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THE OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER OF RECORD FOR GILPIN COUNTY, BLACK HAWK, AND CENTRAL CITY



Springtime in the Rockies can bring some beautiful sunrises in the Colorado Mountains

Photo by Danny Tomlinson

Fire department will give new life to Fritz Peak Observatory

By Don Ireland
Senior Reporter

The iconic Fritz Peak Observatory, which has been sitting in mothballs for years, will be getting a “third life” soon. This week, the Timberline Fire Protection District will acquire the former National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) building and eventually convert it into a fire station.

The public is being invited to tour the forthcoming fire station from 5 to 7 p.m. on Monday, May 9, according to Chief Paul Ondr of Timberline. The fire department’s board will conduct a meeting in the building immediately following the open house.

“We’re very excited about this,” he said.

Timberline plans to transform the observatory into a fire station, which will house fire-related equipment currently stored in a bay at Gilpin County’s public works building in Rollinsville. The department would like to build “two or three” new bays for other fire trucks and fire apparatus at the observatory in the future, Ondr said. “The ability to obtain this large facility in such a great location at NO cost to our residents is simply incredible.”

The Fritz Peak Observatory, at 19126 Highway 119, includes a three-story main building, a nearby two-bedroom cottage and Dutch Peak, an observation site behind the building that overlooks most of the Rollinsville and mid-county area. The building will require some roof and septic system repairs and other remodeling. “With this additional operational space, an increased number of firefighters can be on duty, expanding our current resident, shift, and overnight firefighter programs and accommodations,” Chief Ondr stated. “We anticipate reduced response times to the north end of the county once we are fully functional.”

According to Ondr, Timberline began discussions about Fritz Peak Observatory in 2017. Although NOAA stopped using the facility for its research several years earlier, it was still being used by the late Dr. Clyde Burnett, a professor from Florida Atlantic University, who conducted daily research in the building from 1977 until 2019. Dr. Burnett, who wrote several books, passed away later that year.

The observatory on the east side of the highway is about 8,790 feet in elevation. It is part of two buildings on a 5.8-acre site that also includes Dutch Peak, which is at an elevation of 8,954 feet.

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Recollections of the Teller House

By Mary Peery

Here begins a series of little histories about the Teller House, which will celebrate its 150 anniversary on June 25. The first history is from Muriel Sibell Wolle, who taught at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and served as head of the Department of Fine Arts. Wolle loved Colorado ghost towns and learned about their history, primarily from: her visits, tales from the locals, and library research. Along with visiting the small mountain towns, she would sketch, draw and paint pictures to augment

her observations. During one of her visits to Central City, she had her pictures on display at the Teller Law Office, which will soon become the Eureka Street Popcorn. Below are excerpts from two of her books: *Ghost Cities of Colorado* and *Stampede to Timberline*:

“The Teller house was big and substantial and a little gloomy. The dining room was empty by the time I arrived, save for Mr. Teller, who invited me

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Fritz Peak Observatory

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The elevation of FPO and Dutch Peak were attractive to researchers because they could get away from light pollution and atmospheric pollution from larger communities, including Denver and Boulder. In approximately 1958, scientists from the University of Colorado began using the site to study the aurora borealis.

Dr. Eric Williams, a Deputy Director (Planning) at the Chemical Sciences Laboratory and Earth Systems Research Laboratories at NOAA's Boulder division, previously told the Weekly Register-Call that most upper atmospheric observations occurred during the wintertime. After a few winters, the scientists realized they needed a "base camp" due to the arduous conditions. The Commerce Department's National Bureau of Standards purchased the nearby three-story building – now known as the Fritz Peak Observatory – in 1965. The building enabled scientists to have a full-time research and staging area while allowing them to lodge overnight. No dome or large telescope was ever installed atop the building. FPO was primarily used as a laboratory to conduct scientific research on the Earth's atmosphere in an effort to better understand and predict its behavior. Today, NOAA's Chemical Sciences Laboratory (previously the Aeronomy Laboratory) research focuses primarily on several issues related to atmospheric chemical composition: climate, air quality, radiation and clouds.

The government observatory was the second life

for the building, which initially was built as the Severance Lodge by Horace "Skip" Severance, a World War II veteran, and his wife Dorothy in 1946. A kitchen, gift shop, bar, and ballroom were on the ground floor. The ballroom area included a large brick fireplace. When Severance Lodge became a research facility, scientists and their associates ate at tables in the former ballroom. Next to the room was a stone staircase, which offered passage to the dormitory-style rooms upstairs.

Scientists brought in various instruments and built wood and metal shops inside, where they created new equipment. One experiment included shooting different colors of laser beams from the building to conduct measurements. The laser beams lit up the skies in part of the county.

