

Grand Junction on the Frontier

Topics Included:

- » What is a frontier?
- » What drew people to the Grand Valley?
- » What was life like for the first non-Native settlers to the Grand Valley?

What is a frontier?

A frontier is at the edge of civilization – beyond a frontier is the wilderness. Grand Junction was one of the last frontier towns in the lower 48. It wasn't settled until after 1881. When pioneers first moved to Grand Junction, they gave it mixed reviews. Some saw it as a paradise – an oasis in the desert. Others saw it as a desert wasteland.

Grand Valley Settlers

One of the main draws for families moving to the Grand Valley, were the stories about a large river that flowed through the center of a warm valley. The river was called the Grand, and then eventually renamed the Colorado, and met a second river, the Gunnison, this junction was thought to be a prime location for settlement - Grand Junction. The mild climate through much of the year, combined with a constant water supply would seem like an excellent place for agriculture and ranching. This was a message Grand Junction's founders were determined to promote; an alluring message that spoke to hopeful pioneers looking for an opportunity after the establishment of the Homestead Act of 1862, and the opening of the western frontier. Eager developers persuaded newspaper editors to help spread the word about this land of opportunity. Nationwide, Americans heard sensationalized reports. Some headlines called this region, "the empire of the western slope", and "the valley of the grand". These grandiose stories captured imaginations across the nation. Enchanted families began a great, and for some, a perilous journey west - in pursuit of a new life.

Almost immediately after the Ute Removal act of 1880, and the consequent forced migration of American Indians, white settlers moved in haste to the Grand Valley. Encouraged by the removal act, settlers rushed to be the first in line for a chance at a claim on land which would soon become available as Indian lands transferred to the public domain. First impressions of the region varied. Explorers like Capt. J.N. McComb of the Corps of Topographical Engineers reported, "Perhaps no portion of the earth's surface is more irremediably sterile, none more hopelessly lost to human occupation". A stark contrast to the fertile lands the newspapers would later describe to attract settlers. Extremely hot summers and dry sandy soil made for less than fertile growing grounds, and very little shade. Grand Junction's first school teacher, Nannie Blain described the conditions she and her students endured on the hottest days,

"those dirt roofed cabins were the very best of residences for the early settlers in Grand Valley, where the heat was intense, because no vegetation whatever except along the river; hence the sun beat down intensely upon the barren adobe, reflecting its rays, so that at midday, during the summer of 1882 the thermometer sometimes registered as high as 112 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade."

A saving grace for the Grand Valley, and the features which permit its suitability for habitation are the two rivers that flow through the center of Grand Junction. Unlike the plateaus and mesas surrounding the valley, the banks of the river are rich and wet enough to allow vegetation.

Soon after families began to settle in the Grand Valley, they determined that access to water was the greatest priority. Although nearby water was available in the Grand (Colorado) and Gunnison rivers, the pioneer community had to work out a way to deliver that water to their lands for drinking and crop cultivation. Accessing this water would require a whole lot of ingenuity and problem solving. Early pioneers toiled and trudged to dig the first diversion ditches which would deliver the much-needed water to their lands. Ditches were dug after careful consideration and planning to ensure the water would make it up and over the rugged topography before being evaporated. The landscape transformed before the settlers' eyes. With a steady water supply, farmers and ranchers realized they could make the desert landscape into a fruitful agricultural hotspot. In 1882, soon after the establishment of Grand Junction as a town, work began on the Pioneer Canal - diverting water from the Colorado River to the Grand Junction area. This and other irrigation additions in the Grand Valley turned the valley into a green and productive area blossoming with orchards, farms, and ranches.

With the advancement of irrigation and the arrival of the Denver Rio Grande Railroad in 1882, the stage was set for other families to join the pioneers of Grand Junction and begin to settle this still very rugged frontier town. Author Dave Fishell describes this town of contrast vividly in his historic account,

“By the time the settlers arrived on the western slope in the mid and late 1880's, Grand Junction was making the change from tiny pioneer camp - composed of high walled tents and small, hastily built cabins - to growing community with buildings made of the products of one of five brick factories. The town became the seat of a new county (MESA), and the railroading center of a large desert and mountain region. This change did not come overnight. When a family moving from Detroit, Indianapolis, or Colorado Springs stepped off a Denver and Rio Grande train at Grand Junction's impressive two-story station, they had to stumble through streets that might be a muddy quagmire or inches thick in dust. As they walked to one of several hotels along the western end of Main Street of Colorado Avenue, they would pass numerous sagging cottonwood log cabins that many men, and some families, still called home. By contrast, nestled next to the rough-and-tumble shanties and cabins, were such big-city niceties as stores, trees that edged wide streets, and an opera house that attracted capacity audiences. The frontier and civilization were neighbors in early day Grand Junction.”

One of the Grand Valley's first pioneer families arrived with two young children. Their names were John and Sarah Hull. Sarah remembers the family pitching a tent on the corner of what is now Colorado Ave and 1st Street. In the 1880s, when Grand Junction was first settled, there were no cars, roads, or grocery stores as we know them. Everything the family needed for survival was either hand-made or home-grown. Life on the frontier wasn't easy, and every person in a family had chores they were responsible for completing on a daily basis. Pioneer families worked together to carve out a life under difficult circumstances and in some of the most remote places.