

DANIEL I. J. THORNTON

Michael Sawyer  
Director  
Rangeview Library District  
October 15, 2004

Before 1953, north of Denver was farm land and had a few dirt roads. Then Sam Hoffman, a developer from Phoenix, saw an opportunity of the rolling wheat fields seven miles north of Denver and envisioned of building homes cheaply to World War II veterans. He bought a section of empty farm land from the Eppinger and McElwain families and began to lay out the new town. His construction company, F & S Construction Co., began to proceed building 300 homes. This would be Adams County's first planned community. At the ground breaking held on April 19, 1953, Hoffman's daughter-in-law and famous actresses, Jane Russell was in attendance. The first family, Robert and Marjorie Glassman with their son, Bobbie, would moved into their new home in the new town on Saturday, January 31, 1954. The new town was named after the sitting governor, Daniel Thornton, even though he did not give permission to use Thornton as the town's name. Who was Daniel Thornton?

Daniel Isaac J. Thornton was born in Hall County, Texas between two farm communities of Memphis and Estelline on January 31, 1911 to Clay and Ida Thornton. He was the fourth child of a family of six which consisted of five boys and one girl. His father dreamed of a prosperous Texas farm that never quite became a reality. Dan began attending school at the age of eight. He attended a small country schoolhouse where the kids shared two rooms that was five miles away. Since there was no transportation, he walked to school in his boots, which became his trademark. He later claimed that he never owned a pair of shoes in his life. To help his father, he picked cotton and helped with dairy chores and was recognized by his family to be the expert on tending, treating and handling farm animals. In 1921, Clay decided to move the family to Lubbock County because his farm was not producing what he had envisioned. They moved to a 177-acre farm near Slaton and Dan went to a slightly bigger school in Posey. He joined the 4-H Club at the age of ten and has been involved ever since. Dan had the same dream of his father which was to have a prosperous ranch including raising cattle and his lifelong interest was nourished by the involvement in the 4-H Club. At the age of thirteen, he won the

declamation contest by reciting the Gettysburg Address which was not a popular topic in Texas. As he grew, he was in constant trouble at school known as one of the troublemakers. His father was a member of the school board and often heard the complaints about his son. Some of these kids were so tough, they would often pick fights. One of these kids kept picking on the male teacher to the point that he humiliated him by whipping him. The teacher left and Clay decided to solve this problem. He left one day and returned with a new male graduate to be the new school teacher. The toughest kid decided to fight him and the new teacher ended the fight in less than a minute. Since he was a former Texas University lightweight boxing champion, this new teacher was able to put these “tough” kids in their place.

Dan was very involved with the 4-H Club and the Posey 4-H grain judging team won the county and district championships in 1923, 1924 and 1925. It was in 1925 that he was president of the Lubbock County 4-H Club and at the state meet won top honors which encompassed an all expense trip to the National Livestock Show held in Chicago. This was his first train trip, let alone his first trip anywhere outside of Texas. He won top honors at this show! Dan was becoming a star in home town as he began to appear in the newspaper. He began to become more serious with his 4-H work and in 1927, he was the state 4-H president. This allowed him to attend the first national encampment held in Washington D.C. One evening, President Calvin Coolidge decided to visit the encampment. As he was walking by the pup tents, he noted that there was one tent that had trouble covering the tall slender boy whose knees and shining boots were exposed. The President stopped at this tent and shook one of the boots. Out came the slender tall boy, Daniel Thornton, greeting the President. The President stated he wanted to see what was at the other end of the boots. They carried a short conversation and President Coolidge gave him the advice he never forgot. The President advised him that he “get less rest and do more work. To those who work the hardest come the great rewards.”<sup>1</sup> He never forgot the President’s advice and this visit was the highlight of his early years. In addition, he won the showmanship award at this encampment.

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<sup>1</sup> “Dan’s star started to rise early in his life,” Rocky Mountain News, January 2, 1955, p. 14.

