

RIFLE'S BLAST FROM THE PAST

RIFLE HERITAGE CENTER

P.O. Box 1882, Rifle, CO 81650
Museum Address: 337 East Avenue, Rifle

ISSUE 33

Winter Quarter 2018
Museum Phone: 970-625-4862

I am writing this on the winter equinox - December 21st, 2018 - the shortest daylight day of the year and the beginning of the solar New Year. This day has been observed for thousands of years and ancient civilizations have built many monuments to this day, in the old and new world. Such sites as Stone Hedge, Tulum, and Chaco Canyon are just a few of these famous monuments. Rifle has a monument to veterans, but not one for residents that were responsible for putting Rifle on the map and making it a stable community in the past. This story is about one man's effort and what that effort has resulted into. I hope you enjoy the history.

I would like to thank all the volunteers for their service in 2018. They are a great group of people who are dedicated to preserving and presenting the history of Rifle. I know they look forward to the many changes and updates to the museum in 2019. Please consider joining this great group of people if you are interested at all in the history of our community. We always welcome anyone from new residents to natives, young or old. The museum needs you to continue to grow in our community.

Newsletter Editor, George Pearson

The snow shoes keep him moving over the top of the deep snow. It had been quite a walk-up Rifle Creek from the Vanadium mine the last location on the road plowed by the State. George Steele was determined to get his water temperature reading from Rifle Creek at the base of Rifle Mountain Park. He needed to determine the average year-round temperature of the stream in order to provide the Colorado Division of Game and Fish the information needed to convince them to consider a new fish hatchery. Ever since coming to the area in 1952 he had noticed a location in Rifle Creek that provided all the necessary requirements for a large trout fish hatchery: land, abundant water, quality water, and most importantly water that was not too cold. So, on this cold winter day, he was determined to get the reading, not knowing that it would ultimately provide the information to his boss that allowed for the construction of the World's Largest Trout Fish Hatchery and change the course of Rifle history.



In 1943, George Steele enlisted in the Army during WWII. While serving throughout the Pacific, he was wounded by shrapnel, earning a Purple Heart and the Bronze Star, and was later chosen as a member of Gen. MacArthur's Honor Guard.

George Steele had been assigne

d to Rifle to be the new Fourth District Supervisor for

the Colorado Game and Fish Department in February of 1952. In his exploration of the new district, he had come upon a Ranch owned by the Zimmerman family that was located just below Rifle Mountain Park. The valley was wide in this area, with a gentle grade, and a nice stream that flowed down one side of the property. The stream contained trout, so George knew that the water quality had to be good. He knew what was needed for a fish hatchery was not only clean unpolluted water, but water that had a constant year-round temperature. Many streams in the Rockies of Colorado had been polluted by mining operations and many of them froze in the winter and became too cold. On this day if this stream on East Rifle Creek was not frozen, it seemed it would have all the necessary qualities to make it possible to have a trout fish hatchery. George would not know that until he had the temperature information. When he reached his sample site the stream was not frozen and was flowing crystal clear. He took his sample and despite the cold, it was 52 degrees. He knew then he had the possible makings of a fish hatchery site.

George Steele presented his finding to his boss who presented them to the board of the Colorado Game and Fish Commission. The information was reviewed and on June 4th, 1953 by officials from the Federal Board of Fisheries and from the Colorado Game and Fish Commission who came to Rifle and toured the site up Rifle Creek. They confirmed that George's information was correct: the temperature was a year-round 52 degrees and the water volume of 42 cubic feet per second was large enough to sustain a large hatchery operation. The Division of Colorado Game and Fish Chief R. M. Andrews and Commission President Kimball at first were skeptical that such a site could exist in the 1950's in Colorado. However, once they visited the site and reviewed Steeles information, they were convinced. Kimball, Andrews, and division engineer Damon Runyon flew to Hagerman, Idaho to inspect the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Fish Hatchery. The division had decided it would like to duplicate much of that large facility at the Rifle Creek Hatchery, so it was necessary to gather as much information as they could. They also approached the land owner, the Zimmerman's, and arranged to purchase the ranches 790 acres for \$60,000.00. Colorado State Governor Thorton signed the purchase documents and

George Steeles work had paid off. The Rifle Telegram Headlines of 6/11/1953 read "HUGE FISH HATCHERY TO BE LOCATED UP RIFLE CREEK". In an interview with Dick Lyttle, the Vice President of the Colorado Game and Fish Commission and editor of the Meeker Herald, made the announcement of the purchase of the land and the plans for the new hatchery. He stated that the facility would provide thirteen new jobs and would be a great tourist attraction. Dr. Harold Watson, president of the Colorado Game and Fish Commission, estimated the cost to be (paper stated \$150,000 probably a misprint) \$1,500,000.00.

