

## A Home by the Way: Miles Court in Holly, Colorado

by  
Keith A. Sculle



Miles Court in Holly, Colorado

Holly, Colorado, is a small town with a long history of travel. Written records alone across the intersection of the Great Plains and the nearby Arkansas River Valley have traced the Apache and the nomadic Arapaho and Cheyenne who displaced them in the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Coronado, Archuleta, Ulibarri, and Valverde, Spanish explorers from 1541 to 1719, *perhaps* passed near what would become Holly three hundred to one-hundred sixty years later.<sup>2</sup> The whole of Prowers County surrounding latter-day Holly was “anything but isolated” by 1700, one of the county’s historians has emphasized.<sup>3</sup> French explorers and traders from the east passed through the area in the eighteenth century, reversing the usual previous routes which came out of the southwest.<sup>4</sup> Defeat in war punctuated by the Sand Creek Massacre dispossessed the Native Americans altogether of the area in 1868.<sup>5</sup> Stage coaches and wagon trains sealed the closure by chasing away the buffalo and other game.<sup>6</sup> The Santa Fe Trail’s Mountain branch passed through what became Holly.<sup>7</sup> In 1871, ten years before founding the town he named for himself, Hiram S. Holly (also Holley and Holleys), by way of Connecticut, New York City, Tennessee, and Arizona, built a ranch near the site the Santa Fe Railroad chose for its depot, later, in 1894.<sup>8</sup> Talk, some planning, and a little funding for the “Rainbow Route,” one of the many named highways before inception of the federal trunk system in 1926, signaled the dawn of the automobile age in the 1910s on roughly the same latitude as Holly, although on Colorado’s western side.<sup>9</sup> US 50 would eventually join it, also giving automobilists an entrance into Colorado through Holly on the eastern state boundary.

---

KEITH A. SCULLE (Ph. D., 1972, University of Illinois) is the co-author of seven books with university presses on various aspects of Roadside America and, independently, of numerous articles for general or academic readers. He recently retired as the Head of Research and Education of the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency. Over a 34-year career with the agency he also directed the National Register of Historic Places and was the site manager of the Old State Capitol in Springfield.

In Holly, the entrepreneurial Marsh brothers opened the Shady Rest auto camp, sold it, and, even in the teeth of the Great Depression, in 1930, readied to build a chain of auto camps and filling stations, one in Holly and one eastward in Syracuse, Kansas.<sup>10</sup> Later years witnessed the inception of more permanent facilities.

On Holly's eastern edge, on the north side of US 50, at Colorado's southeastern federal highway portal, stands the remains of one of these more permanent facilities—Miles Court. In *Colorado Heritage*, Lyle Miller has traced the state's history of roadside lodgings, reminding us of this heritage's origins and fascinating changes along busy rights of way. "Elsewhere, off the beaten path (or Interstate ramp) and behind a real neon sign can be found a nice old motel with peace, quiet, and uniquely decorated rooms, and a bargain price."<sup>11</sup> Memory extends another helping hand. It is especially helpful for intriguing but defunct businesses like Miles Court. With the good fortune of a Miles daughter's family memories and lodgers' too, we can figuratively re-enter their once prosperous roadside lodging though it went out of business several years ago. The shared experience is twofold—not only a traveler's glimpse of Holly's life but the very rare view of the family accommodating travelers in their public business-cum-private house.

Holly's economy built on ranching, sugar beets, and wheat afforded a sufficient living so long as the Arkansas River did not flood its valley and occasionally the small town itself. Dust storms and tornadoes raged too. Seasonal workers drawn to ranching and harvesting around Holly embodied a steady demand for temporary housing that a reliable motel could satisfy. Upstream, the Caddoa Dam Reservoir (later re-named the John Martin), for a decade beginning in the late 1930s, had enabled trout fishermen to enjoy their pastime. These, a few automobilists passing through, and, at least once, a railroad conductor off the Union Pacific, were a small supplement needing overnight lodging.<sup>12</sup> The resurgent tourist trade after World War II spurred new and neatly maintained roadside lodging throughout Colorado's recreational destinations.

