

ROCKMOUNT NAMED DENVER'S No. 2 LANDMARK BY THE DENVER POST

# The Denver Post

## Local Touchstones

Outside Guide: Offbeat Landmarks

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Duman's Custom Tailor on East Colfax Avenue has fitted politicians, sports icons and even a former governor. (Andy Cross, The Denver Post)



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Seattle has the Space Needle. St. Louis has its Arch. New York boasts the Statue of Liberty. And Denver has — what — the DIA terminal?

Fortunately, giant manmade landmarks aren't the only things that shape a city's image. It's often the less noticeable features — great playgrounds, long-lived pizza joints, memorable bookstores — that truly mold our sense of who we are and where we belong.

Think of San Francisco. It would steal our hearts even without the Golden Gate Bridge or the Transamerica Pyramid, thanks to such niceties as its foghorns, cable cars and cornucopia of intimate shops and restaurants.

Denver, perhaps best known for its mountain backdrop, has a wealth of similarly small-scale charms that



Mile High marker on the west steps of the Colorado state Capitol.



A fountain at the Brown Palace that draws from a well 750 feet below.



The Rockmount Ranch Wear label has been around since 1926.

(Denver Post file photos)

give our town its own special character. These cultural touchstones — some rooted in our Western heritage, others merely offbeat — tend to be overshadowed by more mainstream tourist attractions, but together they contribute much to our common identity.

Here are some favorite local landmarks to share with visiting holiday guests.

### **1. Birthplace of the Cheeseburger.**

Colorado's first drive-in restaurant, the Humpty-Dumpty (known as the "Barrel" for its rotund appearance), is long gone from the site it once occupied off Speer Boulevard in northwest Denver. But a waist-high stone marker commemorates its role in pop-culture history as the place where an inspired chef first slapped a slice of cheddar on a beef patty and — presto! — invented America's favorite sandwich. Others elsewhere claimed to have created the cheeseburger around the same time, but it was Denver's Louis E. Ballast who actually thought to trademark the term, and registered it on March 5, 1935. The gray granite monument to his prescience, dedicated on that date in 1987, sits adjacent to a Key Bank parking lot at 2776 N. Speer Blvd., a block west of Zuni Street.

### **2. Rockmount Ranch Wear.**

There's no better place to place to "cowboy up" than this enthralling shop at 1626 Wazee St. in LoDo, where the late Jack A. Weil perfected the iconic snap-front Western shirt more than 60 years ago. Still family run, the store stocks belts, buckles, bolos, bandannas and boots. But its main offering is shirts — fringed, embroidered, flowered, rhinestoned or just plain serviceable, most of them priced under \$100. "Papa Jack," who died in 2008 at the age of 107, was known as the world's oldest CEO. His legacy, as a supplier to generations of authentic cattlemen as well as Hollywood wannabes, seems as lasting and genuine as the wood floor and tin ceiling of the store itself.

### **3. Brown Palace Water Fountain.**

An old-school, pedestal-style water fountain in the lobby of the Brown Palace Hotel may be the classiest place in town to get a free drink. Just to the left of the concierge desk, it is supplied by the hotel's own artesian well, which taps a rock formation some 750 below ground. "While you're here, drink it all in," urges a plaque above the fixture, which also serves as a water bottle refill station. A wall display nearby, outside the entrance to the Ship Tavern, maps the geology of the Denver Basin aquifer that gives rise to the flow, and documents the drilling operation that replaced the original well in 1978 — some 90 years after thirsty visitors first sampled its waters.

### **4. The 5280 Marker.**

The best place in town to check the altimeter setting on your GPS may be found



The cheeseburger was invented at Denver's first drive-in restaurant, the Humpty Dumpty. (Denver Post file photo)

on the west side of the state Capitol, about a dozen steps down from the entrance, where a shiny, palm-sized brass disc registers its exact height above sea level: 5,280 feet. It and the inscription a couple of steps below — "One Mile Above Sea Level" — have become an informal tourist attraction, beckoning flatlanders of all ages to sit down and take pictures of each other. No word yet on whether global warming may eventually cause the marker to be raised.