While attending Slaton High School, he had to drop out to help work on the farm when his father became ill. After his father recovered, he went to Lubbock High School and lettered in football and track. After graduation, he attended Texas A&M where he played football and worked to pay for his education which was working for the school entomology department. His father became ill again and he was forced to leave college to help manage the farm. Dan was able to return to college, this time attending Texas Technological College where he resumed playing football and studied agriculture. In 1930, a scout for UCLA saw Dan play football and convinced him to transfer to there. He moved to Los Angeles to a fraternity house and worked as a meat cutter at the local Safeway. He later found work as a hay hand. In the summer of 1931, he had an opportunity to work in Colorado Springs for two months for Pikes Peak Transfer Company lifting furniture, pianos and carpets. He fell in love with Colorado and was determined to come back and live in Colorado. It would be ten years before he would fulfill his dream.

During Christmas week of 1932, he was in the UCLA student union building and noticed that there was a bridge game being played. He watched the game being played and stood behind a coed who he thought was playing the game wrong. That sparked a courtship with Jessie Willock that ended in marriage on April 7, 1934 despite her parents not really approving of him. He knew Harry Warner of Warner Brothers and had a three year contract to be in movies. Although he had a steady income, he became bored since he had to wait around to be in the pictures and most of the time, he ended up on the cutting room floor. He felt he was not giving the Warner Brothers a fair deal and broke the contract. From there, he worked at the gas station at a lesser pay. Times were tough and it forced him to leave UCLA before he graduated. Dan thought he would like to be an oil tycoon and decided that he would enter into this business. Right after he and Jessie got married, he got a job as an oil field roughneck in Playa Del Rey Hills (California) and later was promoted to a derrick. Because he was away from Jessie a lot, he was worried about her because she was ill. Finally one day Jessie told him that she wanted him to do what he wanted to do most and that would be a cattleman, a dream that Dan had when he was a youngster.

Borrowing \$37,000 from his father-in-law, he set out his ranching career by purchasing a dilapidated ranch near Springerville, Arizona. He built up his stock that laid the foundation of his cattlemen's career. He had purchased some purebred Hereford herd from another cattleman in Fredonia, Kansas. He had six months to complete the transaction. As the six months was coming up, Dan needed to be creative to pay off the sales. He was always traveling and in this particular case, he went to his former client in Las Cruces saying that he was "dropping by to see him" and inquired how he liked the herd he purchased from him. Dan mentioned that he was on his way to Roswell to "sell his herd" to another cattleman and that he was staying at the Roswell Hotel. He raced to Roswell hoping there was such a hotel and was relieved to find that there was. There was a message from his former client that he was interested in purchasing the new string of Hereford herd from him. Hence, his business was saved as he was able to complete the Fredonia transaction. This was the beginning of Thornton's showmanship in the cattlemen's industry. He decided that the finest registered Hereford breed would be his business. This would be the foundation of his successful cattlemen career. His Hereford cattle were showed at livestock shows and would walk away winning countless blue ribbons. This brought him notice with the other cattlemen. His good friend, L. M. Pexton, described him as follows:

"There's no question about it. Dan's sense of public relations, his showmanship, and his amazing ability to know and breed good animals made him one of the great men in the Hereford game. In the space of a few years he gave the industry glamour and he did plenty to bring big sales money to ranchers. He has an inborn ability to judge cattle—he is considered one of the finest judges in the business. And he knows the intricacies of genetics so that he can pick a cow and a bull and get an offspring that wins championship."<sup>2</sup>

When his enterprise outgrew its original home, the Thorntons decided to purchase 1,700 acre ranch near Gunnison for \$47,500 and moved there on December 1, 1941. Dan and Jessie had visited Colorado many times and both felt it was a great place to live. This would fulfill his dream from his first visit in 1931. He continued to breed his Hereford herd which was nationally known for excellent quality. It

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<sup>2</sup> "Dan starts to build Hereford Cattle Empire," Rocky Mountain News, January 3, 1955, p. 26.

was through his creative idea that made him even more known. He decided to run a contest to name his strain he was able to produce, and advertised the contest in all of the cattle journals with a prize be awarded to the winner. The reason for the contest was that the “cattle had class and care and needed publicity.”<sup>3</sup> He called his herd the Thornton Triumphant (TT) and people around the country came to visit his ranch to see and buy his Thornton Triumphant Hereford. Dan did not rest on his laurel as he went out promoting his TT Hereford mostly via his personal airplane which traveled over 300,000 miles a year. The zenith of his business came in 1945 when Dan sold two magnificent bulls for \$50,000 each at the National Western Stock Show – a world record at that time. Before selling them, he was persuaded to have the one of the two bulls bedded in the lobby of the prestigious Brown Palace Hotel where he stayed when he came to Denver. This got him pictures and space in many national newspapers and magazines in the country. Because he was becoming financially sound, there was a point when he had an interest in purchasing the Cleveland Indians but he did not pursue this venture.

