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Longmont – Life Made Sweet

🕒 March 16, 2023 ❤️ Like 💬 0 Doug Geiling



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The best views of Longs Peak are unquestionably from in and around the city of Longmont. The prominent mountain is like a snowflake in that it never looks the same twice. It can glow pink from a rising summer sun or shine in bright white under a fresh snowfall and a cobalt March sky.

Most of the mountain that is visible from Longmont is not Longs Peak at all but its slightly shorter and less-appreciated twin Mount Meeker. Meeker, just 84 feet short of “fourteener” fame, is like a jealous little sister. She stands in front of Longs as if trying to capture the spotlight from her more striking sibling. But the prominent summit of Longs is always there with its dramatic Diamond Face peaking just over Meeker’s broad left shoulder.

The mountain is named after Stephen Harriman Long who led one of America’s first scientific expeditions into Colorado’s high plains and mountains in 1820. Before Long’s expedition the Arapaho Tribe called the twin summits Neníisótoyóú’u, which means “The Two Guides.” As one travels north or south along the base of the Front Range, the shifting orientation of the twin summits of Neníisótoyóú’u can provide the traveler with a reliable navigational reference, like a terrestrial North Star.



Sometime before 14,000 BC: First human presence in the Colorado area.

According to Elliott West, author of “The Contested Plains,” Native Americans traveled from south to north along the Front Range corridor for thousands of years, likely using The Two Guides for navigation. In a great counterclockwise annual migration, people traveled towards the north along the face of the Rockies each spring before turning west into high elevation summer hunting grounds. With summer’s bounty in tow the people would descend back down into the sheltered valleys along the base of the mountains each fall where they would wait out the winter and do it all over again come spring.

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900 – 1350 AD: Pueblo culture in four corners region reaches its zenith.

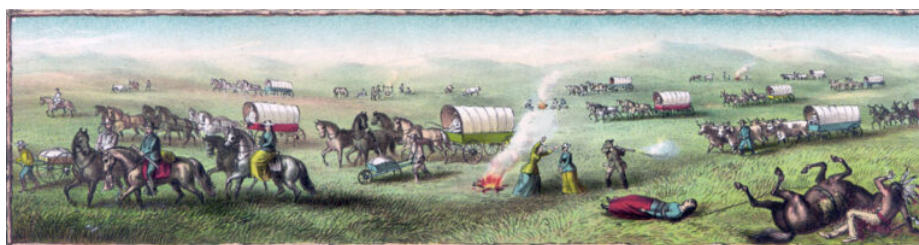
▲ Back to top



This annual circuit likely began long before the rise of the great first civilizations half a world away and persisted as Near East empires rose and fell and Chinese dynasties came and went. After hundreds of generations this way of life was finally disrupted with the arrival of Europeans.

When this new European way of life crashed upon these plains and mountains like an avalanche, The

Two Guides continued to provide a navigational and inspirational beacon for newcomers arriving from the east by horse and carriage.



About 1500 AD: Migrations across North America caused by European colonial intrusion.



1864 AD: U.S. Army commits the Sand Creek massacre, killing about 200 Cheyenne and Arapaho people.

Longmont, which combines the name Long with the French word for mountain, mont, was founded as a pseudo-utopian colony in Chicago-Colorado Colony was more pragmatic than utopian. Participants purchased ownership shares in the colony, and the funds were used

[Back to top](#)

to purchase 60,000 acres of fertile soil along the St. Vrain River just a few miles east of the Rockies. The founding members, according to Longmont Museum curator Erik Mason, were early progressives and philanthropists. While the colony venture itself went bankrupt, the settlement was established, and the town of Longmont had begun as an agricultural center in the growing Front Range area.



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1871 AD: Longmont founded by the Chicago–Colorado Colony.

From the Russian steppe to the high plains

Unbeknownst to the town's founders, the seeds of much of Longmont's future heritage were planted in another colony a century earlier on the other side of the planet. This earlier colony was in Russia's Volga Steppe, a land that shares a similar climate and landscape to Colorado's High Plains. It is a semi-arid prairie with cold winters and warm summers.

