

Welcome to Highlands Ranch

The Early History of Highlands Ranch

There is much more to the history of Highlands Ranch than meets the eye. Underneath the layer of present-day modernism, lives an excitingly vivid past just waiting to be revealed. Among the earliest pioneers to this area was an Austrian immigrant named Johanne Welte. With the help of his brother-in-law Plaziduo Gassner, Welte established the Big Dry Creek Cheese Ranch in the 1870's, formerly located on what is now University Blvd. just north of Highlands Heritage Regional Park. The dairy ranch was well known for its production of butter as well as Brick and Limburger cheeses. The Cheese Ranch was comprised of a main farmhouse, large barn, and many other out buildings. Welte planted fields of alfalfa, corn, barley, beets, and eventually cultivated a 10 acre fruit tree orchard.

In 1898, John W. Springer, a wealthy man with a background in politics, banking, and law, along with his ailing wife Eliza (daughter of a highly respected cattleman named Colonel William Hughes), moved to the future Highlands Ranch area. Through a series of land purchases, Springer became the largest landholder in the region. Here he established the Springer Cross Country Horse and Cattle Ranch.

In 1904, Springer's wife Eliza died. Five years later he married Isabel Patterson, a beautiful, audacious young woman who developed an addiction to nightlife, narcotics, and adventure. While Springer tried desperately to earn his new wife a position among Denver's high society, and even named his elegant Cross Country Ranch home "Castle Isabelle," his beloved "Sassy" proved difficult to tame. On May 24, 1911 her extra-marital exploits resulted in the highly publicized murder at Denver's Brown Palace Hotel, where one of her alleged lovers was murdered by yet another alleged lover. Humiliated, Springer divorced Isabelle five

days later. He sold the Cross Country Ranch to his first father-in-law, Colonel William Hughes, and disappeared from the public eye.

When Colonel Hughes died in 1918, the property, which had been renamed Sunland Ranch, passed to his granddaughter, Annie, daughter of John and Eliza Springer. In 1920, Annie sold the ranch to Waite Phillips, an Oklahoma oilman whose brothers founded Phillips Petroleum Company. Phillips christened his new home Highland Ranch, and lived there for six years before selling it to Frank E. Kistler, president of Wolhurst Stock Farms.

Under Kistler's ownership the property became known as the Diamond K Ranch. Shortly after his divorce from his wife, Florence, in 1929, Kistler married Leana Antonides. When his first wife, Florence, moved out with the Kistler children, daughter Julia, who adored her father, stayed behind. Sadly, Frank Kistler did not return Julia's devotion and she spent many lonely, sorrowful days weeping in her bedroom at the mansion's far western wing. The distressed sobs of her ghost are still rumored to drift among the empty mansion's halls today.

Kistler encountered financial difficulties in the 1930's and sold the ranch to Lawrence Phipps Jr., in 1937. Phipps Jr., the son of a former Colorado Senator, renamed the property Highland Ranch and continued to use it as a working ranch. During this time, Highland Ranch was also the headquarters for a prestigious group of equestrian hunters known as the Arapahoe Hunt Club. The Club gathered frequently upon the property to hunt coyotes with the help of an eager band of loyal bloodhounds.

Phipps Jr. owned the property until his death in 1976. Shortly thereafter, the entire ranch was sold to businessman Marvin Davis, who quickly organized the Highlands Venturers Corporation to market the property. In 1978 Mission Viejo Company entered a two-year option agreement and in 1979 officially became the new owners of Highlands Ranch. Residential construction began the next year. In 1997, Mission Viejo sold Highlands Ranch to Shea Homes.