

FIRST DRAFT

# Redlands promontory hosted Easter Sunrise Service for years

As dawn broke on April 21, 1935, “the thrilling greeting of the trumpets provided a perfect beginning for a beautiful Easter service” at Easter Hill on the Redlands, The Daily Sentinel reported the next day.

The service was “the most impressive that this city has ever held,” the Sentinel added. “Hundreds of people, hundreds more than ever in former years, were present before the dawn broke” at 5:29 a.m.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

A precise count of those who attended the service on the hill west of Grand Junction was not given by the newspaper. But 1935 was likely near the peak of the popularity of Easter Hill for Sunrise Services.

Although services continued there for nearly two more decades, they didn’t receive the same publicity in the Sentinel that the service in the midst of the Great Depression garnered.

By 1954, if not earlier, Sunrise Services were being held on Colorado National Monument — as well as a few other locations around the Grand Valley — and Easter Hill began to fade into the background.

These days, Easter Hill is part of a 600-acre property known as the Redlands 360 master planned community, which was recently approved as a planned development. Easter Hill is a short hike from the end of Easter Hill Drive.

The Redlands 360 project will include a considerable amount of open space, biking and hiking trails, many of them already in existence, including the one to the top of Easter Hill.

Easter Hill will be maintained as open space, and the existing trail network will be improved during the course of development.

One of several small parks in the development, with paved parking and a trail head, will be constructed adjacent to Easter Hill. The developers hope to include information highlighting the history of Easter Hill in their trail signage.

That history as a site for religious services began about 1924.

However, the first Sunrise Services on the Redlands, beginning in 1920 or 1921, were actually held a few miles west of Easter Hill, on a knoll behind what was then the Redlands School, what is now 2175 Broadway.

A Redlands resident named George W. Kelly proposed the idea for an Easter Sunrise Service in the area after attending a similar service in California.

With his Sunday School class, or Kelly’s boys as they were called, he built a trail to the top of the knoll, constructed a wooden cross, and arranged to have local clergymen and choir singers present for the first service.

Women from the Redlands prepared breakfast and coffee for the attendees, and Kelly and his youngsters brought in firewood to keep those in attendance warm on that brisk March morning.

Newspaper accounts of that first Sunrise Service estimate 150 to 200 people



COURTESY OF REDLANDS 360

Easter Hill as it appears today.

attended.

Most arrived before 6 a.m. in cars and parked at the Redlands School, then hiked up the hillside to where the service was held.

Others walked from locations on the Redlands. One man named William Buthorn reportedly walked from Grand Junction, refusing all offers for a ride.

Over the next 35 years, Easter Sunrise Services would take place nearly every year on the Redlands, although by 1924 the service had been moved to a site more easily accessible for automobiles.

That location soon became known as Easter Hill.

In the first years after the move to the new location, Kelly’s boys built signal fires along the route from Grand Junction to guide motorists to the new site.

A number of children in attendance hiked slowly up the hill “with a gift of flowers to spread at the foot of the cross,” according to a 1928 article in the Sentinel.

By the time the services had been moved to Easter Hill, they were conducted through auspices of the Grand Junction Ministerial Alliance.

Attendance in the late 1920s ranged from 400 to 600 people each year, according to newspaper accounts. But in the 1930s, estimated attendance some years was near 1,000.

Based on newspaper articles, by the early 1930s, Kelly and the boys from his Sunday School class were no longer primary organizers of the event. A variety of churches of different denominations assisted in the preparations and the services.

And the Redlands Women’s Club was a fixture of the Easter Hill services, continuing to provide food, flowers and other amenities.

However, Easter Hill on the Redlands wasn’t the only location to acquire that name.

By the late 1920s, churches in Palisade and Clifton had begun holding their own Sunrise Service on a point on East Orchard Mesa, which they called Easter Hill as well.

