

FIRST DRAFT

Skinner Cabin's history murky, with notable players involved

Charles Beard visited John Condon frequently during the 1940s and 1950s, when Beard was herding sheep in what's now McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area.

Condon lived in a stone cabin at the edge of the Fruita Paleontological Area within McInnis Canyons. The cabin is believed to have been built by a stonemason named John Skinner in the early 1900s, and it appears Condon simply moved into the abandoned building.

Condon left in the early 1950s and died in 1953. The cabin has since fallen into disrepair.

But next month, the Bureau of Land Management, the Museums of Western Colorado, Colorado Canyons Association and HistoriCorps plan work to restore the cabin and build a log fence around it. The effort is connected to National Public Lands Day on Sept. 24.

The Skinner Cabin's somewhat murky history includes not only Condon and Skinner, but possibly a reclusive miner named John Kodel, for whom nearby Kodel's Canyon is named.

He was minimally successful as a miner, but became notorious when he began shooting at passers-by because he feared they would steal his mine.

The last known resident of the cabin, John Condon "was a World War I veteran, and he had been gassed," Beard recalled. "He had some health problems, but he had a lot of friends" who would bring him supplies and give him rides into Fruita, about eight miles away. Condon also frequently walked to Fruita.

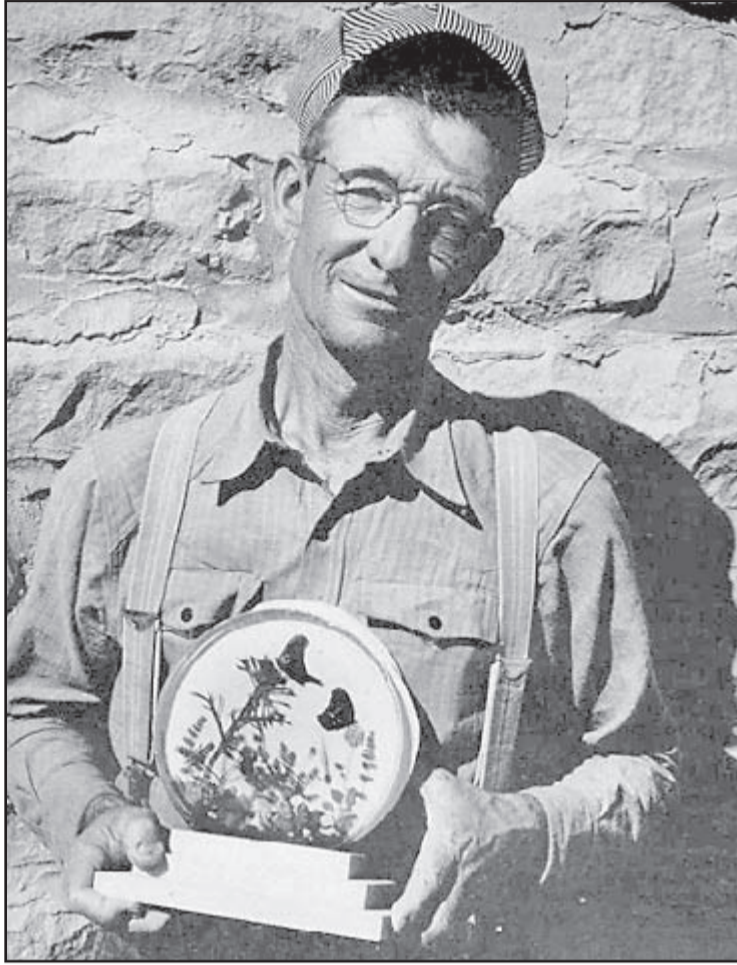
Once, Beard found Condon desperately ill in his cabin, and had to gallop back to his family's sheep camp in Devils Canyon to get a car to take him to a hospital.

Condon also achieved a measure of notoriety, selling dinosaur bones he found near his home, and later making paperweights and wall hangings with bugs, lizards, snakes and plants pressed into transparent plastic.

Origins of the building where Condon lived, also known as the Skinner Stone House, are uncertain. It is built in a barren part of the canyon country, with the closest water — a poor spring, according to Beard — several hundred yards away.

Most believe that John Skinner, a native of England, built the cabin between 1905 and 1908. But why he did, and whether he lived there, is unclear.

Records show that John Skinner later owned a ranch west of Fruita on the north side of the Colorado River. When he died in 1936, his obituary in The Daily Sentinel said he had been



John Condon lived in the Skinner Cabin in the 1940s and 1950s. The photo is from the April 1950 issue of The Desert Magazine, which is now defunct. It shows him holding one of his homemade plastic desk ornaments.