### **5. Duman's Custom Tailors.**

Established in 1962 by Holocaust survivor Maurice Duman, this clothier at 438 E. Colfax Ave., just two blocks east of the state Capitol, has outfitted a long line of politicians, sports figures, restaurant workers and wedding parties, including governors of Colorado starting with John Love in the 1960s. Ever efficient, right down to their well-tempered sewing machines and tape measures worn around their necks, the shop's attendants seem right out of the Seventh Avenue branch of Central Casting. Their expertise with needle and thread is what you long for when you're rifling through the racks of supposedly ready-to-wear at a discount department store.



H. H. Zietz, originator of the Buckhorn Exchange, poses at the restaurant circa 1930. (Denver Public Library/Western History Dept)

## **6. The Buckhorn Exchange.**

Perhaps the best place in Denver to take out-of-state visitors for a taste of the Old West, the Buckhorn was founded in 1893 by a former scout for Buffalo Bill, and still exudes much of its original flavor, chiefly through its astonishing collection of game trophies, which adorn the walls like onlookers at a carnivore's parade. (Don't miss the two-headed calf). The restaurant and upstairs bar, across the street from a light-rail station at West 10th Avenue and Osage Street, have served generations of diners ranging from railroad workers to U.S. presidents, and continue to woo new patrons with a hearty mixture of meat and museum-quality memorabilia.

## **7. The Yellow Wall.**

This billboard-sized sculpture, on the west edge of the Denver Design Center at 600 S. Broadway, consists of a stack of 33 huge concrete beams, each cantilevered out from a central axis like a huge vertical fan. Officially called the "Articulated Wall," it is part of the collection of the Denver Art Museum, and was designed by the noted Bauhaus artist Herbert Bayer, who lived in Aspen for years before his death in 1985. According to a plaque at its base, he intended for the wall "to be viewed not only from close up, but especially from Interstate 25, where it seems to change shape when seen from a moving car." For a more exhilarating view, however, try standing next to it and looking straight up on a clear sunny day, when the bright yellow mass contrasts boldly with the bright blue sky.

## **8. Davies' Chuck Wagon Diner.**

This vintage eatery at 9495 W. Colfax Ave., where you can still get a steak-and-eggs breakfast for under five bucks, has been a Lakewood landmark since the 1950s, when U.S. 40 was the main route into the Rockies. All gloss, glass and metal siding, it's got tabletop units for playing the jukebox, an inert horse standing watch over the entrance, and booths with brown upholstery that matches the color of the ceramic coffee mugs. The diner's most notable feature, though, may be the big neon sign out front, which sports the most welcoming cowboy this side of Wendover, Nev.

## **9. Red Rocks Trading Post.**

Built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, this pueblo-style edifice on the south side of Red Rocks amphitheater west of Morrison houses a visitor center, souvenir shop and rock-music museum of sorts. Like, where else can you find a photo of the Grateful Dead with a chronological listing of all the shows they ever performed at Red Rocks? Not to mention, for \$195 apiece, small benches made from sections of the venue's original wooden seats, complete with number tags still attached. The trading post's nicest amenity may be its back deck, which offers a stunning view of some of the park's namesake rocks and seems just the place to collect your thoughts over coffee on a sunny weekend morning.

#### **10. The "Sleeper" House.**

This distinctive white residence near the crest of Genesee Mountain, also known as the Taco House, the Clamshell or the Sculptured House, has long served as a signal to travelers on Interstate 70 that they are finally getting into or out of the mountains. But to baby boomers, it is not only a geographical but a cultural reference point, for it was a key part of the set in Woody Allen's 1973 movie "Sleeper," in which he played a musician who went in for minor surgery and woke up 200 years later, having been cryogenically preserved. Several other futuristic buildings around the Denver area were depicted in the film as well, including the atrium at the Botanic Gardens, the then-brand-new Mile Hi Church of Religious Science, and the I.M. Pei-designed NCAR campus above Boulder.

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