Russia's ruler, Catherine the Great, a Prussian, was scheming to bring Russia into the European fold — her empire offered enormous lands to be exploited. In the mid-18th century the German states were ravaged by relentless war and religious conflict. Many Germans sought to escape this for opportunities elsewhere, and Catherine the Great made them an offer that was hard to refuse — a new land full of opportunity and freedom. Catherine the Great issued two manifestos that opened Russia's doors to anyone who wanted to settle there. Thirty thousand people, many of them German, took her up on the offer, and the first Volga German colony was established in 1764.

1880 AD: Approximate arrival of the first Volga Germans to the Longmont area.

▲ Back to top



This eastward migration of people seeking land, opportunity, and freedom has undeniable parallels to westward expansion in America one century later. But, in the case of the Volga Germans, the good times did not last. Gradual Russification eroded away the freedoms that were promised to the settlers. By the second half of the 19th century a new promised land emerged, this time in the other direction, all the way

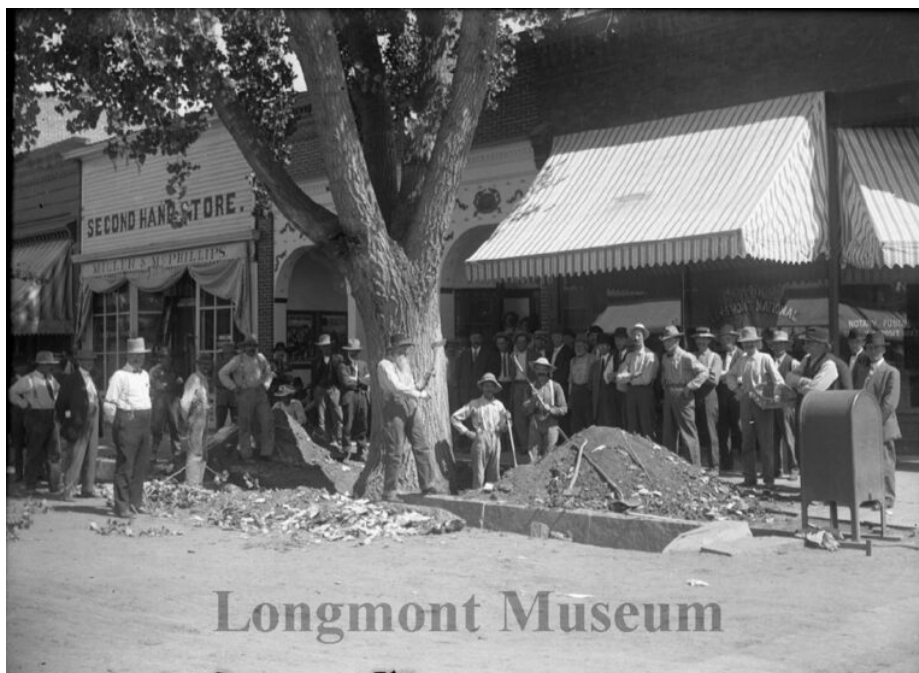
across an ocean: America.

Longmont must have reminded the Volga Germans of home — a treeless high plain with fertile soil in the shadow of the mountains. The Volga Germans brought large families and a strong work ethic that was forged through generations of hard living on the Russian steppe. They were the perfect labor pool for a burgeoning sugar beet industry. To the Anglo-American farmers before them, the Volga Germans were of lower class, at least in the beginning, as were the Japanese and Latino laborers who would come to work alongside them.

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Tree removal in 1911. Courtesy of Longmont Museum.

Over time, though, the Volga Germans assimilated into American society, no doubt helped by their physical resemblance to their Anglo forebearers. They gradually gained land ownership and diversified their involvement into a growing community. The Volga Germans were looked upon with suspicion during World War I, but by World War II they had assimilated into American ways so thoroughly that they were no longer viewed as German immigrants but simply as Americans.