Holly's rising fortunes perhaps induced the Miles to move there. The federal census of 1950 revealed slightly more than a 35 percent increase to 1244 people over the previous decade.<sup>13</sup> The year before, Holly formed a city planning committee, plans proceeded to erect street signs, a clinic and the VFW built facilities, the city park was improved, and several businesses remodeled their buildings.<sup>14</sup> A \$60,000 highway

project east from Holly to the Kansas state line was announced at the very beginning of 1951 and promised, with highway improvements already in place and underway in nearby Kansas, to increase the volume and pace of highway traffic.<sup>15</sup> Onto this setting stepped the Miles family.

Lloyd S. and Myrtle C. Miles married in 1921 in Estancia, New Mexico, another small town, not far off that centuries-old path people had taken in and out of the Great Plains to the southwest. Lloyd had gone from Wichita, Kansas, to New Mexico to stake a homesteading claim.<sup>16</sup> The bride and groom were very mobile in seeking out the place for their permanent residence. They first relocated to Wichita, Kansas, for about eight years, then to the Colorado-Kansas state line in 1929, back to New Mexico in 1933, and, finally, in 1947, returned to the state line about two miles outside Holly—there to run a gas station.<sup>17</sup> Roadside service was in their blood. Lloyd's obituary noted he had run a gas station and "court" when they first moved to the Colorado-Kansas state line.<sup>18</sup> Later, Myrtle's sister and her husband bought the existing Holly Tourist Court and, six blocks to the east, a Texaco service station. At their invitation, the Miles moved to Holly to stay, Lloyd to run the gas station and Myrtle the motel. No less essential, the motel became their long-term place of residence.<sup>19</sup>

The term "court" assumed from the original owner, was somewhat passé in the dawn of the post-war tourist industry.<sup>20</sup> "Motel" became prominent amidst the ever changing competition based on novelty. But "court" was well suited for the ambiance Lloyd and Myrtle wanted as hosts to strangers along the highway. "Court" resonated in the vernacular for elegant yet affordable middle-class taste as in the posh apartment courts of the period. "Court" may also have suggested a sense of community, something valued by those on the road in unfamiliar circumstances.<sup>21</sup> Arranged in a row, as they were at the Miles' new business, court symbolized the home away from home often called "cottage court."<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, the sense of respectable middle-class housing meshed well with the Miles family's search for a home. They had two young daughters. Myrtle's obituary resonates with commitments to her life in Holly. A Baptist from eleven years of age, she eventually served the Holly First Baptist Church as secretary, treasurer, and member of the Mission Society, chaired the Holly Bicentennial Committee and the Holly Cancer Drive, was a member of the library board, bookmobile

board, and the Tuesday Study Club.<sup>23</sup> On behalf of the entire community, she was president of the Holly Women's Civic Club, started the Holly Parent-Teachers Association, and belonged to the Holly Music Mothers and Commercial Club.<sup>24</sup> Ava Betz, historian of Prowers County (with Holly on its eastern edge), detailed the services both Myrtle and her husband assumed from the early 1950s through 1980 as operators of the town's emergency fire and police services phone. Due to Lloyd's and Myrtle's strong sense of citizenship, yet circumscribed by the demands of 24-hour work at Miles Court, they had the emergency phone service installed at the court when Lloyd sat on the town council. "Lloyd and Myrtle threw themselves into community activities," Betz wrote after an interview with the couple in 1980.<sup>25</sup> He was elected to the town council, was a member of the planning committee for the Holly Nursing Home, and strongly advocated diverting the flood-prone Horse Creek through town into its original channel and adding the amenity of a park through the center of Holly.<sup>26</sup> In gratitude and honor of their emergency phone services, upon their resignation, Holly officially declared March 22, 1980, "Lloyd and Myrtle Miles Day." Typical of his unassuming nature, Lloyd welcomed the potluck dinner associated with the recognition, but thought the "special day thing is a lot of phooey."<sup>27</sup>

