high enough temperature to change the magnetic properties of the clay, orienting the magnetic minerals in those features and producing “small magnets” in the ground (Hargrave 2010:91-92). Sometimes, subtle features such as middens and buried soil horizons high in organic matter can be detected and mapped.

Using magnetometers for historical sites can be harder than for prehistoric sites because they tend to have a lot more metal artifacts. Metal has a very strong magnetic signature that can make more subtle signatures hard to detect. Magnetometers have been used successfully on historic sites for a long time now though with successful results (Silliman 2000:89-90).

In the Dearfield survey, I used a cesium Geometrix magnetometer. The sensor consists of two metal rods with a wire coiled around each rod, in opposite directions. The magnetometer used was in total field configuration, with each of the sensors spaced a meter apart (Aspinall, et al. 2008:29). In this configuration a larger area than usual could
be surveyed in a shorter amount of time, while still imaging features about a meter or so in maximum dimension.

Data was collected on 5 different days in May and October of 2009. Each time I brought a friend with me to help with the data collection and take notes. Each grid was numbered. The transects were collected two meters apart. The sensors were set at one meter apart, which means data were collected every meter (Figure 3). I carried the magnetometer for every grid so it was always the same height off the ground, and the collection of each grid was as consistent as possible. Neither my assistants nor I wore any metal. I collected data from one 40x60 meter grid, and eight 40x40 meter grids scattered around the Dearfield townsite. Walking at a steady speed I would proceed in a straight line towards my assistant or a large orange traffic cone that was placed on the other side of the grid. I collected data from eight of the grids in the fall, when the weeds were very high, as Figure 2 shows. This caused some problems, as some clumps of weeds were hard to walk through, and others would get caught in the cords of the sensors. We tried to mitigate some of this by clearing out any weeds that were no longer rooted in the ground, and taping the cords to the body of the magnetometer as much as possible. Other hazards included cacti and other very prickly weeds, as well as snakes and mosquitoes. If something happened and I could not keep a steady walking pace across the grid I would erase that line and start over. If there were obstacles I could not walk over or through, such as a fallen shed, I would walk around it. These, as well as large pieces of surface metal, pieces of foundations, and ditches or mounds were all recorded in my field notebook. Figure 3 is an example of the kind of surface metal that were recorded.
Figure 2: Collecting magnetometer data at Dearfield
The earth’s magnetic field changes throughout the day. Geomagnetic storms on the sun can also cause magnetic disruptions on earth. To make sure that these changes did not affect my data, I chose a neutral spot in the road and took readings before and after I collected each grid. These readings and the readings from the USGS Boulder Magnetic Observatory would have allowed me to normalize the data (Breiner 1973:6). After the data were processed, however, these changes did not appear to have a noticeable effect on the data.

To be able to put the grids in space, several of the grids had at least two corners tied into different landmarks on the landscape, such as house corners and telephone poles. I took GPS readings for most of the corners of the grids as well. For greater accuracy I took four measurements at each corner and averaged them for the final reading.
Data processing

I first processed the data using MagMap software, which adjusts all readings into geographic space. I processed each grid separately, and then merged and mapped the final products together. Images were constructed and edited using Surfer 8.

I had to edit the data to compensate for the presence of surface metal, as well as normal data collection problems. The readings near the surface metal are so high that when the grid is created subtler features might be lost. To mitigate this problem, I put the readings into an excel spreadsheet and found the average. I then deleted all of the readings that were one standard deviation above and below the average. By excluding the highest and lowest readings, smaller changes in the other readings could be seen more clearly on the images of the grids. Since every two meters I was walking in the opposite direction, the original grids had some stripes on them. I also compensated for this by editing the data.

The grids were then mapped in space using ArcGIS software. This allowed me to see the grids in relation to known features, historical lot ownership, as well as the location of previous archaeological work done on the site. The magnetometer grids were all placed into space using the GPS coordinates I had collected. I then used known points on the landscape such as road intersections to tie in historic maps and maps used in previous research to the basemap. This will necessarily produce some distortion in the overlying maps, but this was minimal.
**Reading Magnetometer Maps**

Magnetometers can detect both remnant and induced magnetism. When put onto a map these usually show up as dipoles. This is because magnets have a positive and a negative pole. In the data these poles will be strongly contrasting, making them easy to see. In the Surfer software a variety of color schemes can be used help bring out more subtle features.

Figure 4 is a magnetometer survey done at a prehistoric site. This site had a metal pipe running through the northeast corner, with part of it sticking out of the ground, as well as a known feature of fire cracked rock. These are marked on the map. The data showed strong dipoles that were thought to be surface metal, because of their strength. These dipoles have a dark red side and a dark blue side. This is because metal has a strong magnetic signature. There were other weaker dipoles that could have been features. The metal pole shows up very clearly on the map, and the direction that the pole is running is obvious. The signature for the pole is ten meters across in some places, but the pole was not. “[T]he relationships between the horizontal dimensions of a strong magnetic anomaly and those of its source are often complex” (Hargrave 2010). 46
Figure 4: Magnetometer survey done at a prehistoric site in Northpark, Colorado

Theory

My analysis of Dearfield is rooted in place theory. Different aspects of place theory inform this analysis. These aspects allowed me to make sense of the ways Dearfield has changed in meaning over time, and are discussed in this chapter.

Place Theory

Place theory has its roots in geography and now incorporates concepts from a myriad of other fields, including philosophy, sociology, and literature. In anthropology, place theory has gained importance since the 1990s. Place theory has become an important aspect of anthropology, as it is one of the keys to the formation of social order and
identity. “[A]ttachments and meanings are commonly considered fundamental for orienting individuals and societies, integral to social identities and often, to moral grounding” (Ashmore 2004:259). It also allows anthropologists to have a deeper understanding of the past, and to bring in more marginalized communities to the discussion.

Place is defined in anthropological literature in many ways, although it is almost always defined in opposition to space. In a general sense space is defined as a physical location where actions occur. It has little or no meaning to people. Place is space to which people have ascribed meaning. This meaning can be different for different people, and it can be expressed in different ways.

**Communities with Blurry Borders**

Karen Blu theorized an approach to places in her work with the Native American Lumbee people of North Carolina (1996). Blu outlines two important aspects of how the Lumbee conceive of their places: 1) Lumbee places do not necessarily have distinct limits. They have what Blu describes as “blurry borders” (1996:2); 2) these places are not necessarily visual on the landscape, but are still known to the Lumbee. This focus on places that are not visually marked and physically constrained is an aspect of the discussion of place that has been overlooked.

The Lumbee have never had a reservation or any federal or state protection for their homeland. The land they live on and the places they live in are not exclusively Native American. They share the land with white and black Americans as well, but they do not share they same sense of place (Blu 1996:198). Their connection to these places, their
“home places” or “communities” is part of their social and individual identity and is constructed and lived in different ways than their neighbors.

Like many rural people, the Lumbee focus their communities on rural settlements. Blu describes these communities as having “vital centers with blurry borders.” Each of the communities is centered on a town, but extends beyond that town. The Lumbee know where these communities extend to, but it is not obvious on the landscape. “The Indian sense of community, by contrast, seems less heavily dependent either on the built environment or on the physical feature of the land. Instead, the quality of human relations defines space” (1996:216). Each of the communities and, therefore, the people who make them up, have their own character, and the character of each place is known by other Lumbee people. The Lumbee do not need to live in or even very near the town to be part of that community. They know where they are from, and in this way their places do not just make their identity, their identity makes the place.

The other important aspect of the Lumbee construct of place is that visual aspects are not necessarily important. Like the absence of visual boundaries to Lumbee communities, some communities are not marked at all. Blu also calls these “visually vague communities.” One young Lumbee man, when describing some local landmarks “mentioned some physical features such as swamps and branches (creeks), some built features such as churches, and finally “area”: “like Black Ankle. You know it when you hit it, but you can’t see it. It’s like courage, you can’t see it but you know what it is”” (1996:200).
**Place-making**

Keith Basso uses the term “place-making” to describe how we ascribe meaning to places. According to Basso, this is both a simple and complex act. Simple because we do it everyday by satisfying our natural curiosity and asking questions like, “what happened here?” and “who did it happen to?” complex because it involves a whole host of social and cultural interactions, and acts of remembering and imagining that interact in a whole host of ways (1996a:5-6).

Remembering is key to place-making. In remembering and re-imagining Basso claims that we, in a way, make history. Place-making,

is not only a means of reviving former times but of revising them, a means of exploring not merely how things might have been but also how, just possibly, they might have been different from what others have supposed. (Basso 1996a:6).

Since the meaning of places is made in both personal and communal ways, and because place-making is a way to re-make history, these constructed meanings will be different for different places and at different times. The meanings of communal places are being constantly negotiated and contested. Various groups will have their own meanings for places (Blake 2004:234-235). Meaning of places can change; they are dynamic. “Monuments and landscapes are reinterpreted by each generation” (Ashmore 2004:262). This makes places palimpsests of meaning. Barbara Bender makes this clear in her book *Stonehenge, Making Space* (1998). She begins with the earliest structures at the Stonehenge site, tracing their significance through time to the contested place that Stonehenge has become today. The physical aspects of Stonehenge changed tremendously in prehistory, starting with a chalk and mound circle, to which was later added the standing stones. Stonehenge was connected to other ceremonial centers in
Britain and was probably an important part of the spiritual life of the Neolithic people. Stonehenge was abandoned in the early Bronze Age, signifying a change in how people were experiencing and thinking and remembering the place. These changes in meaning continued on through today, and Bender shows how different groups in Britain have ascribed different meanings to it (Bender 1998:39-67).

**Place-memory**

Place-making is related to place-memory, an idea conceptualized by Edward Casey, and later used Delores Hayden in her book *The Power of Place* to show ways places important in urban settings can be remembered (1995). Place-memory is one outcome of place-making. Casey writes that, “memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported” (Casey 2000:187). Memories are tied to places. This connection may not be explicit when speaking about a memory but it is remembered in a place.

Places have the ability to hold and contain memory. Bringing to mind a place brings with it specific memories of events or people or stories connected with that place (Casey 2000:182). Historic places, help citizens define their public pasts: places trigger memories for insiders, who have shared a common past, and at the same time places often can represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present. (Hayden 1995:46).

Basso describes how the Western Apache use place-memory in the names of important places on the landscape. Just saying the name of a place was enough to convey a very nuanced message to another person. The places that were referred to are connected to Apache mythology and history, and by naming the place the moral behind the story of the place is communicated. An example that Basso gives is a young man
who has been dumped by his girlfriend and for over a week has gotten drunk and made inappropriate remarks to other women. He comes to his friends and says this behavior is behind him and he would like to go back to work. Instead of chastising his behavior these friends reference a place called Trail Goes Down Between Two Hills. It was at this place in Apache mythology Old Man Owl, who was very sexually promiscuous, was tricked by two beautiful sisters. By naming this place, the young man’s friends were letting him know in a gentle way that the way he behaved was not appropriate (Basso 1996b:59-61, 64).