During World War II German (and Italian) prisoners of war were brought to Longmont to work the farms as labor was short due to the war effort. These prisoners were housed in a barracks on Third Avenue and Kimbark Street. According to Mason, the Volga Germans of Longmont brought the prisoners ethnic German food, perhaps recognizing from their own history how ordinary people can be swept up into the war games of egotistical rulers.

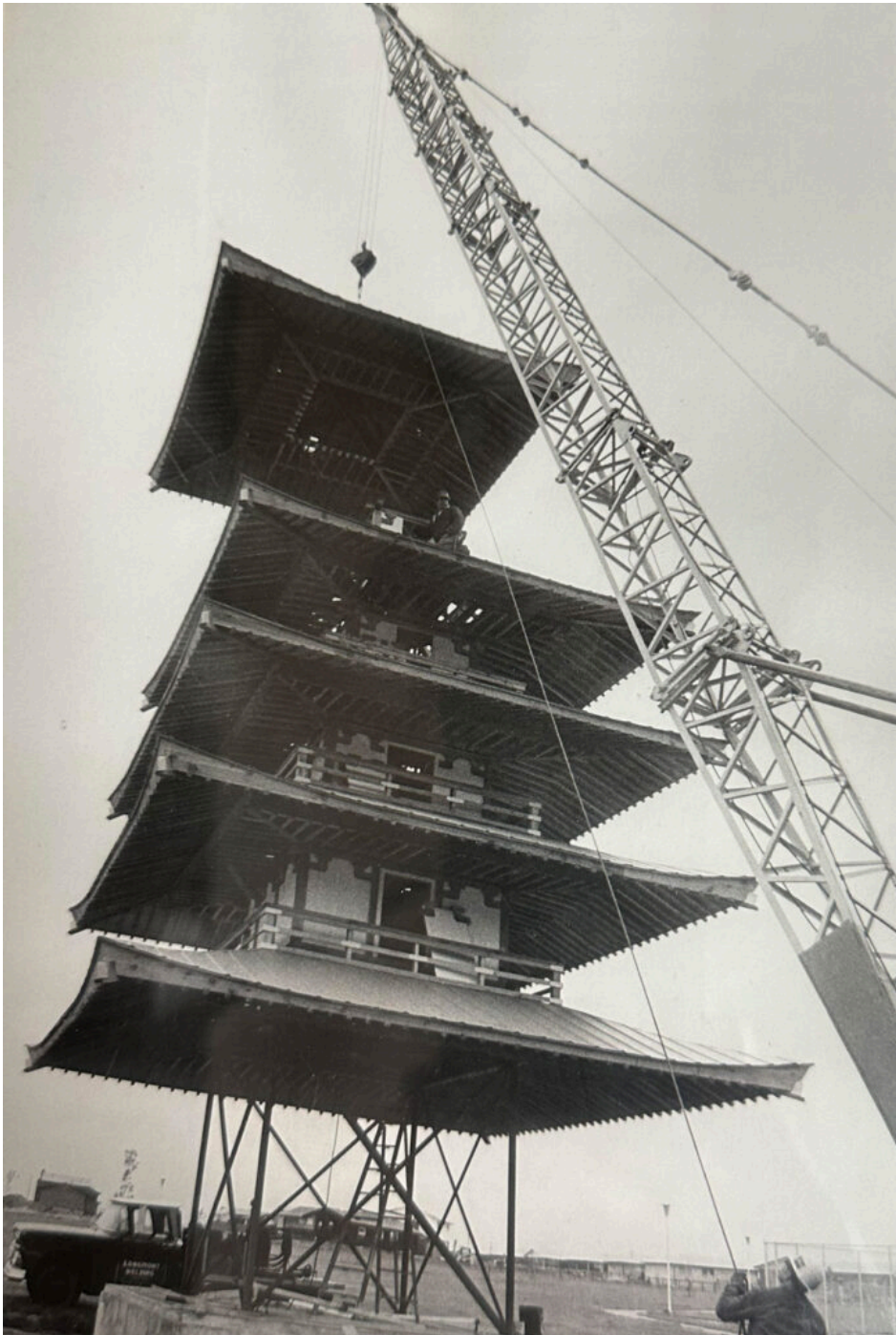


1943 AD: German POW camp opens.

It is said that the Volga Germans adopted the slogan “arbeit macht das Leben süß,” which means “work makes life sweet.” That saying was more literal than its intention, as their labor not only helped make life sweet for themselves but literally brought sweetness into the cupboards of

Back to top

American households as they helped build the sugar beet industry in Longmont.





