How We Became Nederland

Nederland sits in a valley created by a glacier thousands of years ago. Native Americans used the valley and river left behind by the glacier before the first hunters and trappers looking for beaver pelts found their way to the area in the early 1800s. A relatively flat area with a good water source and ample wildlife, the valley was an attractive place for early settlers.

In the mid-19th century, the first white homesteaders who settled here gave it a variety of names. First known as Dayton, then Brownsville, and in 1871, when the first post office was located here, it was called Middle Boulder. That was the same year Abel Breed bought the silver-rich Caribou Mine and decided to bring his ore from Caribou Hill to the "warmer" climate of Middle Boulder for milling. It was also the same year the Boulder Canyon Road was completed, though it would be nearly forty years before the first automobile (a Stanley Steamer) would make the difficult trip up from Boulder in 1910.

In 1873, Breed sold the Caribou Mine to the Mining Company Nederland from Holland. Breed's Caribou Mill in Middle Boulder became known among the miners as "the Netherlands," meaning "low lands" (which it is compared to the town of Caribou at 10,000′ elevation). In 1874 when the town incorporated, the people chose Nederland as the new name.

The mines at Caribou soon declined, however, and the Dutch company pulled out just a few years later. By 1890, there was little ore to be milled and Nederland became another mountain ghost town, with only a handful of families living here year round.

A second mining boom began just after the turn of the century. Sam Conger, who had discovered the Caribou silver mine, found tungsten in areas to the north and east of Nederland, and he knew its value in making steel. The old silver mill in Nederland was converted to process tungsten. By 1916, Nederland had a population of nearly 3,000, about twice its present number. During this time, you could travel to Nederland by train, Stanley Steamer, and car. In addition, the town of Lakewood grew north of Nederland and the town of Tungsten sprung up at the foot of Barker Dam. An unnaturally flat area and a small house that once served as the miners' mess hall on the south side of the canyon road just below the dam is scant evidence of the town that still appears on some area maps.

By 1920, the Town's population had plummeted to about 200 people. Automobiles replaced the train, and the cabins became summer getaways for rich folks from the Front Range. For the next 20 years, small mines, farming, ranching, and tourists — picnicking at the new Barker Reservoir, kept the Town alive.

The last small boom was in the 1940s, when demand for tungsten again picked up during World War II. But once again, as demand for tungsten fell, the town was left to a small group of miners, farmers, ranchers, and summer people. Eventually the theater, bowling alley, stores, and banks closed.

Nederland in the 1960s saw a steady increase in population, starting with "hippies" who brought a vibrant music scene and a new lifestyle to the sleepy valley. By the 1990s, Nederland's population had grown quite a bit, accounting for new residents who commuted all along the Front Range for work. At this time, Barker Meadow was developed into the town's only shopping center and plans were underway to spruce up downtown to attract more tourist and encourage local residents to spend their dollars in town, instead of "down the hill" in Boulder.

At the turn of the 21st century, the town's population growth had leveled out. New attractions brought increased tourism and increased revenue to local businesses. A new fire station and new library solidified Nederland's position as the hub of the Peak to Peak Community. Townsfolk now wonder what the future will bring… what will Nederland's next boom look like? Its next bust? How will we retain the town's unique character as the times around it change? One thing is certain: Nederland is a town like no other, and probably always will be.