The way that we remember places is structured in many different ways. Collective memory becomes an important aspect for many places.

People experience and remember or forget collectively, and they figure out how to interpret these experiences. They develop a collective memory by molding, shaping, and agreeing upon what to remember, although this process may not be always consciously planned. (Shackel 2001:655).

Keith Basso states that “memory does not require exact repetition” (1996a:181). No one person or one society remembers past events exactly how they happened. We reinterpret the past to suit our present needs of it. Telling stories of places is important in the production of a society’s memory of a place (Hayden 1995:46).

By using these different aspects of place theory I will show how the meaning of Dearfield has changed from the time it was founded until the present. I will illustrate that the way Dearfield has been remembered does not necessarily reflect the reality of those who lived there, but rather shows how the collective memory of Dearfield has changed to suit our present needs of it. The meaning of Dearfield today provides us with two sides
of Dearfield: that of O.T. Jackson’s commercial venture and that of the homesteaders’ community.
Chapter 3: Historic Context of Dearfield

The story of Dearfield starts long before the place came into existence. The historical and political events that came before, during, and after the city’s occupational period are important in order to understand what led O.T. Jackson to found the city, and why it did not survive.

Effective site interpretation in historical archaeology relies upon reconstructing historic context. Historic context is used to address questions at different scales or levels of inquiry and refers to major trends that have influenced long-term historical development in different study regions. Historic context also consists of the basic cultural and historical details related to the past occupants of a site. (Groover 2008:18-19).

The reasons why black people would move to a marginal landscape in eastern Colorado to try their hand at farming without irrigation was not a decision made without context. The prevailing attitudes towards blacks after Reconstruction, especially in the south, led to a western migration. The west was attractive because large areas of land were being opened to homesteading and nearly everyone could have a chance to make their own living off the land. It was in this context that Dearfield was formed. Later, a combination of dropping crop prices, drought, and economic depression- events that affected all of America- helped lead to the virtual abandonment of Dearfield. The larger context helps to put the meaning of Dearfield into perspective, showing how this dry, windblown land could become a symbol of fortitude, hope, and freedom.
Post Civil War America

Black Americans had high hopes for their future after their emancipation from slavery in 1865. They exercised their recently gained rights by voting and entering politics, and many did very well in the early years after emancipation. Several black men were elected to the Senate, and other blacks brought court cases against states and establishments for discrimination (Dray 2008:153, 314, 352). 1865 was also the year the Freedman’s Bureau was established. Its purpose was to help the newly freed slaves by establishing school and aid societies, regulating labor, and distributing rations, among other things (Fleming 1966:315).

These hopes were soon dashed during and after reconstruction by the enactment of Jim Crow laws, which essentially recreated and codified many of the political and social restrictions on blacks that had been present before emancipation, such as disenfranchisement by literacy laws (Keyssar 2009:142-145). The Amnesty Act of 1872 and the closing of the Freedman’s Bureau that same year were the first signals that the Federal Government was not going to stay on the side of the former slaves. The Amnesty Act gave the right to vote for all but the highest offices and military positions back to members of the former Confederacy (Rawley 1960:54). Further laws meant to disenfranchise the southern black population were enacted, including ones requiring voters to pay a tax, but giving special dispensations to poor whites. In 1877 Republicans agreed to end Reconstruction if Democrats agreed to respect the freedmen. This was a convenient way to end Reconstruction and mollify the Democrats. Two Supreme Court cases in the last decades of the century further reduced the liberty of black Americans. In 1883 the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was found to be
unconstitutional, and in 1896 the court decided in *Plessy v Ferguson* that social integration could not be forced by the federal government, however equal accommodation must be made. This was the start of the “separate-but-equal” standard that was in place until the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Dray 2008:321; Gold 2010:220). The black-only train compartments, schools, and all other separate accommodations were never equal and almost always inferior.

One result of these actions was that many former slaves who stayed in the south ended up not much better off than they had been as slaves. Too poor to buy land and unable to get credit, many started by renting land on the same plantations where they had been slaves. Many could not afford the rent and became sharecroppers, paying rent with some of their crop. If they could not pay with the current year’s crop, they would put up the following year’s yield as collateral. Once the farmers fell behind on their rent they became equivalent to serfs (Foner, et al. 2005:202-203).

A new generation of post-emancipation black leadership emerged at this time. The ideas they espoused were quite varied. Some believed that Africa was the only place a black man could truly be free. Others believed that complete civil rights needed to be immediately granted. Still others believed that economic equality was the best and most important way to achieve full equality. It was this last route that Booker T Washington, a man who became one of the most powerful black men in the country, followed.

Booker T. Washington was born a slave in 1856 in Virginia. As a teenager, Washington attended the Hampton Institute in Virginia. The Hampton Institute was a black school that sought to teach the newly freed southern black population how to survive and thrive in the impoverished south. At the age of 25, General Samuel
Armstrong, the founder of the Hampton Institute, sent Washington to Tuskegee, Alabama to set up another black school. This school became the Tuskegee Institute, which still operates as a university to this day. Booker T. Washington believed that the only way black Americans were going to be able to become fully functioning members of American society was to build themselves up from the land. They needed to be able to produce all of the food and other products they needed themselves. He put this into practice at his Tuskegee Institute. He combined a traditional education, which included reading, writing, and math, with agricultural and other industrial skills (Moore 2003:15-29). The all black student body grew their own food and even made their own bricks for the buildings. In Washington’s book, *Up From Slavery*, he expressed,

> How many times I wished then, and have often wished since that by some power of magic I might remove them upon the soil, upon the solid and never deceptive foundation of Mother Nature, where all nations and races that have ever succeeded have gotten their start, - a start that at first may be slow and toilsome, but one that is nevertheless real (Washington 1986:63 [1910]).

These sentiments inspired many black Americans at the time, including the founder and many residents of Dearfield. The opening of land in Kansas, Oklahoma, and further west for homesteading gave black people the chance to put Booker T. Washington’s principles into practice.

**The Opening of the West**

In the 1880s and 1890s, the lands that had previously been home to various Native American tribes were made available by the government to ranchers and farmers. This move west appealed to many black Americans because these lands were open to everyone, regardless of color, and this was upheld time and again by the government.
The government simply wanted the interior of the country to be settled. To black
Americans, the west was seen as a place where, “you will not be molested and where
you will be able to think and vote as you please” (Littlefield and Underhill 1973:342).
This did not mean that there were not racial incidents at land runs. One such incident
took place in 1891, when land was opened in Oklahoma. The question of who could
settle these lands was resolved by a letter from the Secretary of the Interior to the
Registers and Receivers at the Land Office stating that,

You will receive fillings from all duly qualified persons, without distinction of
color or other condition than those applicable to other lands, save as to the prices
specified. The President concurs in this construction of the law and in these
instructions (Littlefield and Underhill 1973:348).

Thousands of black Americans participated in these land runs.

Much of the land opened to homesteading was part of an area named by Zebulon
Pike as “The Great American Desert.” This included the eastern half of Colorado,
future home of Dearfield. It is a semi-arid region where farming is hard because the
soil is sandy and dry, and many of the first people to move there were ranchers, not
farmers. Dry farming, farming without irrigation, had become something of a fad in the
1880s. The farmer relies on precipitation for all of the water for the farm. Scientists of
the time were promoting the idea of “pluviculture,” or that “rain will follow the plow.”
They believed that the more land that was planted, the more rain would come. This
theory appeared to hold true at first, with wetter than normal years in the late 1880s
leading to good crop yields. For these reasons, along with success stories from farmers
who had access to irrigation, people swarmed into Colorado and other western states
from the east, and started moving into more and more marginal lands. 1890 onwards
saw an end to this trend, for the time being at least. The rain had stopped falling and a depression in 1893 caused a mass exodus of the area (Mehls 1984:73-74).

The 20th Century saw another boom on the dry plains. The federal government promoted farming and ranching during this time by passing a series of acts to make life on the plains easier. In 1909 the United States Congress passed the Enlarged Homestead Act. Congress recognized the difficulty of grazing a large herd of cattle on 160 acres. The new act provided for 320-acre homesteads in arid regions. The Borah Act, passed three years later, reduced the residency requirements to seven months of each of the “prove up” years, the years the homesteaders had to make enough improvements on the land to make it their own. In 1916 the Stock Raising Homestead Act was passed, increasing ranchers’ acreage to 640 in arid regions. These acts were meant to encourage people to move to these drier areas and make it easier for them to prosper there. In addition to these changes in homesteading laws, the weather in the first two decades of the 20th century was relatively wet. One of the results of this Congressional generosity and help from Mother Nature was the dramatic increase in the number of farmers in the area. The idea of pluviculture returned, with a more scientific bent this time. New technologies, and events like the Pluviculture Conference in Denver encouraged would-be farmers to head back out to eastern Colorado (Wyckoff 1999:172, 176-177). They took land that had previously been only good for grazing and tried to grow a living from it.

All-Black Towns

The settling of the West with homesteaders naturally gave rise to towns. Most of these towns were not only commercial and industrial centers, and viable in and of
themselves, but centralized places for homesteaders to foster a sense of community. Racism was not erased in the west, and many black Americans organized their own towns, especially in Oklahoma and Kansas. (Littlefield and Underhill 1973:342, 346-347). Like most western towns, these all-black communities thrived if a railroad came through, making it easy to ship their crops and get goods from the east. Some, such as Langston, Oklahoma, have continued on to this day.

The stories from the many of these towns focus on a spirit of community cooperation, a theme that will be echoed in the oral histories of the settlers of Dearfield. In Langston the citizens got together in the early years to establish a volunteer fire department and a Board of Trade to promote local businesses (Hamilton 1977).

The numerous black towns in Oklahoma gave rise to the fear that the black immigrants were trying to create an all-black state, and force the white people off their lands. Black men running for office fanned the fire. Some white people ran blacks out of cities and whole counties. There was a fear that the migration of former slaves was a conspiracy to increase Republican votes in the west (Franklin 1984:127). Lawmakers started enacting “Separate-but-equal” laws in these western states and as a result many black Americans moved further west.