This information was followed up on July 5th, 1953 in a Telegram article where the governor stated the cost estimate to be \$400,000. The hatchery would produce around a million trout per year of the six to fourteen-inch size. This production would be forty percent more than the existing three hatcheries in Glenwood, Leadville, and Waldon could produce in a year. The Governor also stated that the facility would be finished in 1954.

House Bill 21 was introduced to the Colorado State House by Representative John Vonderhoof to approve \$420,000 for the State and Game and Fish Commission to build a trout rearing facility up Rifle Creek. The facility would be the largest and most modern in the United States and would produce 200 tons of trout annually which would be over a million trout legal limit size. The bill included \$300,000 for startup cost of the Rifle Creek rearing unit. The bill passed and was sent to Governor Thorton for approval on February 4th, 1954, which he signed.

Now that the project was funded the Commission contacted Damon Runyan and Associates who were providing them with architectural and engineering services to come up with the plans for the facility. Damon Runyan's estimate was \$500,000.00. The Commission directed them to go out for bids on the facility beginning on March 1, 1954, with the bid opening to be on April 1, 1954. The bid process was delayed, and it was not until March 11, 1954 that the Colorado State Fish and Game Commission approved the plans from Damon Runyan which were sent to the State Planning Commission for approval. The plans were approved and on March 18, 1954 the State Purchasing agent was to have the plans available for bidders by March 12, 1954. The bids were opened at the Colorado State Capital on April 5, 1954.

The low bidder was Gardner Construction from Glenwood Springs and their bid came in at \$925,000.00 which was \$225,000.00 higher than the revised estimate by Damon Runyan of \$700,000.00. The Colorado State Fish and Game requested that the plans be reviewed to determine if any changes could be made to lower the cost. After the review it was decided that funds could be transferred from other projects and Dick Lyttle president of the Colorado Fish and Game awarded the contract to Gardner Construction for \$956,000.00. The headlines of the Rifle Telegram on April 22, 1954 read: "FISH HATCHERY CONSTRUCTION STARTS SOON". George Steele was not waiting around. He began the site clean-up and preparation that week. Finally, his dream of the world's largest trout fish hatchery was underway.

The contract included:

1. The huge hatchery
2. A large Storage Garage
3. A Garage Maintenance building
4. Three Modern Homes
5. Ponds
6. Raceways
7. Dams
8. A Bridge
9. A pipe line three foot in diameter
10. A new sewage disposal system with a settling basin

Colorado Game and Fish President Lyttle stated that the water coming out of the hatchery would be completely pure when it returned to Rifle Creek after being treated. Lyttle also stated that the contract with Gardner Construction had a ten-month life and included penalty provision if the work was not completed in that time frame. He also said that the hatchery unit would be a tremendous boost to the economy of Rifle by providing an estimated ten thousand visitors a year who would visit the operations. The facility would also provide ten to fifteen permanent employees and other temporary jobs.

The construction required enormous amounts of concrete, as much as three times the amount used to construct the bridge over the Colorado River in Glenwood Springs - just recently replaced. Gardner Construction announced that they would build a concrete batch plant at the site and use the local gravel to product the needed concrete. Gardner Construction called the project the million-dollar hatchery.

Another construction problem was that the ground was not solid and so the buildings and houses would have to be built on piers greatly increasing the cost of construction of these facilities. The State Highway ended at the Vanadium Mines so two miles of new highway had to be constructed to the site, this was an additional cost of some \$30,000.00 which came out of the highway department budget. As in many construction projects of the day, the hatchery project was not exempt from construction accidents. Just days prior to the first shipment of fish to the site on September 9, 1954 a Gardner Construction employee Virgil Wells of Glenwood Springs was killed at the site when a wooden panel used in the concrete forming was being lifted by a crane and the rigging broke loose and the panel fell hitting him on the head. He was survived by his wife and three children. It is not known what benefits the family received.