Through all these years of civic-minded services, Lloyd and Myrtle ran their businesses and made their home at Miles Court. Their younger daughter, Karen, recently recounted that their actual living area at Miles Court was added after they took possession of the business. "Our front room was also the area where people would come to register and pay for their room." Myrtle, who was most always at the court, liberally allowed Karen and her friends to play on the property. "There was a small lawn by the laundry room with metal lawn chairs. We would take the chairs, turn them over, and cover [them] with a sheet to make an Indian Tee Pee." Winter's often huge snow drifts marooned travelers in Holly. Myrtle's decision to room people in the family's quarters gave Karen a child's joy of sleeping in the front room. Tubs for washing sheets and towels were allowed to double as places to play in water during her grade school days. Sleeping on the lawn was another childhood delight, and, when Karen was older, she was permitted a slumber party in the room closest to the family's living quarters. One of the rural mail carriers and her daughter also lived at the court. Karen's mother babysat the young girl while her mother made the rounds and Karen recalled

attending high school with her nearby friend. On the one hand, denied a pet dog for fear it might bite someone and certain it would get hit by a passing car, on the other hand, Karen's mother allowed her daughter cats, fish, and birds.<sup>28</sup> It was a bucolic atmosphere and physical setting in which to grow up. In Karen's fond memory, "Growing up living in Miles Court—I wouldn't change a thing." The reasons were many.

My mother was home all day. I got to be around her to see how she managed her work and the people she hired to help her. I learned a lot as a child—helping her with her bookkeeping, bank deposits, handling transactions, meeting strangers, and renting rooms and doing the necessary paper work.<sup>29</sup>

Ava Betz's correspondence with the author paid the courtesy of filling some gaps about the later years. "When I was there [in Holly] in the 70s and 80s the court was well-used by migrants, horse racing crews, harvest crews, and people returning for alumni gatherings who had relatives in town."<sup>30</sup> Gateway Downs in Holly was a horse-racing track whose operation drew the horse-racing crews of handlers, jockeys, and groomsmen. (Its final days as a video-screened hook-up to dog races in Colorado Springs, the track brought no crews to Miles Court.) The Monroe Motel at the west edge of Holly, cabins from an early roadside lodging—informally named "Hookerville" after its owner, Morris Hooker—the Grand Hotel that stayed in business at least through the 1950s, and a small trailer park near the center of town provided transient housing alternatives.<sup>31</sup> The Miles family owned a trailer park too, affirming how busy they were in living and making a living along the road.

For all the nostalgic reverie usually attributed to motels among day-dreaming vacationers, Miles Court brings to light a group of lodgers too easily forgotten, namely, itinerant workers. Where better to glimpse Holly's transient demographic absent adequate newspaper accounts? Traveling salesmen are thought of perhaps foremost among those non-recreational lodgers.<sup>32</sup> But Holly was itself the heart of a working community. The year the Miles family moved in to found their livelihood at the court, *The Holly Chieftain*, the local newspaper, tipped off alert readers by proudly running the notice on its masthead: "At the Gateway to 'Colorado's Market Basket'."<sup>33</sup> "Suitcase farmers" helped stake this claim. From the Oklahoma panhandle and western Kansas

farm families with small holdings were attracted to Holly because eastern Colorado's farmlands were cheaper to acquire. Instead of \$100 to \$150 per acre in Oklahoma and Kansas, eager farm families could buy farms for \$5 to \$10 per acre in eastern Colorado suitable for making a living. By day they farmed and, in many cases, lodged nightly at Miles Court, returning to their original farmsteads after the harvest.<sup>34</sup> At least one family recalls an accountant who made his home at the court each year in January and February while working with theirs' and other local farmers' financial records.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most striking memory of how the court accommodated both the local economy and the passing tourist occurred when the latter saw reproductive tracks from slaughtered cows displayed on tables onto which local farmers in training gazed. In the early 1970s, Tim Sitts, a local farmer, recalled his participation in this part of the "preg" testing he received from a veterinarian who lodged for several days at Miles Court. His course took the students off to surrounding farms for other aspects of their training regarding pregnant cows but the tourists in lodging were always startled by what they saw on those tables outside the veterinarian's room. Little did they know that, with the Mileses' approval, the veterinarian had kept those reproductive tracks overnight on ice in his room's bathtub.<sup>36</sup>