Kansas also had several all-black towns, including two established by the runaway slave Benjamin “Pap” Singleton, and Nicodemus, founded in 1877. By 1880 the census showed that 260 black settlers were living in Nicodemus, and schools and churches were starting to pop up. Making a living in Kansas was not easy. One settler remembered getting to Nicodemus:
I said, ‘where is Nicodemus? I don’t see it.’ My husband pointed out various
smokes coming out of the ground and said, ‘That is Nicodemus.’ The families
lived in dugouts. We landed and once again struck tents. The scenery to me
was not at all inviting and I began to cry. (Wiggins Jr. 1998:29-30)

Many times the men would have to work away from home to make ends meet. When
the railroad bypassed the town in 1888 the population dropped off (Wiggins Jr.

**Colorado**

Colorado was a part of the western expansion and was seen as an increasingly
attractive option for black people during the late 1800s. As other western states enacted
“separate but equal” laws Colorado was more openly welcome to new black settlers
than many other places in the country. During an 1879 meeting in Denver, which
included the Mayor and the postmaster general, the sentiment that black people “could
be made useful in hundreds of ways” was expressed. This opinion was not shared by all
members of the meeting, with another man expressing the thought that, while some
black immigrants might be useful and do well, the majority would not “readily adapt
themselves to the great labor tasks of this State”, but this was a minority opinion
(“Denver Daily Tribune” [DDT], May 11, 1879). Blacks were deemed fit to do the
manual labor that the white people did not want to do and were almost always only
hired for such jobs (Holley 1990). As a result of this relatively welcoming attitude, the
black population of Colorado grew from 456 in 1870 to over 10,000 in 1930 (Moore
1993:16).

Colorado experienced its share of racial tension. The Ku Klux Klan grew rapidly in
Colorado during the 1920s, but the kind of hatred they espoused did not start then. The
Colorado chapter of the KKK had about 500,000 members, second in size only to that of Indiana (Mauck 2001:68). In 1923, they burned a cross on the top of Pike’s Peak in a show of strength. Colorado elected both Klan members and Klan sympathizers to the state legislature. Crosses were also burnt on the front lawns of prominent black men in Denver. The political power of the Klan was brief, and had mostly collapsed by 1926 (Mehls 1984:161).

**Five Points**

The Denver neighborhood that would eventually be home to most of the black people in Colorado was and is still centered on the corner where Washington Street, Twenty-sixth Avenue, Twenty-seventh Street, Downing Street, and Welton Street meet. It was the terminus of the first streetcar out of Denver, and it was called Five Points not because it reminded people of the New York slum of the same name, but because there was not enough room to write all of the street names on the streetcar platform sign (Mauck 2001:17-18). The neighborhood was considered the first, and most elegant, streetcar suburb. It was a diverse neighborhood, with large German, Jewish, and Irish populations. It was not until the 1890s that Denver’s black population started moving to the Five Points area, and by the end of the decade more lived there than anywhere else in Denver. Until this time they were scattered throughout the city. The neighborhood was close to factories and other industries that employed blacks, making it a convenient place to live (Mauck 2001:24-25). Later, blacks were forced to stay in the neighborhood by segregation and restrictive housing covenants, which banned residents in other neighborhoods from selling to non-whites (Mauck 2001:7).
Five Points was a thriving community, an important commercial and industrial center of Denver. However black people had more challenges setting up businesses than others. Banks were unwilling to give black businessmen loans, and white people often would not patronize black-owned businesses. This meant that it was hard for a business to expand beyond the community. The 1920 census shows that 47% of black men were employed in domestic and personal service jobs, compared to only 6% of white men. This did not mean that black people did not set up businesses. Black businesses also hired other black people to work for them, thus helping raise employment numbers, especially in the Five Points area (Hansen 2001:96, 98, 104).

It was from this neighborhood that many of the residents of Dearfield would hail, and to which they would move back to in the 1920s. The founder, O.T. Jackson had hoped that more businessmen from the community would move to Dearfield. The lack of professional services in Dearfield became a sore spot for Jackson.

**Planning an All Black Town in Colorado**

As early as 1871, the black community of Denver had already expressed an interest in starting an all black town someplace in Colorado (*Rocky Mountain News* [RMN], March 15, 1871). In 1875 the Rocky Mountain Herald reported that one hundred black immigrants from Georgia had arrived in Southern Colorado hoping to settle land and start raising stock (*Rocky Mountain Herald* [RMH], June 19, 1875). By 1902, at least three colonies had been established; although all were to be short-lived. 1902 also saw the founding of the Ethiopian Protective and Beneficial Aid Association by Isaac B. Atkinson in Pueblo. The aim of this association was to raise money to help its members buy homes, find employment, and provide protection at its proposed colony. This
colony would include a shoe factory, tannery, general store, school, hospital and retirement home, most of which would be supported by the colonists farming sugar beets (Wayne 1976:112-117). This call for blacks to establish their towns and homesteads could be a loud and urgent one.

THE NEGROES OF THIS STATE NEED TO WAKE UP TO THE GRAND OPPORTUNITY OFFERED IN FARM LAND. ONE HUNDRED PERSONS POOLING THEIR MONEY CAN CONTROL AN IMMENSE BODY OF LAND, WHICH TOGETHER WITH THE GENEROUS PROVISIONS OF THE HOMESTEAD LAWS OF THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT WILL MAKE OPENINGS FOR OUR PEOPLE FOR MANY YEARS TO COME AS GLORIOUS AS THAT THE WHITES HAVE IN THE GREELEY, FORT COLLINS, GRAND JUNCTION AND ARKANSAS VALLEY SECTIONS. LET’S QUIT DREAMING AND HUSTLE! DELAY IS FATAL! PRICES ARE RISING AND LAND IS GETTING SCARCE! We are always talking about what we will do if we only get the chance. Here is the door of opportunity swinging open and not even calling for sacrifice. It actually offers sure profit to those who will wake up and do. Whether an attempt to establish a colored colony succeeds or fails, the land is always worth what is paid for it, plus the increase, and can be sold to anybody as a last resort. Let us hear from people with savings accounts and we will tell you how and where and at what expense lands can be secured ([SM], August 30, 1907).

Few of these schemes went anywhere, but this desire for land and opportunity is what drew people out to Dearfield. Founded in 1910, the people of Dearfield took advantage of the enlarged homesteading acts and wet weather and were successful, at least for a time, at dry farming.

The Decline of Homesteading: 1920s-1930s

By the 1920s life started to change for people living on the plains, including the residents of Dearfield. The end of World War I in 1918 brought a massive reduction in the price of food. Prices stayed high for the first few years as Europe’s economy
recovered, but soon the prices of wheat and other commodities dropped drastically. Wheat was $1.60/barrel in 1915, but had dropped to only $.75/barrel in 1929. The price of corn that same year was $.03/bushel which essentially meant that farmers had to pay for someone to take their corn (Egan 2006:42, 74, 78). In 1921, the United States experienced a short depression, termed The Great Panic. Farmers were the hardest hit. The price drops made it hard for farmers to make ends meet. To make matters worse, many farmers had taken out loans during better years so that they would be able to expand and buy new equipment. In order to be able to keep up with these loans many started cultivating more acreage to make up for the losses they were feeling in the market. Farmers tore up native grasses that had, up until then, helped to prevent erosion and used deep plowing and other farming methods inappropriate for the soils of the plains. In Colorado there was an agricultural revival by the mid 20s, but this was too late for many farmers, including most at Dearfield (Mehls 1984:155).

In 1930 a long, severe drought struck the plains. In 1933, wind storms started sweeping through parts of Nebraska, Oklahoma, Kansas, Texas, South Dakota, New Mexico, and Colorado. Since there were no crops covering the ground, and the farming techniques used already promoted erosion, these were not typical storms, but intense dust storms. The storms were so bad in places that the sky was blotted out. Farmers lost their land when they could not pay back their loans. Most moved to cities in hopes of finding a job. Others gave up the Midwest all together and moved to California (Burg 1996:115).

In addition to the drought and dust, the stock market crashed on October 29, 1929, starting the Great Depression. This led to even fewer jobs, and more economic hardship
across the country. In 1933, the unemployment rate was 25%, and did not fall below 11% until World War II. Black men already were disproportionately employed in unskilled or low skilled jobs, and these were the first jobs to go (Hansen 2001:102, 105). When asked why they did not employ black workers employers gave reasons such as “Few Negroes are capable of first-class machine or bench work,” and “Negroes do not take to our line of work.” In 1929 the Urban League of Denver concluded that only 10% of black men made enough to sustain their family, and the other 90% relied upon supplemental income from other family members to make ends meet (Hansen 2001:103). Black workers were the last hired, first fired, and were doing more of Roosevelt’s New Deal relief work than white workers (Hansen 2001:108).

Farmers in Colorado were highly affected by these events. While only the southeastern corner of the state was in the heart of the dust bowl, the entire eastern half had to deal with severe storms. The years between 1931-1939 were characterized by 50% drought in the area of Dearfield (National Drought Mitigation Center 2008). The state had some of the highest numbers of people receiving financial relief, and had the 4th highest number of indigent farmers in the country (Goodstein 2007:202). Farmers were then faced with not only a decline in prices, but a decline in demand as well, since people could not afford to buy much food.

This sets the scene for the community at Dearfield. Many of the settlers came from the vibrant Five Points neighborhood, and the connections remained strong. All of them experienced the racial tensions that were prevalent in this era. In the next chapter
I will describe the two sides of the community at Dearfield, and how they are portrayed today.
Chapter 4: The Different Sides of Dearfield

There are two overlapping stories of Dearfield. The first is the Dearfield of O.T. Jackson. In this version of the town of Dearfield, Jackson was the driving force behind the town, dreaming of building it up to a bustling economic hub. He wanted not just homesteaders but business people to come to Dearfield. Jackson pushed the people of Dearfield to work hard, support each other, and make his vision of the town a reality. At the same time he was somewhat separate from the rest of the community.

The second version of Dearfield is that of the homesteaders. In this version the community of those living off the land was not focused on the town of Dearfield. Instead the people themselves, their relationships with each other, and their hard work on the land were what made Dearfield a community, not the townsite, or any of the few businesses there.

