

A City Mapped On A Ping-Pong Table Turns 50

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By Mike McKibbin

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Five decades ago, a petition to have what is now the City of Lakewood become part of Denver was actually an effort to see the city formed.

That's according to a 1969 local newspaper report, after residents overwhelmingly approved incorporation of what was first called Jefferson City. A few months later — after strong opposition to the name — what was then the third largest city in Colorado was renamed "Lakewood."

Copies of the Jefferson Sentinel — now the Lakewood Sentinel — from the spring of 1969 in the county archivist office included an April 17 story about the Denver City Council rejecting the annexation of a 27-square-mile area that would have included what became Lakewood. The story noted resident Pauline LeBlanc had proposed the annexation through a petition signed by 204 people.

Then, on June 26 (two days after the incorporation vote), front page headlines of the renamed "Jefferson City Sentinel" read: "Welcome To The Big City" and "Landslide Creates New Municipality." The issue passed, 8,476 to 3,371.

A small boxed story reported LeBlanc was pleased and had started the annexation issue to get Jefferson City formed.

"When we asked Denver to annex us, we made the area so large that it could never afford to take us in," LeBlanc was quoted. "But it got people thinking and they finally took action. We were just playing for incorporation. This is just wonderful. I'm very happy."

"It is impossible to pinpoint any special reason for this landslide," the paper's editorial read. "Basically, people finally came to the conclusion that the area can't continue as it is. There was a certain fear of Denver, a desire to keep the R-1 school system intact, and growing discontent with county government dispensed from Golden. It all added up to Jefferson City."

Why incorporate a mystery

Whether or not fear of annexation — which would have included adding Jefferson County School District R-1 to Denver Public Schools — court-ordered busing to desegregate Denver schools or other factors spurred incorporation to remain in question 50 years later.

Local historian Kristen Autobee, the former curator and administrator of Lakewood's Heritage Center, authored two books on the city's history with her late husband, Robert Autobee. While she does not believe racism was a deciding factor in the 1969 effort, "I've been working on this question for about 20 years and still don't have an honest answer," Autobee said.

Autobee agreed some incorporation backers were motivated by not wanting to become residents of Denver. A crime wave could have been another factor, she added.

“My gut feeling is there was no one reason people voted to incorporate in ‘69,” Autobee said. “There was just a lot going on.”

In a March 2, 2010, Lakewood history video, Betty Miller, the first woman city council member (served from 1969-75) and now deceased, said when she and her husband bought an area house, “the realtor said ‘don't worry, you're going to be annexed by Denver in the next few years.’ So I moved here thinking I wanted to be in Denver.”

Miller believed Denver’s desegregation battles were a factor for incorporation.

“That was a terribly big issue,” she said. “... I think an awful lot of it was due to the school situation.”

Dick Hilker, then the editor and general manager of the Sentinel, recalled two main issues — inadequate law enforcement by the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Department and opposition to annexation — were reasons for incorporation.

“No one really wanted to form another big government, but we wanted a police department,” Hilker said in an interview. “I’m sure some people moved to Jefferson County to avoid busing. But our schools had a great reputation at the time, too, and we didn’t want to see any changes to our school district.”

Business-wise, Hilker said keeping a local identity was important.

“There were no big chain stores at the time, it was all locally-owned businesses,” he noted. “So the (East Jefferson) chamber of commerce had a lot of influence and supported incorporation to maintain that local identity.”

The Lakewood Heritage Center website noted June 24 was the incorporation election, Aug. 28 saw the first municipal officers sworn in, Nov. 4 was the advisory vote on the name of the city, and Nov. 6 was when city council passed a resolution to change the name to Lakewood.

A city website said the name ‘Lakewood’ was given to a subdivision that William Loveland, owner of the Colorado Central Railroad, established in 1889 near West Colfax Avenue and Harlan Street. Loveland had lived in or near the township of Lakewood, New Jersey, Hilker said.

Jefferson City was chosen to “try to appease everyone,” he added. “They didn’t want to antagonize any area by calling it some other area.”

In the June 26 Sentinel editorial, the paper stated, “Probably the most understated thing about Jefferson City is its name. We agree with many citizens who have complained that a much better moniker could have been selected. ... We think a more suitable name could be found. We urge the election commission to include a name referendum on the ballot for city council and mayor. The commission should ask for suggested names and select two or three that are appropriate and include them with Jefferson City on the ballot.”

An attorney, Elias Candall, led the effort to change the name.

"He was always active in some cause or another and just really disliked the name," Hilker said.

'A scary experience'

Jefferson City's boundaries were drawn on a basement ping-pong table in the home of James Jeff "Jim" Richey, chairman of the incorporation group. Richey was also the city's first mayor, serving almost nine years, from 1969-77, and was often referred to as the "Father of Lakewood." He later ran unsuccessfully for governor and passed away Nov. 29, 2014.

Richey talked about the incorporation in two Lakewood history videos, dated Feb. 9, 2007, and June 22, 2012.

Richey noted annexation and "very little protection from the sheriff's department" were issues, along with the loss of local schools if the area were annexed. Richey recalled a so-called "garage gorilla" or "garage rapist" was active and the sheriff's department had just three cars to patrol the area.

Richey said the incorporation might have been the largest one in history at the time.

"Waking up one morning after an election and having almost 100,000 people as a new city and not having any employees, any ordinances, any rolling stock, was a little bit of a scary experience," he said.

Officials in Denver weren't too happy with Jefferson City's incorporation, he noted.

"They thought this was a territory that was going to be theirs," Richey said. "They put roadblocks in front of each thing we tried to do."

The first election after incorporation featured 113 candidates for 13 offices, including seven candidates for mayor. Richey said the idea of running for mayor grew out of the June 24 incorporation election night, "When someone yelled 'there's the mayor'."

Richey added he and other officials wanted to "soften the image" of the new police department.

"We hired the police chief before the city administrator," Richey stated. "If I had that to do over, it would be the other way around. And we hired the wrong chief. Everyone in the metro area disliked (our) police."

City officers were also required to have a college degree and to wear blue blazers and gray slacks.

"And we called them 'agents,' instead of officers," Richey added.

Soon, however, they realized that went too far, so more traditional titles and uniforms were used, he said.

"I don't think I would have had near the fun running an organized city as it was putting a city together," Richey stated. "But I'm not sure you could draw a city map on a ping-pong table today."