Towering compassion

In south Longmont's Kanemoto Park there stands a towering structure that might seem a bit unusual. A five-story Japanese pagoda rises over the peaceful park. Each of its five levels has a meaning and taken together, they form the essence of compassion.

A plaque near the base of the tower explains the meaning of each of the five levels. The first is love, the foundation of all compassion. The second level signifies empathy. The plaque reads: "Your happiness is my happiness. Your sadness is my sadness. I feel your pain. I feel your joy." The third level is understanding, and here we find our collective responsibility to understand the interconnectedness of humanity. We are all as one. The fourth is gratitude for all things. At the top level is the virtue of giving selflessly of oneself: "As I give myself to others," the plaque reads, "strangely enough, I find myself and I find real happiness."

The Tower of Compassion was built 50 years ago as a wonderful gift to the Longmont community by the Kanemoto family. Theirs is a

remarkable story of the American Dream and an example and reminder of what true patriotism really means. Their story is also one of gratitude for a community that never wavered in its support for their family, even, and perhaps especially, during World War II.



The Kanemoto family. The adults in the picture are Goroku and Setsuno, Ken's grandparents and 1st generation immigrants. The kids are siblings Jim (Ken's father), George, and Faith from left to right.

Ken Kanemoto welcomed me into his real estate business office in south Longmont. "The family farm was right here where we are sitting right now," beamed Kanemoto. "And that house right over there is where I grew up," he said pointing through his office window.

[▲ Back to top](#)



Ken is the grandson of Hiroshima native Goroku Kanemoto. Goroku first immigrated from Japan to Mexico and worked in railroads there, but he jumped off a northbound train in Denver in 1908 to try his hand at farm work. He decided to stick around. An arranged marriage with a young lady named Setsuno, also from Hiroshima, led to a family. As was common for the time, the young couple gave their three children western names: Jim, George, and Faith.

Goroku died in a car accident in 1935, but the three siblings took what he started and built a proud legacy. Jim was Ken's father. "Dad was kind of the ideas guy," he said. "He was active in a lot of different things." This included serving as the president

of the Buddhist Church of America and traveling to Japan with the governor for the dedication of Colorado's Japanese sister state, Yamagata.

We looked through some of his collection of old newspaper clippings on a cluttered desk. A large-framed article about the Tower of Compassion hung prominently on the wall. "You know, I think the Tower was the only Japanese pagoda in America outside of San Francisco when it was built," he said.

