

'Frontier' isn't dying, just drifting

Its persistence reflects nation's change in focus from conquering the wilderness to celebrating it

By Patrick O'Driscoll
USA TODAY

FAIRPLAY, Colo. — At almost 2 miles above sea level, thin air isn't the only breathtaking part of life in this mine-town remnant of America's 19th century frontier.

Five 14,000-foot peaks loom to the west and north. A vast mountain basin called South Park, greening with grass, rolls off to the east and south. Thick forests of pine and spruce encircle it.

But what looks like 1800s wilderness is the fifth-fastest-growing county in the USA. Park County, population 14,523, is growing so fast that it has ceased being "frontier" according to the Census Bureau's official yardstick: fewer than six people per square mile.

Driven by the arrival of retirees, workers from nearby mountain resorts and refugees from Denver's western suburbs, Park County's 102% growth in the 1990s made it one of 19 counties to lose frontier status in Census 2000.

All except one are in the West. Eight are in Colorado, and five are in neighboring Arizona and New Mexico. Combined, those 13 counties cover an area about the size of Georgia.

More than a century ago, scholars prematurely declared that the American frontier had disappeared. In reality, the invisible line that once separated settled from unsettled terrain became fragmented and blurred as growth hopped across the West.

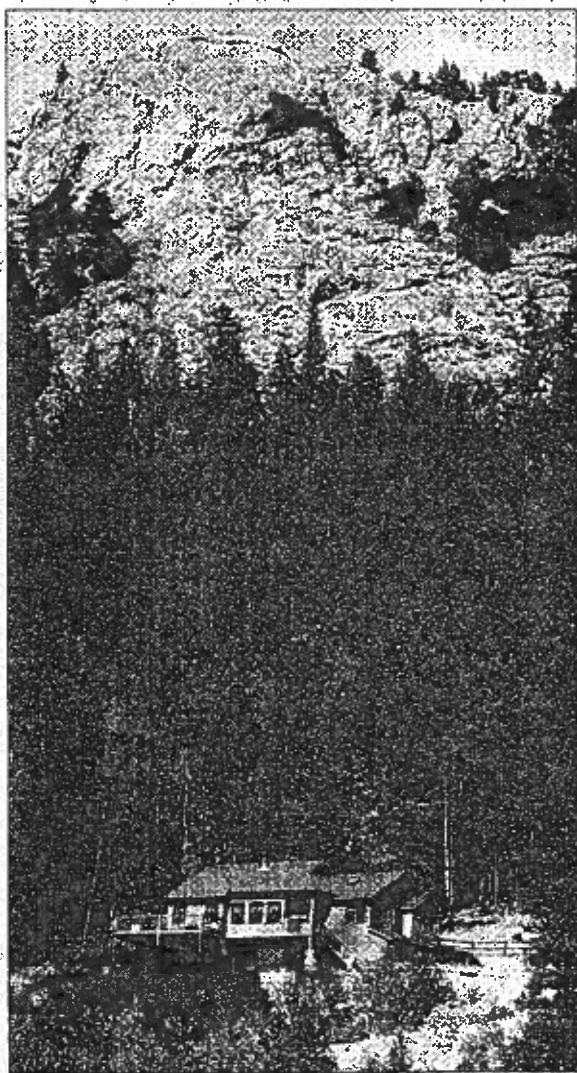
The frontier actually grew in the first decade of the 20th century. Since then, the number of these least populated counties has roller-coastered with economic booms and busts. In the Great Plains, the frontier has expanded in recent decades as population has declined in parts of the region. In the Southwest and Rockies, the frontier has shrunk as more people scramble for a picturesque piece of the West.

The 19 counties that ceased being frontier in the 1990s total about 68,000 square miles. Nine counties — all east of the Continental Divide and totaling 12,200 square miles — slipped back into frontier status.

The net loss of territory designated as frontier was only 4% for the decade. Nearly 40% of the USA — 400 counties with 4.7 million residents and more than 1.4 million square miles — remains frontier by the Census definition. That includes more than 500,000 square miles of the "Last Frontier" state of Alaska, which has 1.1 people per square mile.

More than 27% of the contiguous 48 states is frontier. In the industrialized world, only Canada and Australia, both with far fewer people, have larger frontier zones.

Nationwide from 1990 to 2000, "we just picked up 32.7 million people. It was the larg-



Photos by Rick Willing for USA TODAY

The frontier no more: Wilderness is as close as the backyard in a new subdivision in Park County, Colo. Newcomers helped fuel a 102% boom in the county's population in the 1990s.



Attractive lifestyle: Mike and Barb Pilcher play with sons Wilby, left, and Jimmy in Bailey, Colo., about an hour from Denver.

Area is growing but 'untamed'

By Patrick O'Driscoll
USA TODAY

FAIRPLAY, Colo. — Even when counties stop being part of America's frontier, the atmosphere is far from suburban, let alone urban.

With 6.6 people per square mile, Colorado's booming Park County remains light-years from the 54,900 people per square mile in New York's Manhattan — or even the 3,618 per square mile in Denver, an 85 mile drive from here.