By all accounts, Gateway Downs was an important engine in Holly's economy. The people of Holly opened it in 1967, two years after a devastating flood, and ran it entirely on volunteer labor until it closed in 1995.<sup>37</sup> It built on the regional advantage of warm weather and a long tradition of horse breeding.<sup>38</sup> Rella Steele, who kept financial records for the track, noted that at least on one occasion license plates from forty-five states were parked outside the track. Not only in the racing season but in the off season---September through March---crews stayed at Miles Court while they used Gateway Downs for their stables' training headquarters before traveling in the racing season to tracks in Denver and Aurora, Colorado, and Raton, New Mexico.<sup>39</sup> The Miles' made special efforts to accommodate the stables that appeared at the track, and jockeys routinely made reservations long before their appearance.<sup>40</sup> Retired jockey Jim Chesterman recalled Lloyd and Myrtle Miles with fondness. "Very pleasant people," they welcomed the jockeys and trainers from Gateway Downs who stayed at the court and set aside a room in the court where the jockeys and trainers could play poker, using a bed for the card table.<sup>41</sup>

In its waning days, in the early 1990s, Harold Thurston remembers Miles Court, despite Myrtle's bedridden condition, to have been a comfortably managed setting for himself and, in his words, several "Spanish boys." They lived at the court during winter and worked at Gateway Downs during its April-May season. The court was furnished with a place to cook in its rooms in addition to regular residence; this contrasted to their advantage with the other motel in Holly, which provided rooms only. Trailer courts on seemingly every corner were the lodgings for others who worked at the race track, seasonally swelling Holly's small-town population.<sup>42</sup>

Miles Court clearly was a comfortable domestic setting. It embodied the proverbial home away from home people came to expect in the age before what they later regarded as the efficient but impersonal motel chains born in the booming prosperity of the late-1940s through the 1960s.

Daughter Karen's remembrances reinforce the case for the industrious life style that funded the Miles's own home by the way. Her mother worked hard in the dry climate to keep roses growing in the front yard and small flowers in gardens along the rooms. The Miles removed the original owner of the court's garages in order to install room units. Those and low nightly rates attracted family travelers. Televisions, room air conditioners, and meticulously clean rooms and towels extended the Miles home-style standards into their place of business. Karen can easily recount the methodical steps by which the linens were cleaned and bluing added. But, her mother "always felt the sheets dried and smelled better drying outside." Even when Myrtle finally bought a dryer, it was only used for towels. "Mother was also very particular about who stayed in the rooms." Judged by their looks, some lodgers were sent to the opposite end of town where the Monroe Motel permitted drinking inside the rooms. Couples suspected of not being husband and wife were sent away.<sup>43</sup> Thereby, places so widespread in the roadside lodging industry that they had a name—"hot pillow joints"—never included Miles Court.<sup>44</sup>

The Miles family dispersed over time. So ended their need for a home and the possibility of theirs for others on the highway through Holly. Daughter Karen now lives in Honolulu. Her father passed away in 1981, her mother 16 years later.<sup>45</sup> She sold Miles Court in 1993.<sup>46</sup>