1972 AD: Tower of Compassion constructed.

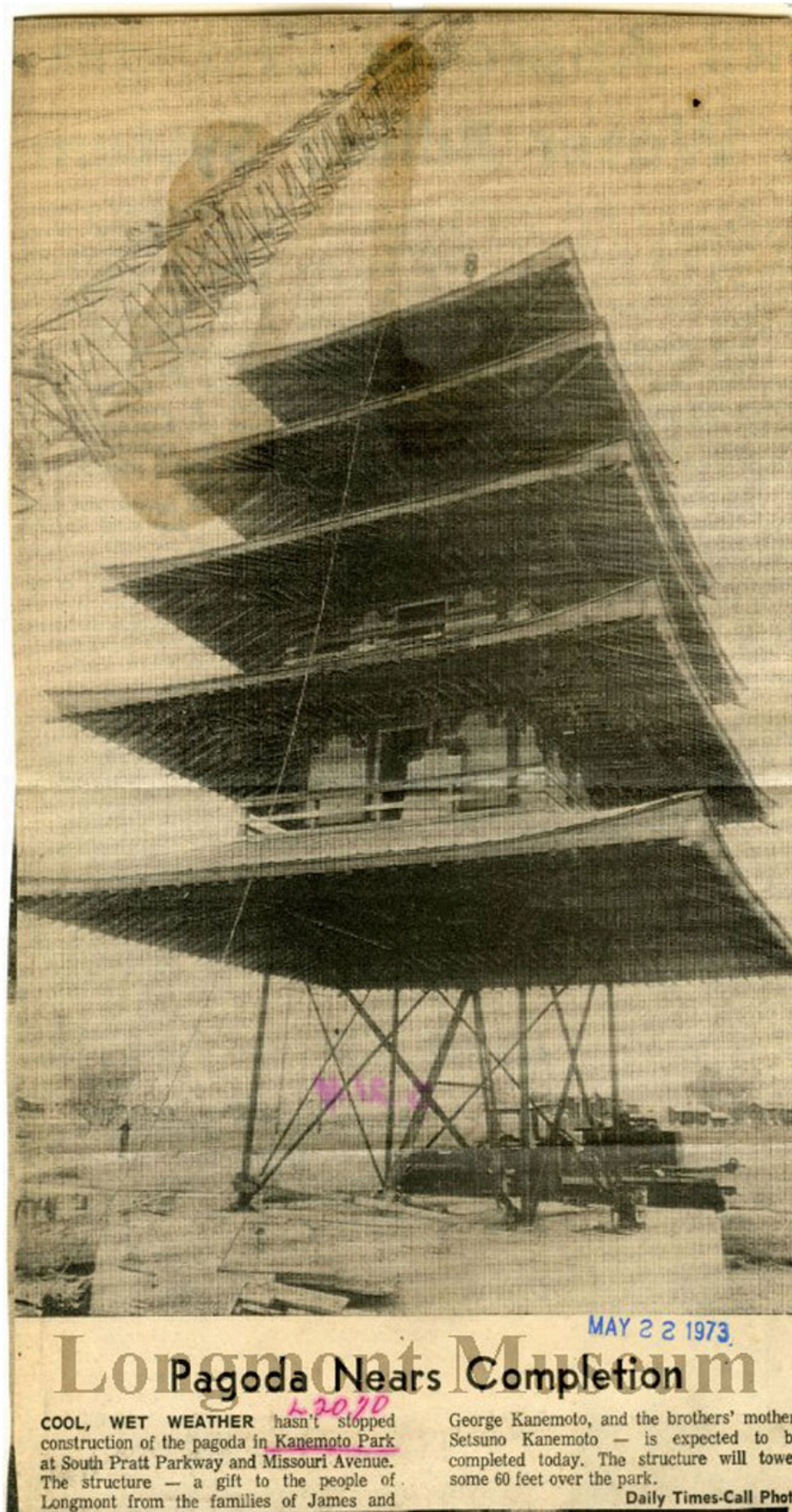


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Kanemoto discussed his family history with pride and reminiscence. The family farm ultimately became the Southmoor Park neighborhood. When the Kanemotos donated some of the land to Longmont, it was made into Kanemoto Park. In 1973 the Tower of Compassion was commissioned by Jim, a gift of gratitude to the people of Longmont for their support and friendship over the years. The cherry trees near the tower were donated from Japan.

[▲ Back to top](#)



There were other Japanese families in and around Longmont in the early 1900s. By World War II the area was something of a refuge for Japanese Americans avoiding internment in other parts of the country. Colorado's governor at the time, Ralph Carr, was the only Western governor to oppose Japanese internment. As a result, Colorado's Japanese residents were spared that inhumane treatment.

The Tanakas arrived in the area in the 1920s, first near Canfield in Erie and then expanding towards Longmont. Longmont residents of the 1960s through the 1980s will likely remember Tanaka Farms. I listened to Carol Bowman Tanaka and her cousin Nancy Tanaka discuss old times and family stories. "We were the largest family-owned irrigated farm in the nation," said Nancy. "Twenty semi-loads of veggies went out every day," added Carol. "We had nationwide distribution."

