

## LEFTHAND GRANGE No. 9 – 1945 to 2020

The Left Hand Grange No. 9 was organized at the Batchelder School House southwest of Niwot on December 20, 1873, and received its charter on January 24, 1874. It is currently the oldest active Grange in Colorado. The Grange met upstairs in Nelson Hall, a former mercantile, for years before acquiring the building in 1945 from the estate of John Nelson. This building has been the home of Left Hand Grange for the past 75 years. Significant to the Grange's history, has been the challenging context in which the Left Hand Grange (LHG) has evolved. With the decline in farming, like many suburban Granges, LHG evolved into a community service organization, including non-farm rural families and communities, with our roots in agriculture. Still we retain and foster many of the same values and principles associated with the agrarian spirit. This back-drop of change over the last 45 years further defines the role of LHG in the Niwot Community.

**Background** - The 1960's ushered in an era of changing demographics and cultural transition for the Grange and the surrounding community of Niwot. The small unincorporated town of Niwot was located between the growing larger cities of Boulder and Longmont, along the Colorado and Southern Railroad (now B&N RR). By 1960, the zig-zagging State Highway 119 (now the Diagonal Highway) between Boulder and Longmont, had been completely paved and straightened on a diagonal route paralleling the railroad tracks. In the early 1970's SH 119 became four lanes, greatly increasing traffic flow in the area, but also leveling the two-story Niwot school.

In 1965 the large IBM plant arrived in Boulder County, and located just one mile southwest of Niwot. With a potential for 3000 or more employees, soon Niwot, with its rural character and charm, became a desirable place to live in close proximity to the IBM plant. Also, water and sewer utility services became more readily available with the Left Hand Water District (early 1960's) and the Niwot Sanitation District (1967). In 1968, the Left Hand Men's Club formed the Niwot Volunteer Fire Department, and in 1969 located a new fire house on LHG land through a 99-year lease. Also, in 1972 the new Niwot High School was built. Prior to that students attended classes in Longmont. In 1975, the population of Niwot is estimated to have been less than 1000 people.

When the Boulder County Comprehensive Land Use Plan was adopted in 1978, the unincorporated Town of Niwot was designated as a Community Service area, with a plan to accommodate future growth, with policies attempting to preserve the rural character of the area. Future residential developments were to be designed in a manner and style that reflected a "semi-rural character". Also, the County began acquiring land around Niwot, to preserve Open Space buffers and community identity, with much of this land leased back to farmers. And Niwot became a "receiving area" where developers could acquire Transfer of Development Rights (TDR's) and consolidate outlying rural housing areas into the Niwot service area. The nature of the downtown businesses began to change to a more contemporary shopping district of retail

shops, boutiques, antique stores, restaurants, etc., to cater to a growing non-farm community, as well as outside shoppers.

**Grange Building** - This context of shifting land uses, growing and changing population and changing local economy, provided the LHG with membership and building maintenance challenges, but also offered some new opportunities to preserve the building as a town center. The LHG building, built in 1907 and acquired in 1945, has remained an integral part of the landscape of the two-block “Old Town” Niwot business district, and functions as Niwot’s community center. But poor drainage and street flooding problems continued to threaten the Grange building. In 1992, in order to improve the drainage, curbing, sidewalks and lighting along 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, the Old Town Niwot Local Improvement District (LID) was established by Boulder County, levying a 0.5% sales tax. This streetscape, paving and drainage project was a big improvement to all of the downtown businesses, and to the Grange Hall. And, in 1993, the Niwot Historic District was designated by Boulder County, and Nelson Hall (LHG building) was included as a dominant feature. No new building can be built higher than the LHG’s 30 foot roofline.

While LHG, is one of the oldest surviving community organizations in Niwot, it is also an active partner in a larger network of community organizations that currently serve the approximately 4200 residents of Niwot. These include: the Niwot Business Association (NBA) formed in 1992 to promote economic and commercial well-being of businesses in Niwot; the Niwot Community Association (NCA) formed in 1990 to advocate and interface with local government agencies; the Niwot Historical Society (NHS) formed in 1983 and incorporated in 2003 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, to preserve, collect and protect the history of Niwot; and the Niwot Cultural Arts Association (NCAA), a non-profit formed in 2009, to provide support, encouragement and funding for cultural arts in the Niwot area.



Left Hand Grange No.9, June 2020



Restoration in Progress



Rededication Ceremony, September 2009



Left Hand Grange No.9 since 1945



Street Flooding from Hinman Ditch



Nelson Hall, abt 1910

On September 12, 2009 the Grange Hall was re-dedicated, following a monumental renovation and preservation effort spearheaded by the late Dorinda Dembroski, Grange Secretary. State Grange Master, John Hagan, was on hand to assist with the ribbon cutting, as LHG also celebrated its 135<sup>th</sup> Anniversary as a Grange. This project followed a Historic Structure Assessment, and was needed to save the building for future generations. The hall underwent substantial repair to solve drainage problems and foundation decay that threatened its structural integrity. The renovation included rebuilding exterior walls and modernization of the interior spaces. The lower floor now has full disability access. The renovation was strongly supported by the entire Niwot community with donations to the LHG, as well as grant money. Fundraising for the project began in 2006, and the total cost was approximately \$250,000. This included approximately \$160,000 in donations and fundraising, \$27,500 in donated construction services, and \$62,500 in grants, including \$10,000 from the State Grange. Community and business leaders in Niwot consider the revitalized Grange Hall a great community asset. In April 2010 the Grange received a "Historic Building Preservation Award" from Boulder County.

