



Gifford Homestead



The Gifford farm lies in the heart of Fruita, a desert oasis described by author and historian Wallace Stegner as “...a sudden, intensely green little valley among the cliffs of the Waterpocket Fold, opulent with cherries, peaches, and apples in season, inhabited by a few families who were about equally good Mormons and good frontiersmen and good farmers.”

The Capitol Reef Natural History Association, in cooperation with the National Park Service, has restored and refurnished the Gifford farmhouse as a cultural site to interpret the early Mormon settlement of the Fruita area. The house depicts the typical spartan nature of rural Utah farm homes of the early 1900’s. In addition to the farmhouse, the Gifford Homestead includes a barn, smokehouse, pasture, and rock walls. The homestead is part of the 200-acre Fruita Rural Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Surviving in an Oasis

The first permanent settlement in the area now known as Fruita was established in 1880 by Nels Johnson. Over the following few decades, many settlers and their families resided in this protected valley. However, no more than ten families ever lived in Fruita at any point in time. These pioneers had to rely on self-sufficiency, ingenuity, and hard work in order to survive in this remote location.

Life was simple yet demanding during these attempts at homesteading, and many challenges arose—harsh weather, flash floods, illnesses, isolation. This led to a high degree of turnover among residents of Fruita. A few settlers persevered and stayed for many years, but some did not.

The Capitol Reef area has always attracted those who are willing to be tested by its rugged terrain and difficult living conditions. Explorers, prospectors, ranchers, settlers, sightseers, recluses, and other travelers with transient lifestyles have come and gone over the years. Cabins, farms, motels, gas stations, and guest ranches have all appeared and disappeared from the local landscape. The Gifford Homestead is one of the few remaining examples of the tenacity of Fruita’s early residents, a refuge of rustic comfort surrounded by the unforgiving high desert.

Residents and Improvements

The original home was built in 1908 by polygamist Calvin Pendleton. He and his family occupied it for eight years. The original house had a combined front room/kitchen and two small bedrooms. An outside ladder accessed two upstairs bedrooms. Pendleton also constructed the adjacent barn and smokehouse, as well as the rock walls near the house and on the mesa slopes above it.

The second residents of the home were the Jorgen Jorgenson family who resided here from 1916 to 1928. Jorgenson sold the homestead to his son-in-law, Dewey Gifford, in 1928.

The Gifford family occupied the home for 41 years (1928 to 1969). Gifford added a kitchen in 1946 and the bathroom, utility room, and carport in 1954.

The Giffords were the last residents of Fruita. Dewey Gifford sold his home and land to the National Park Service in 1969 and moved away. With the Giffords’ departure, the story of Fruita as a farming community came to a close. The house opened to the public in 1996. Today, the pioneer spirit of Fruita can be experienced by exploring the landscape of the Fruita rural community and visiting the Gifford Homestead.

Life on the Farm



The Giffords raised dairy cows, hogs, sheep, chickens, and ducks. They also ran cattle in the South Desert. They used the smokehouse to preserve meat for their own use and to sell. Abundant fruitwood and cottonwood were used to smoke meat. Dewey Gifford also worked for the State Road Department, and later for the National Park Service, to supplement his farm income.

The family ate what they raised. The garden produced a variety of food including potatoes, beans, peas, squash, lettuce, radishes, corn, and watermelons. The family also had orchards and grew sorghum. They preserved fruit and vegetables for later use by canning or drying. Canned foods were stored in the cellar, accessed from the front of the house. Dry

goods, such as potatoes, were kept in the root cellar on the back side of the house.

Water was carried to the house from the Fremont River and was used untreated. A two-hole outhouse served the family until an indoor bathroom and plumbing was installed in later years. The house received electricity in 1948.

The Giffords frequently gathered with other Fruita residents, especially the Chesnut and Mulford families, for suppers, singing, games, cards, baseball, reading, and quilting. The families were good friends and helped each other. This was important in a small, isolated community like Fruita.

Homestead Essentials

Items displayed inside the Gifford House represent the type of practical furnishings and appliances that were common in their time.

Bookcase: This worn bookcase once belonged to Janice Oldroyd Torgerson, a Fruita school teacher in 1934. Donated by the Burke Torgerson family.

Cook stove: This Monarch stove both prepared meals and heated the house, though the heat from the stove was probably much less welcome in summer.

Gifford family chair: This handsome homemade chair with a woven leather seat and short, peculiar legs suggest the chair was made for children. On loan from the Gifford family, this chair is the only piece of furniture original to the house.

Hoosier cupboard: This Hoosier cupboard, added to the house as a display in 1996, was a familiar sight in most Fruita kitchens. In addition to providing handy storage, baked goods would often be found cooling on the Hoosier's countertop.

Current Uses

The Gifford House has been converted into a sales outlet for the Capitol Reef Natural History Association. For sale at the store are items handmade by local artisans and craftsmen, including reproductions of utensils and other household items used by Mormon pioneers in their daily lives: rag dolls, quilted items, woven rugs, soap, crockery, wooden items, and toys. Books, historic postcards, jams and jellies, ice

cream, pies, and other baked goods are also available. Historical photos and information on the house's history and residents are on display.

The Gifford Homestead is located 1.1 miles (1.8 km) south of the visitor center on the Scenic Drive. Follow the signs for parking options at the picnic area, homestead, or Jorgensen Pasture.



Twila Gifford plays with a lamb in front of her family's home in the late 1930s. Over the years, the house was remodeled into the building seen today.