## NOTES

1. Ava Betz, *A Prowers County History* (Lamar, Colorado: Big Timbers Museum, 1986), pp. 13-14.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-20 and *This Book Is About Holly, Colorado: Celebrating Holly's History*, vol. 1 (Holly, Colorado: Holly Historical Society, n. d.), p. 3.
3. Betz, *A Prowers County History*, p. 20.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 25-6.
5. *Colorado: A Guide to the Highest State* (Hastings House: New York, 1941), p. 44.
6. Betz, *A Prowers County History*, p. 48.
7. *This Book Is About Holly, Colorado*, p. 5.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 60 and Betz, *A Prowers County History*, p. 7 and 60.
9. Alvin Edlund, Jr., "A Brief History of America's Backbone (a/k/a the Loneliest Road in America) and How it Came to Pass Through Central Colorado," <<http://www.route50.com/history.htm>> , pp. 2-4 of 17 pp. (accessed October 17, 2009).
10. *This Book Is About Holly, Colorado*, pp. 34-5.
11. Lyle Miller, "The Hi-Ho, Lucky U, Bugs Bunny, and Sleepy Hollow: A History of Colorado Motels," *Colorado Heritage* (Autumn 1997): 2-21.
12. Karen Marengo, telephone interview with the author, June 17, 2008.
13. *Syracuse (Kansas) Journal*, July 6, 1950.
14. *Ibid.*, March 16, 1950; December 7, 1950; April 20, 1950; August 24, 1950; October 12, 1950; and December 14, 1950.
15. *Ibid.*, January 4, 1951; March 8, 1951; and November 15, 1951.
16. *Syracuse (Kansas) Journal*, April 23, 1997.
17. *Ibid.* and Karen Marengo, correspondence to the author, September 1, 2009.
18. *Lamar (Colorado) Daily News*, May 4, 1981.
19. Marengo, correspondence to the author, September 1, 2009.
20. John A. Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 45.
21. Stefanos Polyzoides, Roger Sherwood, and James Tice, *Courtyard Housing in Los Angeles: A Topographical Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 9.
22. Miller, "The Hi-Ho, Lucky U, Bugs Bunny, and Sleepy Hollow: A History of Colorado Motels" : 9.
23. *Syracuse (Kansas) Journal*, April 23, 1997, and *The Holly Chieftain*, March 20, 1980.
24. *Syracuse (Kansas) Journal*, April 23, 1997.
25. *The Holly Chieftain*, March 20, 1980.
26. Marengo, correspondence to the author, September 1, 2009 and *The Holly Chieftain*, March 20, 1980.
27. *The Holly Chieftain*, March 20, 1980.
28. Marengo, correspondence to the author, September 1, 2009.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Ava Betz, correspondence to author, November 20, 2009.
31. *Ibid.* and Marengo, correspondence to the author, September 1, 2009.
32. John A. Jakle and Keith A. Sculle, *America's Main Street Hotels: Transciency and Community in the Early Auto Age* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), pp. 102-105 and Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers, *The Motel in America*, p. 67.
33. *The Holly Chieftain*, September 12, 1951.
34. Ira Paulin (retired farmer), telephone interview with the author, January 10, 2010.
35. Ted Sitts (farmer), telephone interview with the author, January 23, 2010.
36. Tim Sitts, telephone interview with the author, January 24, 2010.
37. Judy K. Fell, "Gateway Downs--A Quarter Century of Racing," *The Rocky Mountain Quarter Horse* 36: 2 (February 1997): 18-21 and Linda Grubb, "Gateway Downs racing meet opens Saturday," *The Lamar Daily News and Holly Chieftain*, March 30, 1988, pp. 1-2.
38. Linda Grubb (Holly journalist), telephone interview with the author, January 12, 2010.
39. Rella Steele, telephone interview with the author, January 12, 2010.
40. Grubb, telephone interview with the author, January 23, 2010.
41. Jim Chesterman, telephone interview with the author, January 11, 2010.
42. Thurston, telephone interview with the author, February 12, 2010.
43. Marengo, correspondence to the author, September 1, 2009.
44. Elbert L. Hooker, "The Urban Tourist Camp," *Studies in Sociology* (Southern Methodist University, Department of Sociology) 1:1 (1936): 12-18.
45. *The Holly Chieftain*, March 20, 1980 and *Syracuse (Kansas) Journal*, April 23, 1997.
46. *The Holly Chieftain*, March 20, 1980.