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

The Skinner Cabin as it looks today. Efforts are in the works to restore the cabin and build a log fence around it.

engaged in farming the Fruita area for 20 years.

Some stories say the cabin was built by John Kodel, also a stonemason, who began mining in the canyon bearing his name early in the 20th century. That canyon and Kodel's mine are several miles to the east of where the stone cabin was constructed.

There is no record that Kodel, Skinner or anyone else officially homesteaded on the land where the Skinner Cabin was built, according to the BLM.

Between 1916 and 1922, while Kodel was mining in the canyon that bears his name, his fear of thieves developed into a dangerous obsession and he began firing his rifle at any strangers who came near.

After one man's close encounter with Kodel's bullets, Kodel was arrested, found insane and shipped off to the

state mental hospital in Pueblo. His wooden cabin and other buildings near his mine were burned.

The Beards arrived about the time the Skinner Cabin was built.

Charles Beard said his grandfather, John G. Beard, homesteaded in Devils Canyon and raised angora goats before switching to sheep.

Charles' father, Irving Beard, homesteaded to the west in Pollock Canyon. The Skinner Cabin, which lies between the two homesteads, was not on Beard land, he said.

The Beards had the predominant livestock operation in the area from Devils Canyon to Pollock Canyon through the first half of the 20th century. At its peak, the Beard family raised as many as 8,000 lambs each year and had a large set of lambing sheds near Devils

Canyon. Charles Beard continued working at the ranch even after he graduated from Colorado State University in 1957. It was sold in the late 1950s. Charles, 81, now lives in Silver Cliff.

The paleontological resources of the area have long been known. The late Al Look, a longtime Daily Sentinel employee and amateur paleontologist, spent considerable time digging there, as did John Condon and others.

After the BLM acquired the land — much of what had once been the Beard ranch and the Skinner Cabin — scientists sought protection for those resources.

In 1976, BLM archaeologist John Crouch, later to become a Mesa County commissioner, worked to document important features within the site, now known as the Fruita Paleontological Area, prior to the BLM building a fence around it.

"I didn't refer to it as Skinner Cabin," Crouch said recently. "It was just an interesting rock cabin. Its walls were 19 inches thick in places."

Crouch and his team found barrel staves, and tin cans from the 1950s and other artifacts around the cabin. But, he added, "We didn't have any information about who had lived there."

Over the ensuing decades, those scientists — most notably Dr. George Callison, then working for institutions in California, but now retired and living in Grand Junction — would demonstrate how important the Fruita Paleo Area was.

Fossils of large dinosaurs were discovered there, but so were small creatures: tiny mammals, ancient lizards and the smallest dinosaur unearthed at the time — a chick-sized creature now called Fruitadens.

Ranching and mining no longer occur in the Fruita Paleo Area, but scientific research continues.

And the walls of the Skinner Cabin still stand in that barren desert. By late next month, the cabin will also have a rebuilt roof, stabilized walls and a new rail fence around it.

Colorado Canyons Association Board Member and Gateway Canyons historian Zebulon Miracle will present a program on "Historic Structures of McInnis Canyons," including the Skinner Cabin, beginning at 6:30 p.m. Aug. 23 at the Fruita Community Center.

Information for this column came from Charles Beard, John Crouch, the BLM, the Museum of Western Colorado and the book, "Echoes of A Dream," about the history of the Lower Valley.

Bob Silbernagel is board president of Colorado Canyons Association, which is assisting in the restoration of Skinner Cabin. His email is bobsilbernagel@gmail.com.

Vendors that get state contracts, this hearing is for you

By CHARLES ASHBY
Charles.Ashby@gsentinel.com

Any Western Slope company that does business with the state might want to listen in today to a live-stream discussion with the Colorado Department of Personnel and Administration.

That's because that state agency is holding what it expects to be a well-attended public hearing on attempts to "modernize" the state's procurement code, department officials said.

Called for under a bill that was partly sponsored by two Republican Western Slope lawmakers — Sen. Ray Scott of Grand Junction and Rep. Bob Rankin of Carbondale — the department has scheduled a single hearing in Denver to hear comments about the code, which all state agencies are required to use when awarding contracts to private vendors.

"Our intent is to get as much feedback as possible before we circle back to the Legislature," said Doug Platt, spokesman for the department. "This is actually the second phase. We already did some updating of rules back in 2015, mostly technical stuff. This is our first step in reaching out to various stakeholder groups."