In this chapter I will explore each of these versions of Dearfield. By using historic documents and oral histories I will show how each of these stories unfolded at Dearfield. I will then discuss how newspapers, websites, and other media sources portray Dearfield today.
Side 1: O.T. Jackson’s Dream of Dearfield

O.T. Jackson’s Background

Oliver Toussaint Jackson was born in Oxford, Ohio in 1865 (Fig 5). As a young man Jackson worked as a waiter, a caterer and a newspaperman before moving to Boulder in 1892 and opening several successful businesses. One of these was Jackson’s Resort, a popular place for picnics and parties just east of Boulder. Jackson sold liquor at the resort, which led to legal trouble, because he did not have a license. After his arrest for this in 1905 or 1906, he changed Jackson’s Resort to a private club, to avoid complications with the temperance movement (Pitcher 1976:13). Jackson also owned the Mutual Laundry Company, the Stillman Hotel, and the Boulder Lunch Counter (Figure 6). Jackson married Minerva Matlock in 1905 (Boulder Daily Camera [BDC], July 14, 1905). It was his second marriage. They never had any children but adopted a boy before they moved to Dearfield (Pitcher 1976:52).
Figure 5: O.T. Jackson; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library
Jackson dressed and acted like a serious businessman that he was. Walter Groves, who moved to Dearfield when he was 10, remembered Jackson as being tall and stately, and always dressed in a suit. He was, “not the type of man to joke.” (Walter Groves, interviewed by Margaret Pitcher, March 7, 1976 [Groves 1976]Denver Public Library). Jackson kept his home nicely furnished, and his wife was a very good housekeeper. He had a nice car, and all the people later interview remembered both O.T. and Minerva as hard workers. Minerva worshipped at the Methodist church but Jackson did not attend any church. Walter Groves remembered Jackson as not having anything nice to say about church (Groves 1976).
Jackson’s Politics

In the early years of the century Jackson got involved in politics. Since the Civil War most black Americans voted Republican, the party of Abraham Lincoln. O.T. Jackson broke with this convention and supported the Democratic nominees for the senate and governorship. This support led to a job as messenger for Governor Shafroth, elected in 1908. He had already started to dream of a black town in the Colorado countryside by this time. By using his connections in the governor’s office, Jackson was able to secure some land in a 20,000-acre tract that had just been opened for homesteading in Weld County, in 1910 (Pitcher 1976:14). It was on this land that the town of Dearfield would be built. The Negro Townsite and Land Company was organized to start promoting the colonization scheme. The company’s motto was a quote by John Ruskin:

When we build, let us think that we build forever. Let it not be for the present delight, nor for present use alone; let it be such work as our descendants will thank us for, and let us think, as we lay stone on stone, that a time is to come when those stones will be held sacred because our hand have touched them, and that men will say, as they look upon the labor and wrought substances of them: ‘See! This our fathers did for us’ (Colorado Statesman 1909)

It was at a committee meeting in 1910 that one of the early supporters of the town suggested the name Dearfield. Dr. Joseph H. P. Westbrook, a prominent physician and civic leader said,

We plan to make this our home. These are to be our fields and because they are ours and because we expect and hope to develop them and make them into substantial homes, they will be very dear to us, so why not incorporate that sentiment in the name we select and call our colony Dearfield? (Weld County News [WCN], November, 1921).
O.T. Jackson’s politics did not endear him to all in Denver and Boulder’s black population. He was accused of pandering to whites and perpetuating black stereotypes, especially after the governor appointed him messenger. He was thought by some to be putting his own interests in front of those of the black community (Picher 1976:20). Jackson, on the other hand, accused the professional black men of Denver of complaining of the lack of opportunity but not taking advantage the opportunities at Dearfield. These antagonisms were played out in The Statesman, Denver’s black newspaper. In one attack Jackson wrote,

The negro colony plan that is launched has not one professional man on its bona fide subscription list of about 70 which represents more than 1200 shares sold. The professionals who were the first to receive benefits from the establishment of a colony, were the most ardent knockers, without any other excuse than personal, and lack of business foresight. (Jackson 1910).

This animosity may have dissuaded black professionals from investing in Dearfield.

Jackson was a forceful man, and hostile to those that did not share his vision.

**Dearfield: The Good Years**

The first claims were laid at Dearfield in 1910. Jackson’s first settler was an elderly man named J.M. Thomas (Figure 7). They met on the side of the road when Thomas told Jackson he wanted a farm but it was too expensive, Jackson replied with, “I’ve got exactly what you want.” Having thus convinced the man to move to Dearfield, Jackson made arrangements to have Thomas help bring up some of his possessions. They spent their first night in a tent harassed by coyotes. “We were nearly scared to death. It was the most uncomfortable night I have ever spent.” Jackson recalled. (WCN, February 13, 1920). In August of that year the newspaper The Colorado Statesman reported that
Thomas and another man, James Smith, had planted 50 acres of winter wheat (SM, August 20, 1910).

The first winter, 1911-1912, there were only seven families living on the site, and only two frame buildings. The rest of the people lived in dugout houses or tents. That winter was a particularly bad one, and at Dearfield three of the horses died of starvation. The first few harvests were disastrous as well. Only a few of the settlers had experience in farming, so there was a lot of trial and error in these early years, and nature was not always on their side. One settler remembered how one year, “everything came up fine and did well until July. Then came the grasshoppers that almost cleaned us out… We were not discouraged, however, and last fall did some clearing for hay ground” (Johnson 1915). In these years, farming and selling crops did not bring in enough money to live on all year long. This meant that the settlers had to work for the white
ranchers in the area or they would spend the winter working in town and the summer in
Dearfield. Many of the settlers of Dearfield were extremely poor. Jackson recounted
how many of them could not even afford the $5 filing fee on their lands (Johnson 1915).

Despite these humble beginnings, Jackson had big plans for Dearfield. The land
was formally platted in 1914. The town was in the NW corner of Section 30, Township
4N, Range 61W. It had 250 24x125 ft. blocks and 16 unplatted blocks in the town
proper (Carlson, et al. 1994:8) (Figure 8).
Figure 8: Map of Dearfield; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library
In about the year 1920 Jackson put out a brochure expounding the economic prospects at Dearfield. “The opportunities offered in Dearfield for location and investment are unsurpassed in the United States for Negroes of business and mechanical ability and small capital,” Jackson wrote. The brochure described the town as having “a city well, a boarding house, a cement block factory, a blacksmith shop, telephone, and a church building,” and then goes on to suggest that, because the farmers are becoming more prosperous they would need more businesses to supply them, more laborers to work for them, and more farmers to take advantage of all of the prosperity. Jackson was envisioning a prosperous small town, finishing with, “… WE NEED YOUR BUSINESS NOW to furnish the farmers with supplies and to handle their marketable crops. We want 100 families to build up the town of Dearfield.” (Jackson 1920).

Jackson had provided an example by opening and running a filling station and lunch-room just off of the highway (Figures 9 & 10). He was also running a boarding house out of his home (Figure 11). In 1915 he was quoted in The Denver Western Farm Life as saying, “we established Dearfield in order to give our people who did not care to farm an opportunity to engage in the mercantile business and take up truck gardening” (Johnson 1915). Jackson was clear on his vision of the town as one with several small businesses on the townsite to service the farmers out on the land.
Figure 9: Dearfield Filling Station; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library

Figure 10: Dearfield residents outside of the Lunch Room; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library
Jackson was not the only person to open businesses in Dearfield. J.J. Houston pushed for and got a Post Office built near the town, which meant that the people did not have to make the trip of a few miles to Masters to pick up their mail. The post office opened on January 11, 1917, and was called Chapelton (Figure 12). In 1921 Bert Griffith took over as post master (Carlson, et al. 1994:8). Houston also owned a grocery store, although Cody Masten and his wife were probably the ones to run it. Squire Brockman opened a blacksmith shop near the lunch room (U.S. Census Bureau 1920). The number of businesses that opened in town, though, was nowhere near the number that O.T. Jackson had hoped or expected.
Figure 12: J.J. Houston with woman and child outside of the Chapelton Post Office; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library

While bringing more businesses to the town was O.T. Jackson’s biggest hope for Dearfield, he also promoted it as a vacation spot. On the back of the Dearfield letterhead Jackson added a few sentences about Dearfield being, “A great health resort for summer vacation.” (Dearfield Letterhead 1915). Later, former residents remember family and friends coming up for picnics in the summer, as well as having young relatives stay in the summer. Jackson mentions some amenities such as, “Good hunting and fishing,” and “Fine view of the mountains,” as well as space for tents and, “cottages erected and rented for the summer on application.” (Dearfield Letterhead 1915).

By 1921 the town, according to Jackson, was home to 700 people, and the land, crops, and animals were worth an estimated $500,000 (Jackson 1920). This is an
exaggeration on Jackson’s part, as the 1920 census shows less than 100 black people living in the Dearfield census area, but people were moving there. The settlers had also bought a thresher and had plans to buy tractor and open a canning factory (Letter from O.T. Jackson to Mr. WJ Harasha, December 5, 1918 [Harasha Letter 1918] Denver Public Library). The people of Dearfield were beginning to thrive (Figure 13).

![Figure 13: Dearfield residents in their fields; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library](image)

Jackson felt he would not have had this success if not for his wife, Minerva. A quiet and unassuming woman, she was a hard worker. One settler remembered, “She worked day and night everyday. J.J. Houston was the only one who could work harder than Mrs. Jackson.” (Pitcher 1976:100-101). The Jackson’s had a filling station, lunch room, and hotel in the town, and while O.T. Jackson was working in Denver, Minerva would have run all three herself during the week. Jackson recognized his wife’s contributions to his success.
I never could have accomplished what has been done in the establishment of the settlement and town had it not been for my wife whose sacrifices, untiring labor and patience to stay in the settlement and assist in encouraging and holding the people together cannot be outdone. She is Notary Public and Judge on the jury in all cases civil, criminal, social and religious. (Harasha Letter 1918).

Despite Jackson’s best efforts the town did not grow as he had hoped. The 1920 US Census shows that only 7 families in the district encompassing Dearfield were not living on farms in that year. I interpret this data to mean that they were the only ones living in town. Since the years from about 1919 to 1923 were the high point at Dearfield in terms of prosperity for its residents the fact that not that many people were living in the town center is an indication that Jackson was exaggerating in his estimation of population and worth. The black population of the Dearfield area that same year was only 106. By 1930 it was down to 26 (U.S. Census Bureau 1930). Some of this discrepancy but not all of it, is probably due in part to the fact that not everyone who made a claim proved up, and the fact that many of the residents did not spend all year at Dearfield.

Jackson himself did not live at Dearfield in the early years. He was still working for the Governor, and would only come back to Dearfield on the weekends. He was not the only one who did this. Until they could make all their money from their farms, many of the men worked in Denver during the week, and commuted up to Dearfield on the weekends (Pitcher 1976:100).

