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Star K Ranch put to good ewes

Nature center sprouts from former home of beer-guzzling sheep

**By Mike Patty, Rocky Mountain News
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Correction

This story should have said that the new nature center at the Star K Ranch on the Sand Creek Greenway in Aurora is the Morrison Nature Center.

AURORA - Once home to a beer-drinking, cigarette-loving sheep named Oscar and his eccentric owner, the old Star K Ranch today is in the center of one of the metro area's open-space treasures.

The old ranch house of Virgil "Pop" Stark, who held gambling and drinking parties there during the 1940s and 50s, has been remodeled into the The Morrison Nature Center. It opens officially Sunday.

The nature center is surrounded by 200 acres of century-old cottonwood trees, willows, native grasses and a wetland preserve.

Located south of Smith Road at Laredo Street, the site is surrounded by urban development. Yet it is home to wild deer, foxes, coyotes, rabbits and a multitude of bird and waterfowl species.

"People have a hard time believing this is Aurora," said Kate Kramer, executive director of the Sand Creek Regional Greenway Partnership.

The nature center also provides access to the 14-mile Sand Creek Greenway Trail connecting the High Line Canal Trail in Aurora to the Platte River Trail in Commerce City.

Linda Strand, manager of open spaces and natural areas for the city of Aurora, said the Morrison Nature Center will be a valuable asset, used to educate visitors about the area's natural and historic significance.

"We hope to have a ranger on duty about 40 hours a week, with lots of educational displays and old photos," Strand said.

The Sand Creek Greenway idea was born in 1995, when a group of citizens and representatives from Aurora, Denver and Commerce City got together.

With the closure of Stapleton Airport, the group joined the Stapleton Development Corporation to form a private, non-profit partnership to complete Greenway Trail, which opened in June 2002.

Aurora started acquiring land for open space around the Star K Ranch back in the 1970s, and has finally accumulated about 200 acres.

Remodeling of the old ranch house was paid for with a \$550,000 grant to the Sand Creek

Partnership and city of Aurora by the Pauline A. and George R. Morrison Charitable Trust.

In addition, grants of \$170,000 from the Adams County Open Space Initiative, \$160,000 from the Sand Creek Partnership and \$75,000 from the city of Aurora made the project a reality.

The story of the Star K Ranch goes back to the 1940s, when Pop Stark traded his original homestead to the federal government so it could build the Rocky Mountain Arsenal.

He ended up with the Sand Creek site, on which he placed a railroad caboose and later built a house.

He used the ranch as a weekend retreat for himself and friends to drink, gamble, hunt and fish.

According to a Dec. 11, 1943, story in the *Rocky Mountain News*, the Star K ranch was also home to menagerie of pets, including a feisty ram named Oscar.

The story, by writer Pasquale Marranzino, told how Oscar, "200 pounds of fuzz atop a set of spindly, black legs, with a blood-shot eye and a barroom manner," got a daily ration of beer with a cigarette.

"Pop stepped up to the corral and yelled, 'Here, Oscar, you good for nothing hunk of mutton,' " the article reads.

"So here comes Oscar to the fence. He licked Pop's hand, put his forehooves on the rail and reached up for his beer.

"It was down the hatch in two gulps and to make the show impressive, he belched and bleated for more.

"The beer was followed by one of Pop's cigarettes, which Oscar gently took from Pop's lips and held it between his teeth awhile before munching it down."

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