Their fondest memories, however, seemed to focus more on the local life and the community

they grew up with. All the kids, as many as twelve at one point, worked the produce stand near Lookout Road and Highway 287. The two cousins laughed as they remembered the "cabbage wagons." These were trucks loaded high with cabbages just picked from their fields. Locals learned that, if they came out and followed the cabbage wagon down the road, a few heads of free cabbage would tumble down into the street.

[▲ Back to top](#)

Like the Kanemoto Family, the Tanakas always felt supported by the community. They remember the small town of old Longmont. “I miss the neighborly sense of community,” said Carol.



A five-story Japanese pagoda rises over the peaceful park. Each of its five levels has a meaning and taken together, they form the essence of compassion.



Earning the stripes

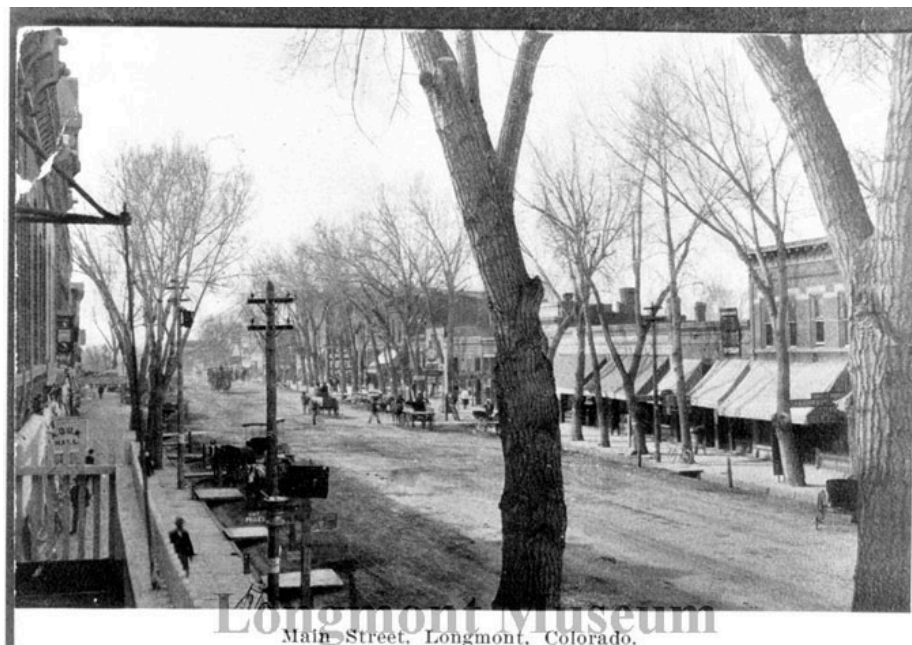
When Goroku Kanemoto stepped off that northbound train onto Colorado soil in 1908, he would have likely been accompanied by Latino migrants with the same idea. By 1909 Colorado was the largest sugar-producing state in the U.S., and the Great Western Sugar Company was dominant in Northeast Colorado.

World War I accelerated Latino migration into Colorado. They filled a void left by the slowdown in European immigration while simultaneously fulfilling labor demand in an industrializing western U.S.

1903 AD: First sugar factory opens, creating new industry.

The Great Western Sugar Company actively recruited Latino Americans from New Mexico and Mexicans during this time to fuel their growing enterprise. World War I, therefore, represents the shift from primarily European to Hispanic agricultural labor in the Longmont area.

Back to top



Main Street, Longmont, Colorado.

This was not always a smooth transition. A diversifying community was met in the 1920s by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in eastern Colorado — including Longmont. The Klan's influence may have been in part a violently racist reaction to changing demographics — their support did not last. In 1927 Longmont's Klan-dominated city council was entirely voted out of office. A Klan-supported scheme to construct the

Chimney Rock Dam on the North Fork of the St. Vrain River was scrapped, and, according to Mason, 7,000 sacks of cement that were procured to build the dam were put to good use: They were used in the first paving of Longmont's Main Street!