**Activities/Community Service** – The Grange makes the building available to Boulder County for public meetings, and to other Niwot community non-profit groups for their meetings. These often include lectures on Niwot area history and happenings, weekly catered breakfast meetings, craft fairs, business lectures and office potluck meals. It is also used for memorial services. And we have at various times offered used book sales, plant sales, art and knitting classes, lectures about gardening, etc. We also participate in community events such as the annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade, and various activities at Christmas time.

The Grange continues to be a longtime sponsor of Boy Scout Troop 161 and Cub Scout Pack 161, and in 2020 agreed to sponsor a new Scout Troop 161 for girls. The Grange has been a beneficiary of a number of Eagle Scout projects. Music has a long history at the LHG, from square dances in the 1950's, to dance classes and recitals in the 1970's. In the 1980's and 90's bluegrass concerts were popular. The old upright piano, donated to LHG by Chris Finger Pianos, is tuned regularly so it is always ready to make music. In 2013 the Grange began hosting an ongoing and popular monthly music open stage that often draws as many as 10 performers and 25-40 people. In 2019 two Grange members launched the non-profit Willowdale Live art and music series that has drawn national performing acts. The popularity of this series has resulted in an increased LHG membership approaching 50 members, after hovering around 35-40 for the past decade. Also, in 2019 the Grange became an official sponsor of the "Niwot Community Semi-Marching Free Grange Band", a local volunteer band that performs at community events.

The old Niwot Volunteer Fire Dept. (NVFD) garage building, located on Grange property is used by LHG for extra storage space, but is also made available to other community groups to store various equipment needed for outdoor events. And it served for a number of years as a used medical equipment loan closet for the community. This building became available in 1982 when the new Mountain View Fire Station was built east of Niwot. For years the garage housed

NVFD's Old Engine #10, which is now driven in parades and community events. LHG also has a close relationship with the Niwot Historical Society (NHS). In 1999 we cooperated with them to allow relocation of the "Original Niwot Fire House", built in 1910, onto the Grange property with a 99-year lease. Since then NHS has undertaken preservation measures for the building, and uses it as a small history museum, open on special occasions. This building is also part of the Niwot Historic District.

Because the Grange relies on rental income to maintain the building, we look at ways to broaden interest in hall rentals, and other ways to extend our community service. Several years ago internet access to the building was added. Also, after several years of discussing the LHG no-alcohol policy, in 2018-19 we adopted policy and implementation procedures, to allow alcohol in the building on a limited trial basis for private events. Also, in 2019 a Boulder County Economic Vitality grant made it possible to redesign and update our website and elevate the online presence of the Grange.

Unfortunately, due to the Covid 19 virus pandemic, it was necessary to close the Grange for the months of April, May and June 2020. But as we look toward a reopening, Lefthand Grange No. 9 will continue to remain an active part of the Niwot Community, and part of the enduring rural and small-town tradition. We will continue to play an active role in helping to preserve the agricultural heritage of the area, and honoring the spirit of those who came before us to settle Niwot and the Left Hand Valley.

In her 2011 book, *Niwot, Colorado: Birth of a Railroad Town*, local historian and author Anne Quinby Dyni offered the following perspective on the Left Hand Grange No. 9:

*"Today, Left Hand Grange #9 is the oldest active grange in Colorado. What is the reason for its longevity? In these times of declining agriculture in Boulder County, its members have adapted their outreach mission to accommodate contemporary needs. They have not lost sight of their responsibility to the community they serve."*

#### **DESCRIPTION OF PHOTOS**

- 1) Left Hand Grange No.9, Niwot, CO, taken in June 2020
- 2) Renovation work on the Left Hand Grange No.9 building in progress (Courtesy of Anne Quinby Dyni)
- 3) Re-dedication of Left Hand Grange No. 9 – "The grange hall was rededicated on September 12, 2009, with county dignitaries, grange members and community residents in attendance. Standing here, from left to right, Harris Faberman, architect Paul Zopff, contractor Robert Parich, grange president Rosemary Bruce, and board members, Bruce Johnson, Emily DeCillis, and Dorinda Dembroski, who was the driving force behind the restoration project." (Courtesy of Anne Quinby Dyni)
- 4) Left Hand Grange No.9, building purchased in 1945 (Courtesy of Niwot Historical Society)
- 5) Flooding on Second Avenue in Front of Grange due to spring runoff overflow from Hinman Ditch - 1959 (Courtesy of Niwot Historical Society)
- 6) Nelson Hall in 1910 - Future Home of Left Hand Grange No. 9. (Courtesy of Niwot Historical Society)

*Submitted to Colorado State Grange by Bruce Johnson, Secretary, Left Hand Grange No.9, July 1, 2020*