**Dearfield: The Decline**

Whatever financial success Dearfield attained did not last for long. As the markets collapsed at the end of WWI and the rain declined so too did the chance of making a
living at Dearfield. The black population in the area plummeted as the settlers moved on to find better economic opportunities. O.T. Jackson did not give up so easily. He advertised Dearfield as a “Valley Resort” (Figure 14). In 1931 he opened a dance hall with live music to try to draw people to Dearfield. The grand opening was announced in the Weld County News, with the news that Professor Clarence C. Holmes and his Seven Pieces Golden Throated Orchestra would play the first and third Saturday of every month. Jackson was trying to attract a certain class of people, or at least keep out more undesirable people, as the notice stated, “Children under 18, men in overalls, and women in pajama costume not permitted on dance floor” (WCN, August 20, 1931). Later that same year he organized a large carnival to celebrate the completion of US Highway 34 (Graves 1978). Jackson was also having trouble making ends meet though, and was selling bootleg liquor from the service station to make extra money (Thomas 1990). He was also writing letters to friends and acquaintances asking for more funding for Dearfield, trying to keep his dream alive (Pitcher 1976:126).
In 1937 Walker Groves moved to Dearfield with his wife and two young boys. Groves was a fairly young man and it must have seemed like a godsend to Jackson to have a young, hardworking man in the town to help the remaining residents and show
that Dearfield was still a place of opportunity. Walker Groves’ son Walter remembered Jackson talking to his father about turning Dearfield into a resort or something along those lines (Groves 1976). Jackson’s hopes for a resurgence at Dearfield died when Walker Groves was killed in an accident less than a year later, and his wife and children moved back to Denver (Pitcher 1976:122).

By 1940 Dearfield’s population was down to 12 people (U.S. Census Bureau 1940). Even the Jacksons stopped living there permanently in 1939. He wrote an apology, stating, “We have put in the best part of our lives trying to make this colony a success. We hope to be able to interest some of the younger people in taking up where we leave off and finish what we consider a worthy job.” (Carlson, et al. 1994:10) Jackson sold all of the stock and fixtures of the service station for $187.60, and in 1946 tried unsuccessfully to sell all of his property in Dearfield (Bill of Sale 1945: Greeley Historical Museum; Pitcher 1976:128). After Minerva died, Jackson’s niece Jennie moved to Dearfield to take care of him. After his death in 1948, Jennie inherited his property at Dearfield. She was able to sell some of the property, such as the service station, but she continued to live in O.T. Jackson’s house. She lived there on and off as the only resident of Dearfield until her death in 1976. This marked the end Dearfield as a place of residence.

Side 2: The Settler’s Dearfield

The Dearfield of the people who actually settled out in Weld County was not the same as O.T. Jackson’s. Apart from a little talk about what crops they grew, most of the memories of the Dearfield settlers impart a sense of community, cooperation, and
faith felt by those who lived there, rather than business and planning, like many of the accounts of Jackson’s townsite.

Almost every resident of Dearfield lived on a homestead, and not in “town.” The townsite was situated at NW corner of Section 30, Township 4N, Range 61W. The post office, however, was at Section 10, Township 3N, Range 61W. The first Chapelton school was near there at Section 9, Township 3N, Range 61W. Later, when it became the Dearfield school was moved to Section 11, Township 3N, Range 61W (Figure 15) (Carlson, et al. 1994:8). This was a 20,000 acre area, and each homestead was at least 160 acres. As a result some lived up to a few miles away from the town center (Figure 16). While this whole area was not necessarily called Dearfield, all of the black homesteaders who lived there were known as someone from Dearfield.
Figure 15: Map showing the larger Dearfield area, including Chapelton
Figure 16: Map of Dearfield area; Homesteaded areas compiled by author from census record, Bureau of Land Management General Land Office Records, and Melvin Norris, 1980
Rather than any geographic boundaries, the sense of community had more to do with the shared experiences of the move to the Dearfield area, the challenges faced there, and race. People were living all over the area. Resident Henry Cook recalled, “We were all supposed to be from Dearfield, but we lived all over next to Wiggins-out there by the Empire Reservoir… They used to call that Chapelton. Dearfield was over next to Masters near the Union Pacific.” (Norris 1980:175). Many people made a distinction between Dearfield the townsite, and the Colored Colony, also called Chapelton. According to Anna Collier, Chapelton had, “a post office, a grocery store, and a little newspaper they wrote for the Colored Colony” (Norris 1980:176). She also said that not everyone called the community Dearfield. “We didn’t call it Dearfield. We called it the Colored Colony or Chapelton.” (Norris 1980:176). This lack of a physically bounded area did not diminish the sense of community felt by the settlers.

Race played a part in this sense of community, although those who lived at Dearfield rarely mention it. The importance of race and the experience of segregation and racism that was part of the national atmosphere at the time would have carried over to the colony. The members of the Dearfield community were all black, although there were white and Hispanic people living along side them. This is clear when race in the community came up. When the colonists at Dearfield could not make enough money on their farms they would work on the ranches owned by white people. Anna Collier remembered, “There was one White boy who went to our school. He lived back in our community and they just let him go to school with us.” (Norris 1980:176). These white people lived in the same area, worked and went to school with them, but were not members of the Dearfield community.
Why Dearfield?

Some of the reasons why homesteading was an attractive prospect for black people at the beginning of the twentieth century have been covered earlier in this thesis. The settlers in the Dearfield area had the same reasons to homestead. Homesteading was opened to everyone, regardless of sex and race. It gave people the chance to make a living on their own terms in the way Booker T. Washington had espoused. Land was something that they could leave to their children, a good investment for the future (Olietta Moore, interviewed by Paul Stewart, June 17, 1978 [Moore 1978]Denver Public Library). Charles Rothevell expressed his thoughts on why people moved up to Dearfield as, “It was their place and their own” (Pitcher 1976:103). The idea that this land was their own, and that they obtained it through their own hard work was something that pushed them to go.

The Community of Dearfield

The people who moved to Dearfield had a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. They did have some things in common. They were mostly poor and inexperienced as farmers and many did not stay for long. Others stayed longer, working hard to make a living off of the dry land. Some, like the Colliers, moved out of the Dearfield area, but continued to farm. Walter Groves, who had lived in both Nicodemus and Dearfield, eventually moved back out to the country to raise his own children (Groves 1976).

It was the character of these individual people that made the community of Dearfield something to be remembered. When reading about Dearfield, or listening to
interviews with former residents, it is the spirit of the people that comes out, and it is easy to imagine the fun that they had even while working so hard. The sense of community and mutual respect is also evident. Details from the historic records help us envision the richness of their stories (Figure 17).

Figure 17: Mrs. Bailey and her sister; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library
Some of the most prominent members of the Dearfield community were Charles Rothwell, Crawford Hicks, J.J. Houston, and Squire Brockman. Charles Rothwell and his mother moved up from Denver in 1910. Like many of the other men at Dearfield Charles worked for the white ranchers in the area, mostly the Painter family. He became renowned for his ability to break horses, and rode bucking’ horses in a rodeo in Cheyenne. In 1917 he was drafted into the army and was sent to Europe to fight in World War I. During his time away his mother moved back to Denver, where she owned several properties of her own. She rented his place out and sold many of the pigs and cattle to help pay for the farm, so when he got back he had to work for the Painters again. Charles was lucky, though, because his land was situated close to and lower than the Empire Reservoir and the Bijou ditch, so water would seep onto his land, making it one of the more productive farms at Dearfield. Later, after he moved from Dearfield, Charles became a Pullman Porter on the railroads (Pitcher 1978:14). Eunice Norris remembered him as a gentleman, but said with a laugh that you could not trust everything he says (Norris 1978).

Crawford Hicks’ family was one of the biggest in Dearfield. Crawford was among the first residents, moving to Dearfield in 1910 and taking out a claim on 320 acres (Eunice Norris, interviewed by Paul Stewart, June 17, 1978 [Norris 1978]Denver Public Library). Charles Rothwell believed they lived there the longest of any family. Crawford Hicks helped Charles Rothwell build his house, and when he had time he would help the other homesteaders with putting up fencing or other jobs. The Hicks’ owned a piano, which made their house a popular meeting place for the younger people of Dearfield, as did the fact that Crawford and his wife Ethel had five children (U.S.
Census Bureau 1920; Pitcher 1976:91). The Hicks’ homestead was closer to Masters than to Dearfield because the children attended the Masters school (Norris 1980:132). Newton Hicks, Crawford’s brother, also took out a claim in 1911 (Pitcher 1976:91). He had previously been a janitor in Denver (Norris 1980:132).

The Colliers were another big family who took out claims in 1914. They lived closer to Wiggins than they did to Dearfield (Pitcher 1976:64). Clarence Colliers cut and sold ice with his neighbor, W. T. Fields (Norris 1980:176, 133). George Colliers, Clarence’s father, donated part of his land to build a proposed sanatorium (Pitcher 1976:106).

J.J. Houston was the first Post-master of the Chapelton Post Office. He also had opened a grocery store at the townsite. J.J. Houston let the community hold church services in his store until a church building could be erected (Pitcher 1976:102). A successful rancher, Houston proved up on his homestead and had a registered cattle brand (Pitcher 1976:102). His achievements gave him a reputation for being one of the hardest working people at Dearfield (Carlson, et al. 1994:32).

We know less about other residents. Some are little more than a name, while the character of others is hinted at in the archival sources. Squire Brockman was one of the last residents to be living in Dearfield. He could play quite a few musical instruments, including the ukulele and banjo, and liked to hunt for raccoons (Pitcher 1976:101). Rankford Holly was another man who could play many musical instruments and had been a musician in Denver (Pitcher 1976:105; Norris 1978). Charles Stewart was a Civil War veteran who liked to wear all of his medals. He sold peanuts to the kids, who “ran down the hill to his place after school was out.” (Pitcher 1976:64). Ernest Miller
carried the mail from the Wiggins station to the Chapelton post office and had previously worked as a Pullman Porter. Thomas Bailey and James Haskin had also been Pullman Porters (Pitcher 1976:106).