Platt and Jack Wylie, legislative liaison for the department, said the limited time frame the agency has under HB1451 that the Colorado Legislature approved in the waning days of this year's session only allow it

time to hold the single hearing. The bill calls on the department to report back to the Legislature by year's end.

But because that could mean businesses outside of the Front Range might not be able to attend, the department is live-streaming the hearing over the internet, and making it available for viewing through YouTube.

The actual event is scheduled from 1:30 to 4 p.m. today at the Colorado Department of Transportation's offices at 4201 E. Arkansas Ave. in Denver.

While those not in actual attendance at the hearing will not be able to comment, the department has created a special link on its webpage — www.colorado.gov/osc/pmi — where they can post comments and get updates on the effort.

After today's hearing, the department will determine how to proceed when it comes to more public outreach, such as creating special focus groups on specific issues, Platt and Wylie said.

"We got the biggest space that we could and we sent out invitations to about 6,000 vendors and we got a lot of interest, so the room is full," Wylie said. "But, particularly for Western Slope folks where it would be a challenge for them to get to Denver, they'll be able to watch online. We're going to have other opportunities for people to give their feedback."

Evacuation orders lifted as fire 40% percent contained

BY GABRIELLE PORTER
Gabrielle.Porter@gsentinel.com

Evacuation orders for about two dozen homes in the Housatop Mesa area were lifted Sunday night as firefighting crews contained about 40 percent of the 621-acre Spring Creek 2 Fire straddling the border between Mesa and Garfield counties near Battlement Mesa, according to the Bureau of Land Management.

Officials are cautioning residents to be aware of smoke, ash and dust in the air from the fire, which damaged and destroyed four outbuildings, three trailers and three vehicles this weekend.

People with heart or lung diseases, older adults and children are encouraged to stay indoors when smoke is thick and limit outdoor activity as long as the air is affected, said a release from the BLM. Access to Coun-

ty Road 306 between Spring Creek and Wallace Creek roads is restricted to residents and emergency vehicle traffic only.

Local and federal wildfire crews on Sunday evening continued to fight the fire that started Friday on private land in Garfield County. BLM spokesman Chris Joyner said the crews doubled their containment of the fire Sunday; in the morning they had only contained about 20 percent.

"These guys are out there doing some back-breaking work in really tough terrain and tough conditions," Joyner said. "It's pretty hot out there, it's pretty miserable. ... (But) we doubled in containment size, which is pretty significant."

Joyner said law enforcement officials are still investigating the cause of the fire.

BLOTTER COMPILED BY SENTINEL STAFF

Accused of strangling

A 32-year-old man accused of strangling a woman after she asked him for help cleaning an apartment could be charged with second-degree assault, criminal mischief and domestic violence.

Jesse Mark Anthony Wilson was arrested Thursday night in the 500 block of 29 Road after sheriff's deputies found the woman with bruises on her neck, her face and on both arms, according to an arrest affidavit.

Deputies wrote in the report that the woman tried to hide in the apartment bedroom, but Wilson knocked down the door before pushing the woman into the bathroom and strangling her, the report said.



JESSE WILSON

The woman reportedly escaped into another room after her son, 5, jumped onto Wilson's back to try to get him off, the affidavit said.

While being placed under arrest, Wilson told sheriff's deputies that the dispute started because he saw the woman "about to use intravenous narcotics," although he denied hitting the woman, according to the affidavit.

"Wilson stated (the woman) continued to argue with him and (was) scratching him," the report said.

Assistant District Attorney Rich Tuttle in court called the case "serious" because it involved "protracted choking" and "injuries that involved large bruising." Tuttle also said Wilson was already on probation for a misdemeanor child abuse conviction.

Wilson was issued a \$3,000 cash-only bond and ordered to return to court Wednesday.

According to the Grand Junction Police Department:

- Jonathan Crosby, 27, is accused of possession of a schedule II controlled substance, possession of drug paraphernalia and unlawful concealment of a weapon in the 400 block of Pitkin Avenue on Wednesday.

- Duane Casey, 18, is accused of possession of a schedule II controlled substance, possession of drug paraphernalia, false reporting and being a minor in possession of marijuana on Wednesday.

- Jose Levya, 29, is accused of a protection order violation Wednesday.

- Gregory Santa-Cruz, 27, is accused of criminal impersonation, obstructing a peace officer, possession of schedule IV controlled substances and theft Thursday.

- Joshua Nolan, 22, is accused of criminal impersonation Friday.

According to the Mesa County Sheriff's Office:

- Deputies responded to a reported theft in the 400 block of 32 1/8 Road on Tuesday.

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