Dominated by a majestic mountain basin called South Park, the county has no hospital or full-time doctor, no movie theater, no supermarket, no fast-food joints and just one traffic light. It has a dozen state wildlife areas, 800 miles of rivers and streams, 25 mountain peaks over 13,000 feet, elk herds, ghost towns and 97 acres for every human. The chamber of commerce calls it a "beautiful hunk of untamed real estate right in the center of Colorado."

But this real-life namesake of TV's mythical South Park cartoon series is changing. Where ranchers once ran cattle and planted hay, developers now grow subdivisions. Not the tightly packed tracts of suburbia, but 35-acre "ranchettes." Trophy homes hide in the surrounding woods. Their after-dark glow is the only clue to the growth. "Ten years ago, there were just a few lights out there," says Gary Nichols, the county's head of economic development and tourism. "Now, from here to Hoosier Pass at night, it looks like a city."

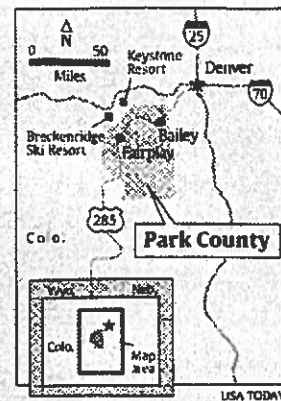
Hoosier Pass, an 11,541-foot-high gap in the mountains, leads to Summit County, home of Breckenridge, Keystone and other major ski resorts. Many people live here and work over there, where the cost of living is too high for most ordinary wage-earners.

Chuck Johnson, who runs Sharon's Deli on Main Street in Fairplay, came over the pass this spring and stayed. "No matter how much it grows here, I don't think it'll ever lose that (frontier) feeling," says Johnson, a former ski instructor who bailed out of Summit County after paying \$1,800 a month to rent a 1,200-square-foot modular home.

Fairplay, the Park County seat, grew 58% in the '90s but still has just 610 residents. Most of the county's growth is elsewhere, on its northeastern border with Jefferson County, Denver's biggest suburban county. In the wooded, unincorporated town of Bailey, log-home builders and real estate brokers feed frontier dreams. Commuters can drive an hour or so down winding U.S. 285 to city jobs and still live deep in the mountains.

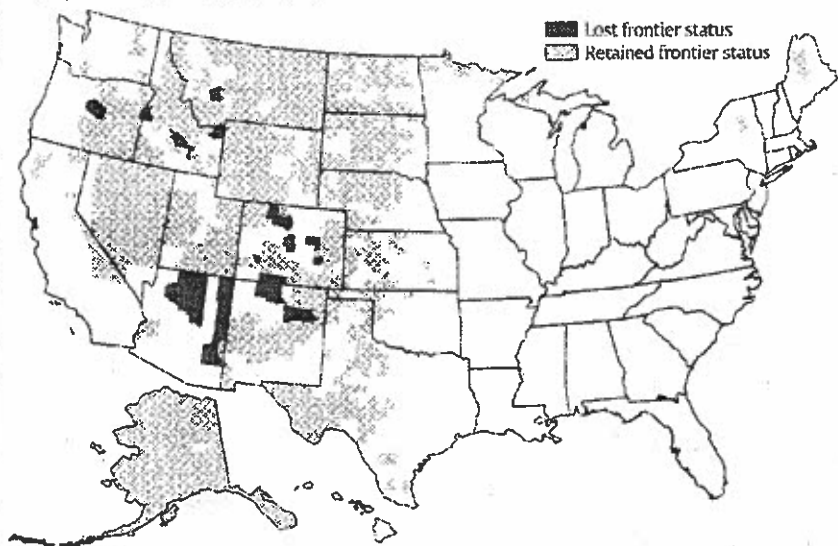
"They want it both ways," Nichols says. "They want deer in the yard when they commute home from their \$100,000-a-year career in Denver."

"We still have people who will ride into town on their horse," says Carol Davis, who runs the South Park City Museum, an assemblage of dozens of pioneer buildings and thousands of artifacts that preserve frontier history in Fairplay. "I spend most of my time in the 19th century," she jokes.



America's shifting frontier

Demographers define frontier counties as those with fewer than six people per square mile. In the 2000 Census, 19 counties lost frontier status.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

By Frank Pompei, USA TODAY

now want it to remain unfinished. In the 1890s, it was a source of pride that we were finishing. Now it's a source of combined, retains considerable emptiness. Within its borders is much of the Grand Canyon. Some counties may never

in isolation by calculating travel time and distance from adequate services. Its tabulation: The frontier consists of 908 counties, 10.1 million people

Old frontier, new frontier

Countries that gained enough population in the 1990s to lose the Census Bureau's "frontier" designation of fewer than six people per square mile:

- Arizona: Apache, Coconino, Graham
- Colorado: Archuleta, Conejos, Crowley, Elbert, Grand, Ouray, Park, Routt
- Georgia: Echols
- Idaho: Blaine, Fremont, Washington
- Montana: Jefferson
- New Mexico: Rio Arriba, San Miguel
- Oregon: Crook

Countries that lost enough population in the 1990s to gain frontier designation:

- Kansas: Edwards
- Michigan: Ontonagon
- Minnesota: Marshall
- Montana: Hill
- Nebraska: Sherman
- North Dakota: Foster