

CARTER MUSEUM HISTORY



The Denver Museum of Nature and Science Began Nearly a Century Ago in a Log Cabin in Breckenridge.

Edwin Carter, a Gold Rush miner turned naturalist, worked and lived for 25 years in the cabin at 111 N. Ridge Street. His collection of almost 3300 specimens of Colorado wildlife became in the nucleus of the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. He was born in Oneida, New York in June 1828 and moved westward, first to Iowa where he was a merchant, then to Pike's Peak in the gold rush of 1859. He became a very capable placer miner (mining for the loose gold found in stream beds) and, in 1860, settled in Summit County.

Carter began to notice that changes were occurring among the wild animals in various mining areas. Deer and elk were growing mismatched antlers. Rocky Mountain bison stopped calving, and mutations such as two-headed calves were appearing. He realized that chemicals such as cyanide used in extracting precious metals from ore were affecting the wildlife through water, air, and soil.

Carter traveled to Black Hawk, Colorado, near Central City, to learn taxidermy and began to collect examples of the abnormalities in several species. This important study became his life work. His collection included more than 360 ptarmigan, nearly one for each day of the yearly plumage changes. Although his form of preservation seems contradictory to today's standards, Carter helped to educate people about the negative effects of the mining era on local wildlife and secured specimens for many future generations to study. In 1868, Carter purchased five lots in Breckenridge. He lived in a small cabin, while he built the present log structure. In 1875, the log structure building became his home, office, museum and workroom. He never charged admission to his museum, which was visited by naturalists and scientists from many countries. He delighted in showing and explaining what he was learning about animals.

Visitors to the museum today ask, "Where did he sleep?" With so many specimens including full-size mounts of bison, bears, elk and wolves, one can only speculate that he had a cot somewhere. We do know that the cabin never had a kitchen. Carter was a tall, quiet bachelor who loved music, played the flute, threw snowballs with visiting children, and had a ready sense of humor as evidenced by photos showing a full-sized mounted bear holding a wine bottle in one forepaw and a wineglass in the other!

In 1892, Carter began to consider what would happen to his now world-famous collection. After welcoming a group of Denver dignitaries to his museum, Carter offered to sell his collection to found a natural history museum in Denver. Negotiations lagged, however, and his collection was not transferred to Denver until after Carter's death in 1900.

We have a precious legacy to preserve and protect as we remember and respect the life work of Edwin Carter, the log cabin naturalist. His wisdom, foresight and hard work were major influences in establishing the Denver Museum of Nature and Science.