A few doctors moved to Dearfield for a short time. Dr. J.P. Westerbrook was an early supporter of Dearfield (Figure 18). A prominent doctor living in the Five Points area of Denver, he took out a claim in 1910. Dr. Westerbrook would preach in the churches for people to move to Dearfield, and was the one to suggest the name Dearfield for the community. He gave up his claim in 1914 (Pitcher 1976:64). Later, he was an anti-Ku Klux Klan activist who posed as a white man and infiltrated the Klan (Pitcher 1976:64). Dr. W.A. Jones was a graduate of Booker T Washington’s Tuskegee Institute. He lived in one of the nicer homes in the Dearfield area and served as doctor to the greater community, regardless of race (Carlson, et al. 1994:8) (Figure 19). Dr. Jones donated land for a cemetery, although there is no evidence of anyone being buried at Dearfield (Carlson, et al. 1994:7).
Figure 18: Dr. J.H.P. Westbrook suggested the name Dearfield for the community; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library
Life at Dearfield

Despite a tough beginning the settlers of Dearfield persevered for a time. In 1915 four farmers had already proved up on their homesteads, and three more were eligible (Pitcher 1976:103). Women who were heads of their household or single were also encouraged to homestead and in 1914 there were already six or seven in the area. By 1917 most of the men of Dearfield were no longer working for anyone else. Many of the women, however, still worked for the nearby ranchers at low rates to help supplement their income (Johnson 1915). The homesteaders of Dearfield grew a variety of crops such as alfalfa, barley, corn, hay and sugar beets, and kept animals including pigs, chickens, turkeys, and geese (Norris 1978) (Figure 20). They sold their goods at markets in Greeley and Denver.
Many of the settlers lived in small houses that they built themselves, with the help of other residents. Since the land around Dearfield is relatively treeless, most settlers brought second hand planks with them from Denver on the train. Charles Rothwell described the house he and his mother lived in: “There was one room, about 9 ½ feet wide and 12 feet long. Later we added a kitchen and another room, and a porch.” (Massey, et al. 1985:2). The toilet was outside, and most people bathed in a tin tub (Pitcher 1978:18). The scarcity of trees also meant that the settlers had to find another source of fuel. Some people would go to the river, about two miles away, to gather driftwood. For the most part, though, the settlers would burn brush and buffalo chips (dried buffalo dung) for fuel (Moore 1978).

Besides working the land, the residents of Dearfield found time for other pursuits. Some of these were to further help their families. They would hunt small game like
pheasants, geese, ducks, and rabbits, and fish in the reservoirs. Settler Clifford Springs remembered a time when,

we had nothing in the house but some bread and butter. We went fishing in the ditch and caught some big ones and we friend them in butter and ate them with the bread and some water. I don’t think I’ve ever had such a delicious meal. (Pitcher 1976:64).

They also canned vegetables and fruit, and salted meat and fish to preserve it for harder months (Pitcher 1976:106). The settlers did some of these activities together, which further fostered their sense of community.

Other activities that the people of Dearfield engaged in did not necessarily help with the basics of feeding and clothing themselves, but were important nonetheless to forge a sense of community. Church, music, picnics and other social outings were common at Dearfield.

The spiritual life of the community was very important to the settlers. There were at least three denominations, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and Methodist. It seems that the Methodist Church had more followers. Olietta Moore remembered that at least some of the times the different denominations would worship together (Charles Rothwell, interviewed by Charles Stewart, June 10, 1978 [Charles Rothwell 1978]). Several preachers lived at Dearfield, and others would visit the colony from time to time. Eunice Norris’s father was the Methodist preacher, and she recalled at least a few baptisms at the church, although no one was married or buried at Dearfield (Pitcher 1976:101). Thomas Russell was a well-known Pentecostal Minister who preached in several small communities, including Dearfield (Norris 1978) (Figure 21). Newton Clark donated 5 acres on which to build the church, and the building was used as a
school as well. There could have been services held in O.T. Jackson’s dance hall
(Junne 2012). The post office was called Chapelton, and some suggested that this name
was used because of the importance of the church in the town. After church services
the people of Dearfield would spend time visiting with each other, discussing
community matters, friends, and farming. Church was therefore a much-needed break
from the hard work of farm life, a chance to recharge their spirits, and an important time
to forge community ties (Moore 1978).

![Figure 21: Pentecostal Minister Thomas Russell with is wife and dog. The town in the back may not be Dearfield; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library](image)

While an older generation dominated the population, there were younger people at
Dearfield, especially in the summers, when relatives would visit from Denver. “We had
some good times up there,” Charles Rothwell recalled (Pitcher 105). They would go on
dates, although there were not many places to go. According to Charles Rothwell the
Ford’s house and church were the only places to go. The Ford’s house was especially
popular because they had a piano. Eunice Norris remembered a few more events, and said that the social life was much like any other small communities. The young people would have parties, dances, socials, and do, “things the older folks didn’t approve of.” (Pitcher 1976:102). The youth of Dearfield were also involved in athletics. Two wrestlers from Dearfield, Miles Whitehall and Buster Cook, wrestled in Orchard (Norris 1978). Dearfield also had a softball team that was still playing in 1934. That year, O.T. Jackson wrote a letter to the Continental Oil Company, in Fort Morgan, Colorado, about sponsoring the team in their move to the Wiggins softball league. In this letter, Jackson said he agreed to write the letter asking for sponsorship if the team would, “clear off a diamond over here and play their practice games at Dearfield” (Carlson, et al. 1994:9).

The other major part of life for the youth of Dearfield would have been school (Figure 22). The Dearfield School District 42 opened in 1910, and classes were held in the Methodist Church. Starting in the 1918-19 school year, the school district changed to Chapelton District 124. This school was located closer to the Post Office than the town center. This school was closed in 1922, and in 1923 the school was moved again, and called Dearfield again. It was at this time that Odessa McCullough was teaching. Other teachers include Sarah Fountain, Katie Harris (who later married Mr. Kanty, a drugstore owner in Denver), and Sarah Fowler. Anna Collier remembered a headmistress names Miss Vandeval. She also recalled her father driving a bus that would carry the children who had to come from far out to get to school (Letter from O.T. Jackson to Mr. Lerew, Continental Oil Company, July 6, 1934:1934:O.T. Jackson Papers & Dearfield Collections, Digitital UNC). Sarah Fountain, who moved to

![Figure 22: Dearfield children and teacher outside of their school; Picture courtesy of Denver Public Library](image)

Music was a big part of the residents’ lives. Squire Brockman played the ukulele, banjo, and the guitar, and the Ford’s had a piano (Katz 1995:55). All of the people interviewed for the oral histories remembered dancing, in the dance hall, the lunch room, or at someone’s house. Sarah Fountain organized her school children into a church choir (Pitcher 1976:105).

Dearfield also maintained close ties with the black community in Denver. Most of the residents of Dearfield had friends and family living in the city, and until their farms were financially solvent, many worked in Denver. Dearfield became a popular weekend destination, and people would caravan up to go fishing, hunting, have picnics, and visit friends. The Greeley Tribune reported on September 28, 1916 on the second annual festival and carnival at Dearfield. According to the article there were about 1500 visitors. Entertainment included music and an exhibit of livestock, farm produce and food. Competitions were held for food and crops with cast prizes (Katz 1995:55).
In 1919 Dearfield held a Fall Festival celebration. The visitors feasted on roast beef and barbeque, and the town attorney, S.A. Carey, spoke to the crowd about sticking it out at Dearfield despite hard times (Greeley Tribune [GT], September 28, ).

Crime was low in Dearfield, with only two reported incidents. In 1920 a young man admitted to robbing the Chapelton Post Office, and in 1922 another man was found guilty of entering the home of a settler and stealing $20 worth of property (Carlson, et al. 1994:9). There was some trouble over Charles Rothwell’s water rights as well, but a judge ordered in his favor.

**Dearfield in the Early 20th Century**

These two different versions of Dearfield were not mutually exclusive. The community did not shun O.T. Jackson, and the farmers also shared a hope for a strong business center at Dearfield. J.J. Houston pushed for the opening of a Post Office and was the Post Master. Cody Masten ran a grocery store, and Squire Brockman had a blacksmith shop (U.S. Census Bureau 1920). The teachers were residents of the town as well. The community, Jackson included, held fall festivals and other celebrations. Even though Jackson was not a church-going man, he knew that religion was a big part of many of the settlers’ lives. In 1925 he solicited money from his contacts in Denver, including the Secretary of State of Colorado, to procure the funds to put up a new church building (WCN, March 17, 1922; GT, September 3, 1920). Jackson organized a big celebration when Highway 34 was completed (Letter from Carl S. Milliken to O.T. Jackson, September 15, 1925: Greeley Historical Museum; Letter from L.D. Blavelt to O.T. Jackson, September 11, 1925:Greeley Historical Museum).
The difference was in where their priorities lay. Jackson seemed to believe that everyone should work hard to realize his dream of Dearfield. According to Anna Collier Lynch,

O.T. Jackson, he was ambition with certain ideas in life. And he wanted to accomplish them. And now he was going to push everybody, everywhere. And if you didn’t get it, it was your fault, ’cause he certainly pushed you. (Graves 1978).

The settlers had their own ideas. Most of the people who moved to the area were not there to open a business in town, but to be a farmer or a rancher. Apparently Jackson had plans for Odessa McCollough, who had taught at the Dearfield School for a short while, to open an industrial and agricultural school. Her response was, “He certainly didn’t know that Odessa McCollough was not interested in teaching school of any kind.” (Pitcher 1976:100). The settlers’ community spirit was not based only on economics, as Jackson would have liked, it was based on cooperation and sharing life experiences. When it came to economics, the settlers were also trying to do their best to get by.

These differences caused some tension in the settlement between Jackson and others, and there were mixed feelings about him in the community. Olietta Moore called him a brilliant and progressive man, and praised him for his foresight and generosity (Pitcher 1976:103). Charles Rothwell on the other hand said of Jackson, “He was an Uncle Tom and that was why we all hated him.” (Moore 1978). Eunice Norris said she thought the people of Dearfield thought Jackson was “alright.” She also remembered her parents saying he was a shrewd business man, and pleasant, but “maybe too pleasant when you are a shrewd business man” (Pitcher 1976:104). The
forceful personality that Jackson revealed in *The Statesman* when Dearfield was just starting continued during its occupation. Anna Collier Lynch remembered him getting upset when people did not shop at his store, even if the prices were higher there than at the store in Masters. “We’d go out there, and if he didn’t see you drive in his store and come out with some packages you were going to get it when you passed.” (Norris 1978).

**Dearfield Today**

People have been writing about Dearfield since its heyday. The way Dearfield is described now is as a once booming town that is about to be forgotten. The Black American West’s website states, “Today the Black American West Museum proudly owns the majority of the town’s lots and is seeking to preserve, protect and tell the story of this historical town” (Pitcher 1976:104). The Greeley Historical Society Website says of Dearfield during the dustbowl: “The growing town was dying. By 1940, only 12 people lived in Dearfield.” ("Dearfield Colorado" 2009). These evoke a sense of a community living in a bounded area, with a main street with stores and the like.

Many of the writings about Dearfield since the 1960s give a sense that Dearfield is about to disappear and be forgotten. Articles with titles like “Historic Black Farm Colony Is One Gust from Oblivion” and “Dearfield, Black farm community 0f Weld County is no more” are examples of headlines that exemplify this sentiment that Dearfield is something of the past (Brooks 2013). These articles portray Dearfield as something that died long ago, and is about to be swept out of our communal memory.

These writings also show how Dearfield is still a part of Colorado’s collective memory. While many of them write how Dearfield is forgotten, these articles keep
getting written. Research is still going at Dearfield. It clearly has not been forgotten.

