

Centerfield History (circa 1990's)

Centerfield was settled gradually, mostly by residents of Gunnison seeking to expand into the ample land in the Gunnison or South Field. The first homes were built in 1877 by Michael Nielsen, Chris Sanders and William D. Childs and his bride, Mary Ann. In the early 1880s a score of new families had joined them and the little group began erecting a community with public buildings. The first was a multi-purpose log meetinghouse built in 1882. In the same year a Primary and a Sunday School were organized with Harriet Highams and James Hansen as president and superintendent. Mutuals were formed in 1890. A superior stone church was erected of stone in 1886-88. Sans the tower added in 1897, it still stands with the distinctive Mansard roof found in no other Sanpete town but Centerfield. The Centerfield Ward was

organized in 1897 with Andrew C. Fjeldsted as bishop. Harriet Higham was chosen as Relief Society president and in 1924, a seminary building was built. Lacking room in the old church, a new one was constructed in 1909.

Like the religious services, the first school classes were taught in private homes with Marie Gribble running the earliest school, a private venture. Joseph Christensen taught the first public school in the log meetinghouse. A two-story brick school in the middle of the block behind the old church and city hall has not survived, although it was the town's largest building. Still in existence is the one-story brick school built north of the church in 1908. It has been modified to serve as the present City Hall. The quality of buildings improved in Centerfield after George Peterson, H. K. Hansen and Walter Christensen started a brick-making business. A popular public building was the massive Opera House built of local brick by Albert Okerman in 1909. Large crowds gathered for dances and parties until it burned down. In 1919 Alfred Fjeldsted erected a joint theater and bank building. Here townspeople enjoyed traveling shows, plays and moving pictures. This building is still located across from city hall.

The town's first store was a grocery operated from a room in the adobe home of John Knighton, Sr. Soon after, James Hansen and Sylvester Whiting constructed a log store. The first major commercial building was the stone mercantile erected by Brigham Jensen with lean-tos added by John Edwards. After seeing many owners come and go, the place became known as Ralph's when operated for many years by Ralph Jensen. James Beck built a competing mercantile in 1901. In 1932 it became the Barlow Store. Oswell Beck built a farm implement store in 1909. It was expanded by Andreas Jensen for a pool hall and barber shop in 1923, and for a general merchandise store by Beck in 1924. The Square Deal Store was constructed by Henry Simansen in 1921. As cars became increasingly available, The Gunnison Valley Motor was established in 1929. Many other stores of various kinds have since been erected along busy Highway 89, Centerfield's Main Street. Outside of town P. M. Jensen operated a sawmill in

willow Creek Canyon starting in 1930. It was later moved and converted to a steam mill cutting 400,000 feet of lumber annually. Before the coming of the railroad to the valley in 1891, the freighting business employed several Centerfield men who carried local food products to the Tintic and Nevada mining districts.

At a church meeting, various names were proposed for the settlement. Centerfield won out because it lay between Gunnison and Axtell. Fortunately, the unflattering previous name of "Skintown" was among the names dropped. A post office was granted in 1898 and the town was incorporated in 1909 with Lars C. Myrup as the first town president. In 1914 a piped city water

system was installed and in 1922, the old streets were graveled and street lights were installed. Sidewalks appeared in 1924 and major improvements of the water system occurred in the '30s.

Like its neighbors, Centerfield is primarily an agricultural village dependent on water development. An early water venture was the New Field Canal Company organized in 1878. It brought water west to Gunnison Valley from Twelve Mile Creek. Locals participated in the building of Gunnison Reservoir beginning in 1889 and the forming of the Gunnison Irrigation Company in 1888, capitalized with \$250,000 in stock. The Gunnison Highland Canal Company of 1896 further expanded local storage and irrigation systems. Grain and alfalfa hay were the town's major crops and enough was raised to maintain an export business. In the early-to-

mid twentieth century, sugar beets, cabbage and peas were successful, along with beef and turkey. High quality, purebred milking cows and bulls were imported from the eastern states starting in 1913 to strengthen a local dairy industry commenced about 1905. By 1947, 80,000 pounds of milk products were being taken out daily from the local creamery. Beef cattle did well on the lush fields of wild hay, although thieving was common. After the Willow Creek Grazing Association was started, the strain of beef stock was upgraded and production improved considerably. As the amount of local hay, grain and beet pulp increased, so did the feed for cattle. The timely arrival of the railroad brought wealth to Centerfield's productive farmers and stock raisers. The same became true of the poultry business, especially after the formation of the Utah Poultry Association in 1922 energized the industry. Many began raising chickens and turkeys in large numbers. Some, including Mr. and Mrs. B. K. Tuft of Centerfield, pioneering new poultry raising methods that revolutionized the business in Sanpete County.

Like Axtell to the south, Centerfield is a place most people chose to drive through quickly on their way to somewhere else. Still, the town continues to grow. Between 1970 and 1980 its population increased 55.8%-- more than any mid-sized Sanpete town. It grew another 17.3% in the following decade, reaching a population of 766 (a little larger than Spring City) by 1990.