In 1947, he stunned the cattle world when he announced that he was selling his entire TT Hereford herd. His wife had inherited a radio manufacturing business and he was named a member of the board. The word was out that he was venturing into this business, or least that’s what Dan had stated. With the help of his neighbors, Dan and Jessie were responsible for hosting the three day event that included entertainment, lodging (local hotels were used), food and transportation. The atmosphere was like a county fair. When it was all said and done, a crowd of 10,000 from various states and countries gathered at the Thornton ranch for the auction which netted him \$875,940. This was the world record shattering the previous record set in 1946 in Fort Worth, Texas when the record was set at \$620,000. Six months later, people realized that Dan Thornton had the knack to know when to get out of the business as the cattle industry went into a slump. A third of the money garnered from this auction was used to maintain the ranch and to make it better than before. His interest in the radio manufacturing business waned and he had time on his hands and was itching to do something else.

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<sup>3</sup> “A showman, a sport, a host—And with plenty of savvy.” Rocky Mountain News, January 4, 1955, p.28.

One midnight in 1948, Dan received a telephone call from his friend, Ed Dutcher, asking him to run for state Senator. Surprised to hear this request, he flatly turned it down despite Dutcher plea that he owed the district something. He told Jessie of this conversation and Jessie concurred with Dutcher saying that Gunnison County had provided him the opportunity to prosper. When Dutcher called back two hours later, Dan agreed to run. His name scared off the Democrat and he ran unopposed as the Republican representative from the 11<sup>th</sup> District comprising Gunnison, Delta and Hinsdale counties. For the next two years, he voted his conscience and angered his fellow Republicans for not following the party line. After serving two years in the statehouse, Thornton was ready to return to Gunnison and tend his ranch. However, fate was to intervene. Ralph Carr, former governor from 1939-43, was campaigning against the incumbent Democrat Walter Johnson when he suddenly died of a heart attack on September 23, 1950, leaving the Republican Party without a candidate for governor. They contacted every notable Republican candidate to run against Governor Johnson but no one wanted to be the sacrificial lamb. Finally, they persuaded Dan Thornton to run. Although there was little chance of unseating the incumbent governor, Thornton had other ideas. He conducted a 34 day political whirlwind campaign where he visited 201 towns and made 303 speeches. The people got to know him and his trademarks which were the 10 gallon Stetson, pipe and cowboy boots. Despite his heavy campaign trail in a very short time, nobody in the political arena gave him much of a chance. In fact, nine days before the election, the Democrat Party accessed the governor's race in a Denver paper as "NO CONTEST". When the election was over, Thornton upset the political world by beating Walter Johnson by 23,496 votes. Thornton even carried Denver, which was prominently Democrat and "this was unheard of as an elephant winning the Kentucky Derby."<sup>4</sup> He was able to overcome the obstacles because he had his own campaign staff when the Republican Party would not help him and got the voters to listen to listen to him. The voters were impressed by the "drive and the personality of the man who told them he knew nothing about politics or state government but was willing to learn if he got a chance."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ainsworth, Ed. "Thornton taking pep to Colorado," newspaper unknown, 1950.

<sup>5</sup> "Dan gets drafted into political victory," Rocky Mountain News, January 5, 1955, p.28.