A recent article about the Denver home of a Dearfield settler in the Denver Post has a quote by Professor George Junne, of the University of Northern Colorado. In the article he says that Dearfield was “the most famous black agricultural community in the United States.” (Verrengia 2000; Graves 1978).

These are the two sides of Dearfield that are revealed in the archives and literature about Dearfield: a man trying to create a thriving town, and farmers trying to create a community and become economically secure. Today these two sides of Dearfield have been merged into one story centered on the townsite. This story has persisted in our collective memory. In the next chapter I will review the physical evidence of the buildup of the townsite. I will then discuss what this lack of construction at the townsite says about the meaning of the place of Dearfield, and why the site has come to stand for the community today.
Chapter 5: Physical Evidence of the town of Dearfield

In the previous chapter I described the two versions of Dearfield: that of O.T. Jackson’s town, and that of the settlers’ community. Today our memories of Dearfield are centered on the townsite even though most of the residents did not feel like that was where their community was centered. In this chapter I will describe the physical evidence from an archaeological survey and the magnetometer survey that I conducted at the townsite. The physical remains at Dearfield testify to a dearth of built improvements in the town. This is seen in the lack of any insurance maps or other documentary evidence of construction, the lack of physical remains of buildings, the archaeological evidence, and the results from the magnetometer survey.

Physical Remains

The townsite of Dearfield currently has four historical buildings still standing. These buildings are O.T. Jackson’s house (sometimes called the boarding house, or hotel), Squire Brockman’s house, the Dearfield Lunchroom, and the blacksmith shop (Figures 24-27). There are also the ruins of buildings that are called the granary and the grocery store, the ruins of several sheds and outbuildings on O.T. Jackson’s property, and the cement foundations of a rectangular building thought to be the barn and dance pavilion, or the Methodist Church (Figures 23, 28).
Figure 23: Location of currently standing buildings are ruins at Dearfield
Figure 24: Dearfield Lunch Room, looking south
Figure 25: Back of blacksmith shop, looking NNW
Figure 26: Squire Brockman house, looking west
Figure 27: O.T. Jackson's house and remains of outbuilding, looking NNE
When Melvin Norris wrote his thesis on Dearfield in 1980 there were a few more buildings standing (Figure 29). His map shows more buildings, including sheds, a chicken coop, and garden plots. Most of the features on this map are not evident today. Norris’ map also highlights some of the confusion surrounding the purpose of the buildings. What he calls the church is called the granary elsewhere, which means that it might have been used as the school as well. He also shows the grocery store being the dancehall (O’Connor 2013).
In 1985 the Colorado Historical Society commissioned a report on Dearfield. In this report the ruins of a shack that was rented to hunters is said to be behind the lunchroom and blacksmith shop. That report does not mention all of the standing building or ruins at the town (Norris 1980:188).

The lack of buildings currently at Dearfield is not evidence in itself for the town not having been developed. The land that Dearfield is on is almost completely devoid of
trees. The settlers had to bring up their own wood to build their houses, and selling the planks when they left was a common practice (Massey, et al. 1985). Therefore, it is not unexpected that there are few buildings at the townsite.

Archival Evidence

There is no mention in the contemporary reports of Dearfield of how the town was laid out, or what was actually in it. What information there is also has to be taken with a grain of salt because O.T. Jackson had a propensity for exaggerating the extent to which the city had grown. For instance, he mentions a cement block factory in 1915, but no later source ever says anything at all about it nor is there any physical evidence of its presence.

No Sanborn Company maps were produced for Dearfield. Insurance companies used these maps to assess the risk of fire for the buildings they insured. The building materials, how many windows, and the primary use of the building were all noted on these maps. The fact that no map was made for Dearfield could indicate that there were no buildings being insured, which in turn could mean that the value of the property and buildings were not high enough to be insured. It could also be an indication that the people who had businesses in the Dearfield townsite did not have enough money to insure their buildings.

Another piece of negative evidence that suggests that the townsite of Dearfield was minimally developed is the fact that the town only had one plat map. Plat maps change if new roads are built, if land parcels are split up or combined, or if land is being dedicated for public use, like a park. The plat map from 1914 is the only one for
Dearfield. This means that the city plan did not change in the twenty plus years of Dearfield’s occupation.

**Archaeological Remains**

In 2002 Brad Noisat of Niwot Archaeological Consultants, with funding from the Black American West Museum and Colorado Preservation, Inc., conducted an archaeological survey of the Dearfield townsite. This survey consisted of 80 50x50 cm test units (TUs). Four main test areas were selected: the Reginald Cooper property, which was a four-lot group owned by Reginald Cooper, who bought the property in 1920; the Mary Hill et. al. property, which was eight adjacent lots owned by several people who had bought the properties between 1914 and 1919; the Washington Avenue transect, in which no lots were sold, but was the town’s main thoroughfare; and feature areas, of which four were selected. These four feature areas were the Wood and Tin Trailer, the surface depression across from O.T. Jackson’s house, which is on land that was purchased by Minerva Jackson, the Granary Ruins, and O.T. Jackson’s house (Figure 30). The selection of these locations for TUs was to test a variety of different situations in town. Lots that had been purchased were hypothesized as having a higher probability of cultural material than those that were not sold. The Reginald Cooper Property, being larger, was thought to perhaps be a more “suburban” type living situation, with the possibility of some agricultural activity, and the Mary Hill et. al. property was thought to be more “urban” with people living in closer quarters, with four buyers on eight lots. The TUs around the features were intended to discover what kinds of activities were being performed around the features (Pitcher 1976:126).
The results from the 20 TUs in both the Reginald Cooper group and the Mary Hill et. al. group were completely negative. There was no sign of any cultural material or
changes in the soil profiles of the units. If there had been any cultural activity, there should be some indication of it in these units (Noisat 2003:9, 10).

The ten TUs put around the Wood and Tin Trailer and the ten around the depression were put in with the hope that some sign of a building would be found. The Wood and Tin Trailer was full of plywood and plaster sheeting. These building materials made up the scatter around the trailer as well. The depression is the right size for house. This made these two properties good contestants for the remains of buildings. A few pieces of roofing and tar paper were found near the depression. The soil was more compact than the native soils in these units as well, which suggests that there could have been some sustained historical activities in these areas (Noisat 2003:11, 14).

24 TUs were dug in the Washington Street transect. Since none of these lots had been sold and because there was nothing on the ground surface to indicate that there had been any buildings on these lots there was a good possibility that these units would not have any cultural material either. On the other hand, since Washington was the main street it would be someplace where the people of Dearfield and their visitors would gather for community activities. Only four of these units had cultural material, the two closest to and the two furthest from O.T. Jackson’s house. The material found closest to O.T. Jackson’s house is typical of the slow accumulation of material that will form around a long occupied home. The cultural materials recovered from these units include a handgun cartridge, shotgun shell, jar fragments, beverage container fragments, and tableware. These are suggestive of the kinds of activities practiced in Dearfield. The TUs around Jackson’s house yielded more construction debris, and other household debris (Noisat 2003:23, 26).
The two other TUs in the Washington Ave. transect that produced results were at the side closest to the highway. Tin can fragments, other unidentifiable bits of metal, and a glass wire insulator most likely used for long distance telephone lines were among the finds. A small concentration of charcoal was also found in the wall of one of the units. These finds prompted the archaeologists to place another five TUs six to ten feet around them to determine the extent of the material culture. Nothing was found in these additional units, suggesting that whatever activity was taking place was fairly small in terms of area (Noisat 2003:17, 19, 39, 40).

The TUs from the depression of Minerva Jackson’s property yielded a small amount of construction material. The TUs around the granary ruins also produced very little in the way of artifacts. The archaeologist hypothesized that the number and placement of these test units could be the reason so little was found. If he had dug more, he concluded he could have discovered more about the uses of these spaces (Noisat 2003:20, 23).

The conclusion of the archaeologist was that either Dearfield had not been as built up as previously thought, or that because of the differences between the maps and the actual city layout, he may have just missed the areas that had been built on. (Noisat 2003:27, 30, 33).

**Magnetometer Evidence**

The results from the magnetometer surveys also attest to this dearth of occupation in the townsite. In 2008 and 2009, I surveyed nine magnetometer grids at the Dearfield townsite (Figure 31). The purpose of these surveys was to find any features such as foundations, basements, outbuildings, or the remains of any dugouts. Magnetometry
covered a lot more ground than the archaeology, and so could pick up on the features that the test units missed. I placed some grids where the 2003 TUs had been placed, as well as other areas where I thought people might have built. Figure 32 shows how each grid was numbered. Figure 10 shows the placement of the magnetometer grids in relation to the historic buildings and ruins at the site.
Figure 31: Location of Magnetometer Grids and Historic Buildings
Figure 32: Numbered Dearfield Grids
Most of the results from these surveys correspond with previous archaeological research. There was not a lot of evidence that the areas surveyed had any sign of extensive occupation. This could be due to the presence of surface metal, or because there was nothing there to find. The presence of surface metal could have produced dipoles in the data so strong that subtle features that could have pointed to more occupation were missed.

Figure 33 is magnetometer grid 5 from Dearfield. This unit was placed close to a house, and because of the weeds the shed was not noticed until I was on top of it. The house, even though it was a few meters to the south, still shows a strong signature on the map. The shed and other surface metals also show strong dipoles that are spread out over the entire south part of the grid. Because these dipoles are strong, I hypothesized that the other strong dipoles are either more surface or near surface metal, and that more subtle features may have been obscured.
Figure 33: Magentometer Grid from Dearfield
Figure 34 shows the TUs on the Reginald Cooper property and its correlation on the magnetometer grids. Since the property maps were up to 20 feet off, these are probably within a meter of the correct placement, but may not be exact. The test units line up with dipoles in the magnetometer data. There was no evidence of any sort of cultural material in the TUs, so the magnetometer data probably shows more culturally barren grounds. Since this grid had no surface metal the dipoles that do show up would be subtler. This is because the standard deviation of the grid data would be smaller with no surface metal, and therefore the sensitivity of the parameters is higher.
Figure 34: Test Units and Magnetometer grid on the Reginald Cooper Property

The TUs near O.T. Jackson’s house did yield some cultural material. The magnetometer data showed a very slight dipole at these two TUs, but the other dipoles
in the grid are surface metal, burned material, or associated with extant buildings (Figures 35, 33). This may mean that more subtle signatures may have been lost in data processing, or that there was nothing happening there.
The other 7 magnetometer grids showed these same trends. The grids were either devoid of or had quite a bit of surface metal. The grids that had surface metal showed
little sign of other cultural activity. This could be due to the fact that the dipoles from
the surface metal are so strong that they obscure more subtle subsurface features. I
suspect that many of the anomalies that I have marked on the magnetometer grids are
either surface metal that I did not see while collecting the data, or metal near the
surface.