To add to the confusion, the first site on the Redlands where Sunrise Services had been held began to be called Old Easter Hill, much like the sledding and snowboarding hill on Grand Mesa that never was part of the Powderhorn Ski Resort came to be called Old



COURTESY OF REDLANDS 360

Another view of Easter Hill as it appears today.



A full page advertisement in The Daily Sentinel in 1935 promoted Easter Sunday church services around the valley, giving special attention to the Sunrise Service at Easter Hill.

Powderhorn for a time. School classes and individuals hiked on the hill where the first Easter Sunrise Services were held.

Sunrise Services continued on the second site, Easter Hill in the Redlands, into the early 1950s.

However, religious services weren’t the only things occurring there.

In October 1935, the Sentinel reported that a group of more than 40 people had gathered at Easter Hill to enjoy a wiener roast to celebrate the birthdays of three local men: Marvel Chinn, Howard K. Smith and Willis Blevins.

For several years preceding World War II, the Sunset Riders Motorcycle Club held a series of motorcycle races on and around Easter Hill each autumn.

By 1940, the main race — for what was called the Tourist Trophy — attracted amateur and professional riders from several states. It was sanctioned by the American Motorcycle Association.

The races apparently were abandoned during the war, but in the post-war years, a new contest sprang up.

In 1947 and for several subsequent years, the Grand Junction Gun Club hosted a turkey shoot on Easter Hill in late December.

And on July 4, 1951,

Easter Hill was the site of a large fireworks display, sponsored by several local American Legion posts.

In 1954, a Sunrise Service sponsored by the United Christian Youth Movement, was held at what was called the Picnic Grounds on Colorado National Monument.

It’s not clear from newspaper articles of the time whether that was the first Sunrise Service on the monument, or if they had been occurring for several years.

With few exceptions, such as the 2020 interruption because of COVID-19, Sunrise Services have been at Colorado National Monument each year since then.

Services this year are planned at the Saddleback Campground on the monument, beginning at 6:30 a.m.

The services will be sponsored by the Redlands and Fruita United Methodist Churches.

Still, Easter Hill remains a prominent feature on the Redlands, one that will continue to be available to the public.

Sources: Historic editions of *The Daily Sentinel* at [www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). *Redlands 360 development*.

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## 2022 THIS WEEK IN THE LEGISLATURE

DENVER — Now that the Colorado House has approved, on a party-line vote, a \$36.4 billion spending plan for the next fiscal year, which begins July 1, the so-called Long Bill is to be debated and approved in the Colorado Senate this week.

■ **Today:** The House Finance Committee is to hear HB1064, a measure that would prohibit the use of flavored tobacco products.

■ **Tuesday:** The Senate Transportation and Energy Committee is to debate SB175, a bill that would bar motorists from using mobile electronic equipment without a hands-free device. Current law already bars the use of cellphones while driving for motorists who are under the age of 18.

■ **Wednesday:** The House Judiciary Committee is to discuss SB18, a measure that would expand the state’s court-reminder program to include all defendants, but allow them to opt out.

■ **Thursday:** The Senate Judiciary Committee is to hear

HB1288, a measure that would give sex workers a safe way to report sexual assaults.

■ **Next week:** A Senate committee is to hear a bill designed to create a special initiative to help expand the number of health care professionals in rural areas. The bill would authorize colleges and universities that aren’t already doing so to establish education programs for health care workers. The measure was introduced in part by Sen. Bob Rankin, R-Carbondale, and Rep. Janice Rich, R-Grand Junction.

■ All floor action and committees can be watched or heard on the Colorado Legislature’s website at [leg.colorado.gov](http://leg.colorado.gov). Check that website to see which measures are available for remote testimony, and how to register to speak. Local lawmakers can be contacted at: [janice.rich.house@state.co.us](mailto:janice.rich.house@state.co.us), [ray.scott.senate@state.co.us](mailto:ray.scott.senate@state.co.us) and [matthew.soper.house@state.co.us](mailto:matthew.soper.house@state.co.us).

— Charles Ashby

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