At the age of 39, Thornton took the oath of office on January 9, 1951 and one of the first legislative actions he undertook was raising the appropriation of state advertising from \$17,500 to \$200,000 annually. He believed in Colorado and wanted the rest of the country to know about this wonderful state. He has often been dubbed as “Mr. Colorado” because he was always away promoting the state. The growth of cities, towns and industries jumped considerably with the increase of advertising and Thornton being the goodwill ambassador for Colorado. There were many who were upset that he spent a great deal time away from the governor mansion promoting Colorado. His own party was upset with him because he made decisions that sometimes were against the party platform. As an example of promoting Colorado, he decided that the state should have a float in the Tournament of Roses Parade. Unbeknown to the legislators, they saw it for the first time when it appeared on television and were livid because they thought it was foolish spending despite the fact it won first place in state competition. Thornton stay at the statehouse was “emphasized by his great ability to bring the state into the likelight through personal actions and through a magnified publicity program he instituted.”<sup>6</sup>

To the chagrin of the Republican Party, he became one of the earliest supporters of Dwight Eisenhower for president in 1952. Many had felt that they should back Robert Taft for president. His friendship of Ike goes back to 1948 when they met at the Cherry Hills Country Club playing golf. Ike would vacation in Denver because his mother-in-law lived there and made an impression on Thornton. So impressed, Thornton gathered all of his speeches and memorized some of the text. When Thornton became the chairman of the Colorado Crusades for Freedom in 1948, he used some of Ike’s works in his speeches. He was able to get Ike’s approval of a national kickoff campaign for Crusades for Freedom and Thornton introduced Ike to world on a national broadcast. They remained good friends and golfing partners. At the Republican National Convention, Thornton was able to wrestle 15 of the 18 delegates for Ike. Because he gave a rousing speech in supporting Ike, he was considered as a Vice-President candidate. When that did not occur, rumors were rampant that he would be considered for a cabinet position which never materialized. Although he was not among the favorites with the Republican Party

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



he was popular with the people in Colorado and was reelected to another term of governor by a wider margin than the first time. He defeated his challenger, the State Attorney General John W. Metzger, by 89,880 votes.

In 1953, Thornton was approached by Sam Hoffman to name the new town north of Denver after him and he did not give Hoffman his blessing. Hoffman stated that the new town should be named after him “because Dan deserves the honor in view of his part in building the state of Colorado and his interest in adequate housing for its citizens....Naming this town for Dan should end his being upset about being from Texas and not being a native....This will be a token of Colorado’s affection for its chief.”<sup>7</sup> Thornton himself stated that he prefer it be named for someone else “possibly some Colorado pioneer who contributed more to the state than I have....I wouldn’t like to see a town start out with a stigma like the name Thornton.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Hoffman proceeded to name the town Thornton with a grand vision of building over 5,000 homes. The majority of the homes would be built with two types: the first one, selling for \$8,000, would be a two-bedroom model and the second one, selling for \$11,000, would be three-bedroom home with a carport. Since the actress Jane Russell was an interior decorator, she designed two of three model homes on display. Hoffman named the streets after friends and family members. The curviest road was named after the actress with the curvy body and it was called Russell Boulevard. Hoffman’s dream city became a success as the town grew rapidly because the people had the opportunity to purchase well built homes at a reasonable price and at the same time get away from the taxes of Denver. Problems brewed in the late 1950’s when lawsuits mounted because the houses were built on shifting soil. While the lawsuits were settled, this was not the tragic moment in Hoffman’s life. At his Phoenix home in the early morning of October 13, 1959, Hoffman got into a predawn argument with his wife and things got out of hand. Hoffman shot his wife, Ann, killing her and then committed suicide. When the court probated his estate, his net worth was over \$1.1 million, a considerable sum for that time.

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<sup>7</sup> Amsden, Forest. “‘Thornton, Colorado’ name to honor Dan,” Denver Post, February 19, 1953, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

In 1954, he was asked by many to run for the U.S. Senate including by President Eisenhower but declined. In 1955, he announced he would not seek another term as governor. To his chagrin, an anonymous backer started a "Dan for President" headquarters in Washington D.C. He refused to partake in any part of this movement since he remained a staunch supporter of Eisenhower who at that time had not announced his reelection plan. Once Eisenhower announced his 1956 campaign plan, Thornton became heavily involved with the reelection campaign. Once again, he was considered for the Vice-President slot but Ike decided to keep Nixon. In mid-1956, Ike appointed him as director of the Republican National Committee's Farm Campaign Division. Thereafter, the Colorado Republican Party asked him to run for the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by the retiring Eugene Millikin. This time, he agreed to run and was considered the favorite to win this election. Unfortunately, his opponent, John A. Carroll, won the upset by 2,770 votes. At this point, Thornton decided to leave politics. As governor, he accomplished many things for the state and these are a few: severance tax on gas and oil; creation of a legislative interim council; formation of a continuing financial reserve; reform in the administration of state school lands; an improved parole system; increased state school aid; the adoption of a weight-distance truck tax; a more equalized property appraisal program and more efficient state income tax collections through withholding. His friendship with Ike helped bring the Air Force Academy to Colorado Springs; he was instrumental in bringing the National Bureau of Standards laboratory to Boulder; Sundstrand Company, Martin Marietta's Aerospace Division and Dow Chemical Company as operator of the Rocky Flats nuclear weapons plant. His greatest battle with the legislators was getting them committed to a long-range highway plan. Because of his friendship with Ike, he was appointed to carry out several assignments such as being on the Commission on Intergovernmental Relations; visited Korea to make an evaluation of the country's military and economic strength; and served as special ambassador for Ike to Paraguay.