The hatchery was ready for its first fish by September 14, 1954. These arrived according to George Steel from the hatchery in Dolores Colorado and were 100,000 fingerlings that were placed in the raceways. These would be followed up by 900,000 more in a few weeks. By January 6, 1955 there were 1,100,000 trout being raised in the Rifle Creek Hatchery. On January 20, 1955 the hatchery was officially accepted by the Colorado Game and Fish Commission and payment of \$966,000.00 was made to Gardner Construction of Glenwood Springs for the first phase. The commission announced that the second phase of construction was expected to cost from \$660,000 to \$750,000 and the funds would be raised by an increase in fishing license fees. The commission already owned the land for the second phase which had been approved by the 39th legislature and signed by the governor.

The project was not without controversy. The cost of the three houses was brought up in the legislature and seventeen of the members traveled to Rifle to see the homes and determine if the cost was appropriate. The reason given for the cost was the pier foundation system that had to be built to support the homes. The legislature representatives suggested that perhaps the homes could be turned into duplexes in order to provide more housing. Also, at issue was the water quality. Fred Simon Vice President of the Silt Mesa water district had water users who stated that they had used the ditch water for drinking in their homes and now they did not feel the water was safe to drink and were considering a law suit against the State. A local Rifle Telegram reporter interviewed the parties that had been drinking the ditch water and agreed that the water did not appear to be of the quality for drinking. He also refused to drink the ditch water. The director of the Colorado State Game and Fish commission continued to make the claim that the water leaving the facility was cleaner than the stream water when it entered the facility and he had the data to back it up, but he did not recommend anyone to use it as drinking water.

The official dedication of the Rifle Creek Fish Hatchery was held on May 29, 1955 and included Governor Ed Johnson along with other officials including Director Thomas Kimball and the member of the board of the Colorado Game and Fish Commission. Members of the media were invited in hopes to get the word out that the hatchery facility was a worthwhile tourist facility. The Rifle Chamber of Commerce held a fish fry at Rifle Mountain Park with fish provided by local fisherman. Mayor Jack Goodrich and chamber president Tom Mason were present along with some four hundred and fifty others. In the dedication speech Director Tom Kimball praised the new hatchery superintendent Kenneth Stead for having done an outstanding job of getting the facility ready to produce over a million catchable trout. He also stated that once the second phase was built the number of trout produced would double.

A lot has changed in Rifle since 1955. We no longer have an Oil Shale facility, a Vanadium mine and mill, but thanks to George Steele we still have the fish hatchery. In a recent interview hatchery

Director Capwell stated that the facility currently produces around 700,000 catchable trout per year, so it appears that the second phase was never built even with the fishing license rate increase. For those of you reading this that do not know where the hatchery is located, it is located at 11466 State Highway 325, just north of Rifle Falls State Park. Rifle Falls Fish Hatchery is one of nineteen hatcheries in the state dedicated to improving fish populations in order to enhance angling opportunities and contribute to native species recovery efforts. The Rifle hatchery is the largest state-owned and operated trout production hatchery in Colorado and produces rainbow, cutthroat, brook, and brown trout. The fish hatchery is open 8 am - 4 pm year-round, and includes a Visitor Center and viewing room, "Feed the Fish" food dispensers (requires quarters), and a fishing pond for kids. Guided tours are available during the summer months. The Riparian Zone is just south of the Fish Hatchery and is a unique cascading waterfall with lush riparian grasses. A short trail leads across the cascades and along the other side. A dirt road can be hiked further south to connect to Rifle Falls State Park. The Rifle Falls Fish Hatchery is one of the "Big Five" tourist attractions in the Rifle Colorado area. The hatchery along with Rifle Falls State Park, Rifle Mountain Park and Ice caves, Rifle (Eye of the Ute Arch), I think it needs its own name, and Rife Heritage Center Museum make up the balance of the five tourist attractions. Have you visited all the Big Five?

George Steele was able to think out of the box beyond his normal job and since 1955 his thinking has brought hundreds of thousands of tourists to Rifle to see, at the time, the World's Largest Trout Fish Hatchery. We do not honor him in any way. No monument was built, nor a small plaque mounted -- very few residents know his name. Perhaps he would have wanted it that way, we don't know. Who among you reading this will think out of the box and perhaps develop Johnny Scalzo's dream of having the world's largest rifle, or perhaps a Rifle River Walk? All that is needed is some creative thinking and the will to see it through.



Rifle Falls Fish Hatchery Today

Post Script:

Help Support the Rifle Heritage Center with your firearm donation! Get dollar-for-dollar for your firearms worth this tax season. And help put Rifle on the map with the museum's goal of housing the most rifles in the country!



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