

## Kids' Planet... with Thorne Nature Experience



# 50th ANNIVERSARY OF BOULDER'S OPEN SPACE



by Dr. Oakleigh Thorne, II

**B**ack in 1967, I was part of a small group of Boulder citizens who worked hard to get a sales tax passed to purchase open space. At that time we called these greenbelts. I'd like to give you some history about how this all happened. During the 1950s Boulder was seeing rapid growth. Two University of Colorado professors, Albert Bartlett and Robert McKelvey, became worried that this growth might harm Boulder's scenic backdrop, especially in the area below our beautiful Flatirons, which by the way were set aside by act of Congress in the very early 1920s as Boulder Mountain Parks. In 1959 Bartlett, McKelvey, and others were able to get a vote of our citizens passed that prevented the City of Boulder from supplying water and sewer services above a certain line of altitude, which we called the Blue Line.

Out of this action grew the founding of PLAN-Boulder County, a citizens' planning and "watchdog" group. "PLAN" stood for "Peoples League for Action Now!" I was a charter member of PLAN-Boulder and was also



Photo by Bob Carmichael

The Boulder Flatirons view is protected by Open Space.

a member of the very first Parks & Recreation Advisory Board ("Parks Board") that had just been established by a vote of the citizens.

We decided that it was important to pass a bond issue to purchase Enchanted Mesa, just south of Chautauqua, because it was threatened by real estate development. This included a luxury hotel and 200 homes. We were successful and Enchanted Mesa was secured by the City.

Soon after, Dr. Walter Orr Roberts proposed the purchase of Table Mesa as a site for the National Center for Atmospheric Research (NCAR) that would preserve about 500 acres of open space. It would allow one building designed by a world-class architect, I. M. Pei, and would bring many top scientists to Boulder. Since it was above the Blue Line, it required a vote of approval by the citizens. PLAN-Boulder decided this was a worthwhile idea and came out in favor of NCAR. The vote passed. This was the next mesa south of Enchanted Mesa.

After these successes, PLAN-Boulder, then chaired by Ruth Wright, put on a conference on the importance of greenbelts and why Boulder needed them. Ted Tedesco had just become our new City Manager and he suggested a sales tax, part of which would be used for the purchase of greenbelts. The year was 1967.

We then discovered a copy of a report done in 1910 by Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., whose father had designed Central Park in New York City. In the report he suggested that Boulder should have greenbelts along Boulder Creek and around the city to prevent "urban sprawl."

I had my nonprofit Thorne Ecological Institute (now Thorne Nature Experience) re-publish the *Olmsted Report*. James Bowers, then planning director, wrote a wonderful preface urging us to take action immediately to preserve greenbelts. We handed out these copies to the leaders of Boulder as part of a campaign. Our slogan was "Greenbelts are for

children, and their children, and their children. Greenbelts YES!" We made posters, bumper stickers, ads, and radio announcements.

The sales tax passed! We were the first city in the United States to have citizens tax themselves to preserve greenbelts and open space. Eventually the Open Space Department was established and greenbelt land began to be purchased. I'm very proud of Boulder for having such foresight!

*Dr. Thorne is founder and honorary president of Thorne Nature Experience (formerly Thorne Ecological Institute) in Boulder. They have helped "connect youth to nature" for 63 years! For information about their summer camp and other programs for kids, check their website at [www.thornenature.org](http://www.thornenature.org) or please email [info@thornenature.org](mailto:info@thornenature.org) or call (303) 499-3647, ext. 100.*