1925 AD: Klu Klux Klan takes over Longmont City Council, voted out in 1927.



During the Great Depression many of the Latino migrants who came to work the fields during the agricultural boom of the 1910s and 1920s were pressured to move “back to Mexico” including U.S.-born, Spanish-speaking citizens from the Southwest. By this time, however, most of these community members had put roots down and made Longmont and its surroundings their home despite the overt racism they experienced.

[▲ Back to top](#)

When the Second World War commenced, many Latino citizens signed up to fight for America. “That was a big change then,” said Mason. “They would come back from the war and, instead of accepting discrimination, started to form groups to demand their rights.” In 1945 Alex Gonzales opened Longmont’s first Latino-owned restaurant, City Café. By the 1960s, some overt racial discrimination faded away, but implicit and structural racism remained an issue that Longmont’s Latino residents would continue to grapple with.

In 1980 a Longmont police officer shot and killed two Latino men in an event that shook this still small community. The details of the shooting are for another story, but the outcome may be an example of how a community and a police force can work together to create something positive out of a tragedy. Soon after the shooting, community members formed an organization called El Comité (The Committee), which continues to do good work today nearly 43 years later. “It was not perfect,” said Mason, “but there was a willingness on the part of the police and city leadership to build bridges.”

El Comité’s executive director, Donna Lovato, agrees with Mason’s perspective. “El Comité was formed out of tragedy but grew out of opportunity,” she said. El Comité was created to work in partnership with both the Latino community and the Longmont Police Department. “Every new police officer is required to set up a meeting with El Comité,” said Lovato. “They have to meet with me.”



1980 AD: Two young Latinos shot and killed by Longmont police officer, El Comité founded.

Over the years El Comité has expanded its community involvement and now offers services like citizenship processing and organizes community events. “It has become a trusted agency in the community,” said Lovato. “People come to El Comité before they go to the police.”



El Comité published a book in the 1970s titled “We Came to Stay” that was recently revised into a second edition called “We, Too, Came to Stay.” The book is available at El Comité’s office at 55 Kimbark Str. and at some local book stores in town. On Aug. 14, 2020 Governor Jared Polis formally recognized the valuable work and positive example that El Comité has provided for Longmont and the state of Colorado.

From serving proudly in the Second World War to setting a strong leadership example for the city through tragedy, Longmont’s Latino community has more than “earned their stripes.”



Longmont Main Street from 300 block looking south (1900 to 1920). Courtesy of Longmont Museum.

From sugar beets to airplanes and tech geeks

In 1962 Longmont was awarded the location of the Federal Aviation Administration's Denver Air Route Traffic Control Center. However it was a few years prior when an aviation disaster briefly put Longmont in the national spotlight.

At 7:03 pm on Nov. 1, 1955, a commercial airplane exploded over east Longmont, killing all 44 people on board. It was no accident. FBI investigators soon determined that one Jack Gilbert Graham had taken out a life insurance policy on his mother, Daisie E. King. He placed 25 sticks of dynamite attached to a battery and a timer in her checked luggage. He was executed in the gas chamber in 1957.