Thornton wanted to return to Gunnison to his first interest which was being a cattleman. During his stay at the statehouse, he visited Gunnison during the summer. However, in 1957, he finally sold his ranch for approximately \$400,000 and moved to Cherry Hills Village (Englewood). [*Today the ranch is*

*known as the Ranch House and is used for Bed and Breakfast.]* He had other ventures he was involved with: majority stockholder in the Grand Junction Morning Sun newspaper; majority stockholder and a director of the State Life Insurance Company; co-developer of the Columbine Country Club and residential sites surrounding this club; cattle feeding as lessee of a large ranch near Chugwater, Wyoming and one of the founders of Denver's Cyclo Manufacturing Company which originally made and marketed newly developed aircraft polishing equipment. In addition, he continued to be the goodwill ambassador for Colorado as he served on the Colorado Visitors Bureau and served as president. In 1958, he was asked to run for the Colorado 4<sup>th</sup> Congressional District but declined. In 1962, he was on the comeback trail to run for governor again but had to drop out due to Jessie's illness as the doctor advised him that his wife could not withstand a vigorous campaign. This would be the last time that Thornton would enter the political arena. Thornton and his wife would split their time between Englewood and Palm Springs, California, which they have been doing since 1957.

On an historical note, the city manager of Thornton, Fred Froehlich, suggested in 1964 that the city investigate changing the city's name. In order for this action to occur, the proponent of changing the name would be required to make a petition and obtain the signatures of 51% of the citizens who voted in the last election. Once this was accomplished, then a vote of five council members must be in favor of the change. The reason given to change the city's name was the land growth during the past six months and Froehlich explained that "there are many advantages on changing the City's name; and it would offer many opportunities for the City to expand and develop properly."<sup>9</sup> The real concern was the image that Thornton had received due to the damaged homes caused by shifting of the soil and the hassle of the over million dollars drop in the city's property valuation in 1962. The city received numerous calls regarding this issue. Many were opposed to the change including the first mayor of Thornton, Oyer G. Leary. Those who oppose the change indicated that there appeared to be an imagine stigma on Thornton and there is no reason for this action. The members of city council were cool to the idea of the name.

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<sup>9</sup> "Thornton manager suggests city study name change," Adams County Dispatch, February 6, 1964, p. 1.

received first prize from the Monument Builders of North America in 1977. The work received the top award in the sculpture over \$5,000 category.<sup>10</sup>

Daniel Thornton will be remembered for changing the habit of Colorado parochial patterns. Thinking small was an ingrained habit and Thornton had visions larger and bolder than his predecessors. In four short years, he helped change the Colorado's image into the mainstream of American national life. One of the reasons he was more successful than previous Colorado governors was that he looked like a Western governor ought to look.<sup>11</sup> He had been a highly successful rancher, cattle breeder and his trademarks of his hat, boot and pipe commanded him respect. Thornton and Hoffman sought to increase the awareness of Colorado and encourage people to come to this state. Neither had envisioned the successful growth that the city of Thornton and the state Colorado would grow this rapidly. The city grew from a town of over 6,000 in 1956 to a fledging city with a population of nearing 110,000 by the end of 2004. No doubt that Thornton and Hoffman are smiling from above.

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<sup>10</sup> "Erickson Co, work receives award," Denver Post, March 3, 1977, p. 57.

<sup>11</sup> Obituary, Denver Post, January 20, 1976, p.18.