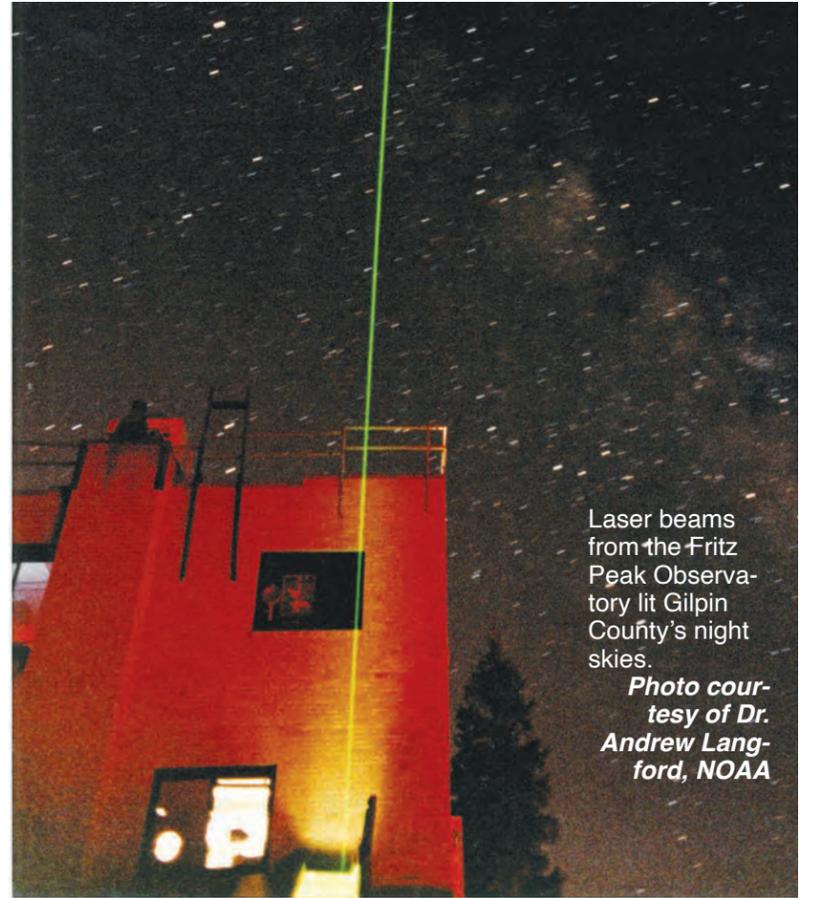
Said Ondr, "We know that many people in the area have driven past the Observatory for years and wondered what it looks like inside. Today, it is empty because the observation equipment has been removed, but it is still interesting to see! We are still learning about the history of the building and would appreciate any information that

the community would like to share."

The chief said Timberline's acquisition of the Fritz Peak site wouldn't have been possible without the efforts and hard work of many people. They include:

- NOAA: Carol Ciuffolo, Dr. David Fahey, Megan Melamed and Dr. Eric Williams.
- Gilpin County residents Wanda Sundquist and Bonnie Nash.
- General Services Administration: Will Morgan and Bettina Alcantar.
- FEMA: Justin Dowdy.
- Gilpin County Commissioners Sandy Hollingsworth, Linda Isenhardt and Web Sill.

• Gilpin County officials Kevin Arm-



Laser beams from the Fritz Peak Observatory lit Gilpin County's night skies.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Andrew Langford, NOAA



The Fritz Peak Observatory will become a new station for the Timberline Fire Protection District in Gilpin County. Drone photo by Don Ireland

strong, sheriff, and Nate Whittington, emergency manager.

- Colorado Wildfire Matters Review Committee: Representative Lisa Cutter, House District 25; Senator Tammy Story, Senate District 16; Senator Joann Ginal, Senate District 14; Senator Don Coram, Senate District 6; Representative Marc Snyder, House District 18; Senator Cleave Simpson, Senate District 14; Representative Donald Valdez, House District 62; Senator Pete Lee, Senate District 11; Representative Perry Will, House District 57; Representative Mike Lynch, House District 49.
- Timberline Fire Protection District: Rick Wenzel, board president; John Bushey, Board vice president; Whitney Donoghue, board treasurer; Chip Smith, board member at large; Jennifer Hinderman, administrative chief; and Christina Willis, volunteer firefighter.
- Additional support: Vaughn Jones, Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control; Tim Griffin, United States Forest Service; Mark Gabriel, CEO and President of United Power; Holly Woodings, vegetation/construction specialist for United Power; and Sean Demeule, vice president and general manager, Ameristar Casino Resort Spa, Black Hawk.

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