Figures 36 through 39 show the magnetometer grids that had a lot of surface metal.
All of them have anomalies that I did not record while collecting data. The signatures
for many of these anomalies are mostly quite small, and some are quite strong, which
makes them most likely individual artifacts. The strong signatures from the many
pieces of ferrous metals could have obscured subtler features. Figure 40 shows an
example of this. Each piece of wood had numerous nails in it. There were also several
pieces of barbed wire in each grid. None of the anomalies are large enough to be
buildings or dugouts. There were a few areas, however, that show what could have
been smaller buildings, such as a shed or other outbuilding, and other areas that could
be of interest archaeologically.

Magnetometer grid 1 has a large collection of signatures, all of which are in the
eastern half (Figure 36). This grid had a mound in that area, which is marked. Some of
the magnetic signatures are most likely associated with this mound. There is also a lot
of surface metal in the eastern half of the grid, which also suggests more activity here.
It could be one area of interest to archaeologists.
Figure 36: Magnetometer Grid 1
Grid 5 also shows an interesting collection of anomalies (Figure 37). In the western portion of the grid there are a few very strong anomalies near a piece of surface metal. While this area is not large enough to be a house or other commercial building, it could be a shed, outhouse, or other small structure. This, along with the anomalies in grid 1 suggest that there are still places in the townsite of Dearfield that could yield information about what was going on there. However, even these possible features do not imply the type of intensive occupation of the townsite that has come to be the dominant narrative of Dearfield.
Figure 37: Magnetometer Grid 2
Figure 38: Magnetometer Grids 3&4
Figure 39: Magnetometer grid 5, North of O.T. Jackson’s house
Grids 6-9 had no surface metal (Figure 41). The road is clearly visible in the data, as is the deep vegetation that was growing on the north part of the road. The anomalies that are present, especially the one in the northeast corner could be due to soil compaction or a difference in vegetation. The anomalies do not appear to be big enough to suggest a house or a dugout.
In 2011 a group of students under the direction of Dr. Robert Brunswig of University of Northern Colorado spent the field season at Dearfield. The students
conducted their own magnetometer survey near the foundation remains of the barn pavilion/ Methodist Church, around the depression on Minerva Jackson’s property, and near the granary. Archaeological test units were put in near the Block 4 house, and behind O.T. Jackson’s house (Brunswig 2011:41, 57).

The magnetometer grids showed areas of interest near the barn pavilion/ church, and depression. The grid near the granary did not show many subsurface features due to the presence of a considerable amount of surface metal and barbed wire. Three 1 meter test units were opened behind O.T. Jackson’s house. These units showed evidence of trash burning, chicken or other livestock enclosures, and domestic artifacts dating from the time of Dearfield’s occupation until at least 1948. The artifacts found in the test units near the remains of the Block 4 house led the researchers to conclude that the house had been moved after Dearfield’s main occupation period, and none of the artifacts were from that time (Noisat 2003:40-42).

**Dearfield Region**

This evidence all points to the townsite of Dearfield as not being the way that O.T. Jackson portrayed it, or the way that it is often remembered today. Instead of being a town with a community, it was a community that had something other than a physical place to hold it together. The town was the most recognized and publicized feature of the community, but that does not mean that in the early 20th century the settlers of Dearfield viewed it as the central part of their lives. The Chapelton Post Office that the people of Dearfield used was not really near the townsite of Dearfield. The schools were not either (Refer to Figure 18). The people of Dearfield had a sense of place that was not based around the townsite, but was still a real part of their lives.
If the townsite of Dearfield was not developed, nor the most important part of Dearfield as a place, why has it become the center of the memory of the colony? The theoretical perspectives that I set out in Chapter 2 can help inform our understanding of Dearfield as a community with blurry boundaries, and as a place of memory.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

One way to understand the community at Dearfield, and how the meaning of the place has changed is using place theory. In the early 20th century Dearfield could be described as a place of blurry boundaries. The people of Dearfield knew their community, even if it was not bounded in any clear physical way. In the intervening years between the end of the community at Dearfield and today Dearfield has changed. The community’s meaning has now been combined with O.T. Jackson’s dream and the townsite. There are many reasons for this, one of which is that it is easier for us to remember tangible things. The remaining buildings at Dearfield stand as a physical symbol of the character and mettle of the people who once lived there.

I have shown that the way that Dearfield is presented to us today- a small, once prosperous community centered on O.T. Jackson’s townsite- is not the only way that Dearfield was experienced by those who lived there. The archival research shows that there were two Dearfields: the one that was presented in newspapers and promoted by O.T. Jackson; and the one lived in and experienced by most of the settlers. The side that O.T. Jackson endorsed, the townsite, with its few businesses and homes, is the physical reminder of Dearfield today. The other side of Dearfield that focused more on a sense of community than an economic endeavor is a large part of the spirit that is remembered there. Dearfield residents’ sense of community did not rely on close
approximation to the town; rather, they experienced an innate, internal understanding of their community.

The magnetometer survey suggests that there may have at one point been a few more outbuildings in Grids 1 and 5 at Dearfield. However, the other grids imply a dearth of other buildings. Together they indicate that the kind of materials we might expect from a small community just starting out, such as dugouts, or a bustling community, like more substantial structures or landscaping, are rare. Still, the physical remains of Dearfield stand today as a testament to this community. They are important reminders of the struggles and triumphs of the people. While they may not have represented Dearfield to all of those living there, they have become symbols of it today. The Dearfield Diner, the Dearfield Lodge, and the blacksmith’s shop help us remember the business side of the town. All of the buildings help root the place of Dearfield in our minds, and are tangible representations of it.

**Dearfield as a place of blurry boundaries**

My research suggests that Dearfield in the early 20th century was not the bustling and prosperous town that O.T. Jackson had advertised. While the people of Dearfield did have a period of prosperity, they did not center their lives on the townsite. The town did not attract the businesses that Jackson had hoped; instead, most of the residents were homesteaders. They lived on over 20,000 acres of land, with some important buildings and places, such as the post office being a few miles away from the town center. Like the Lumbee people of North Carolina, there were no visible boundaries demarcating what constituted Dearfield.
The Lumbee are also not the only group of people who live in Robeson County (Blu 1996:198). Just like the Lumbee, the people of Dearfield were not the only ones living in that area of Weld County. However the white ranchers and Hispanic railroad workers who lived right next door were not from Dearfield. To be from Dearfield was not exclusively a matter of location.

This is not to say that the townsite was not an important hub for the people of Dearfield. It was one of the centers of community life. It was probably where the large yearly celebrations were held, where some visitors stayed, and the focus of outside attention from newspapers and magazines. The stories from the settlers make it clear, though, that other places, like the churches and certain people’s houses were as central to the community as the town center.

**Dearfield as a place of memory**

If the townsite of Dearfield was neither developed nor the most important part of Dearfield for its residents, why has it become the center of the memory of Dearfield? Places are not static. Place making is an ongoing process. The interpretation and meaning of a place are different for each person, and change over time. The later owners of the Dearfield service station had a much different experience of Dearfield than the early homesteaders. While reading this thesis you have created your own meaning of Dearfield, which is different than the meaning, Dearfield has to me. The Dearfield of today is a different place than that of the early 20th century.

Memory is made by repetition, but this repetition does not have to be, and usually is not, exactly as the event or events actually happened. The story of Dearfield exemplifies this. As I have demonstrated, the story that has been repeated does not
exactly match the events of Dearfield; the town of Dearfield was not necessarily the center of the community. The population of the townsite never reached anywhere near the numbers that O.T. Jackson had claimed, as most of the residents lived out on their homesteads on the land around Dearfield. The residents did not even seem to agree on what the community was called, being variously called the Colored Colony, Chapelton, and Dearfield. However, the core of the story is still there, and that is what makes the townsite Dearfield a powerful place of memory. That which is being remembered at Dearfield is the spirit of the Dearfield pioneers; their hope in the face of natural and cultural adversity, their hard work, and their faith. In this Dearfield can become like Apache places of memory. If we were to keep the place of Dearfield as those who lived there did, it would be hard for people today to understand it or have it in their minds.

The idea of people living out on 20,000 acres, with only two small central locations— the townsite of Dearfield, and the area of Chapelton— is too large and nebulous for it to be of much use as a place of memory. But if we distill the whole place down to the standing buildings at the townsite, it is much easier to picture Dearfield in our minds. Just as the Apache invoke Trail Goes Down Between Two Hills when someone has been acting inappropriately, Dearfield is used as a metonymy for self-reliance and the unconquerable spirit of African-American pioneers.

While the meaning of Dearfield has necessarily changed over the years, there is a continuum between the Dearfield of the past and that of today. We do not need and cannot experience it in the same way as those who first lived there, but the connection to the past is still apparent in the way that Dearfield resonates with people today.
Current and Future Research

The University of Northern Colorado research is an ongoing multi-year project. The research is concentrated on the areas of the townsite that have been identified as having the potential to contain historical material. It has the potential to answer a lot of questions about Dearfield; how people were living there; and their ties to Denver’s black community.

The townsite is the most accessible area to research, but there are other places of interest to excavate. The Chapelton Post Office would offer different information than the townsite. Since some people even go so far to talk of Chapelton as wholly different community (which I do not think is the case), it would be interesting to compare the artifacts there to ones found at the Dearfield townsite. Another attractive area to explore would be individual homesteads, although this could be difficult because none of the buildings are standing, nor their locations recorded. Moreover, if the wood from the homes was sold soon after they were abandoned, finding them could be quite challenging. Current land owners would also have to give their permission for archaeologists to be on their land. Since most people did not live in the townsite, the homestead sites could tell us how the majority of the community lived. The excavations at the townsite have shown that, while there is temporal mixing of artifacts near the surface, artifacts from 10-20 cm down are all from the Dearfield time period. This should hold true at the homestead sites as well, and there could be even less temporal mixing in the upper level. These artifacts could also tell us about differences between people who were actually living on their farms, as compared to those who bought lots and were living in town.
I set out on this project to tell the story of the town of Dearfield. What I learned is that there is no one story to tell. Each person who lived there, and each person who visits adds his or her own story. The reasons that the settlers moved out to their homesteads and the community they formed there are the crux of any story of Dearfield though. Today, Dearfield is usually presented as an early 20th century town, but the reality was more complicated than that. The Dearfield townsite was definitely important to the people, but it was not at the heart of their community. Their churches, schools, and time spent working on their homesteads and together are what is remembered at Dearfield.
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