1955 AD: United Airlines Flight 629 bombing occurs over the city.

▲ Back to top



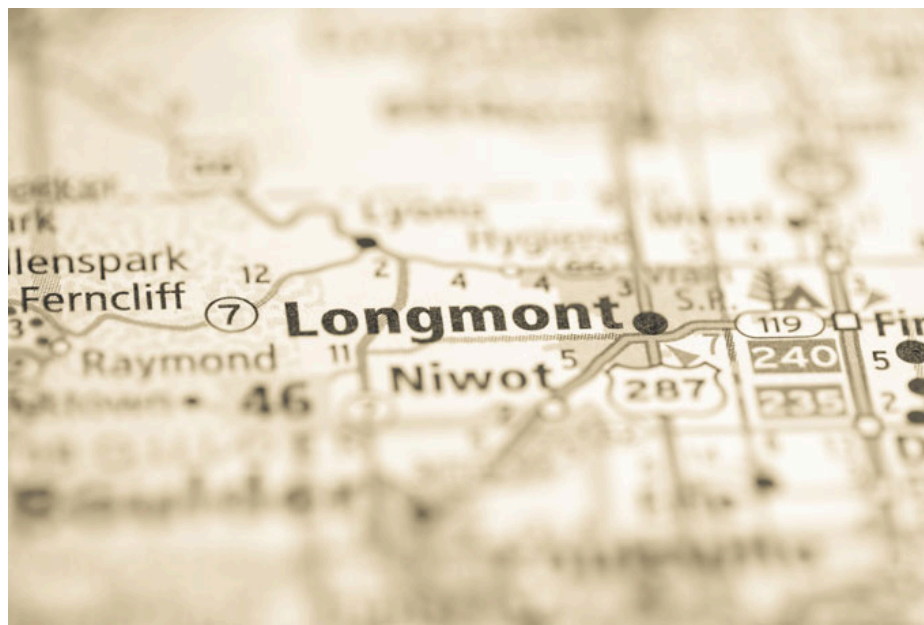
In 1965 Big Blue entered the picture. IBM built its large plant halfway between Longmont and Boulder, drawing simultaneously from the research and educational center of the University of Colorado at Boulder and a growing and relatively cheap labor pool in Longmont. Longmont's population doubled from 1960 to 1970 and then nearly doubled again from 1970 to 1980 to a population of over 42,000. In a sign of changing times, the Great Western Sugar Factory finally shut down in 1977.

I spoke with Longmont native Pam Maestas, a descendent of the Volga German Schlager family. Maestas was born in Longmont in 1957 and remembers it as a small town where “we were able to walk to school from the first grade.”

“Mom met Dad dragging Main in Longmont,” said Maestas. Cruising Main Street is an American pastime best suited for small towns, and by the turn of the millennium Longmont would outgrow this as well. Downtown Longmont, according to Maestas, has “become more artsy now.”

Despite the changes and growth, Maestas is still proud of her hometown. “I’m just proud of my heritage,” she said, “and in spite of everything I’m still loyal to Longmont.”

In 2021 Longmont celebrated its 150th anniversary and reached 100,000 residents. It is certainly no longer a small town. It must now learn how to become a small city. Although many might nostalgically hold on to its commendable past, Longmont's more recent history has proven that its diverse community can flourish in changing times.



2021 AD: 150th anniversary.

Kathy Partridge grew up at the Lykens Gulch Farm Commune just to the west of town. She remembers when Longmont was a small town and misses the days when Longmont life was slower and quieter. But, even with the growth and change, she is proud of her town. “I think Longmont is the best city in the county in so many ways,” said Partridge.

It's hard to argue with that sentiment given Longmont's rich and unique history and legacy. This town that is now growing into a small city is still surrounded by farmland, at least for now. Those stunning views of The Two Guides are still there. And the Tower of Compassion, now celebrating its 50th year, still stands as a reminder that Longmont, Colorado is a community to be proud of.



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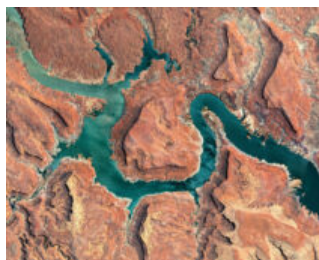
Doug is a Colorado native, a Northglenn High School graduate (class of 1993), and Colorado State University alum (class of 1997). He currently resides in Edgewater near Sloan Lake, but has previously lived in Erie and Lafayette. Doug is a backpacker, fly fisherman, traveler, writer, and business management consultant.

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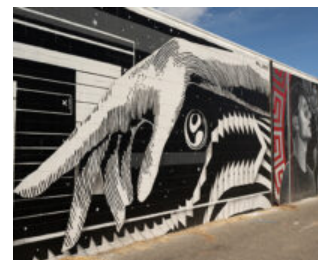
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