

- The museum is located at 337 East Ave in Rifle.
- The phone number is 970-625-4862.
- The website is www.RifleHeritageCenter.
- You can join us on Facebook .

Look for our opening in May 2022!

Come see the new and improved displays!

Get that new t-shirt you've been wanting!

If you are interested in history, we have a place for you!

Rifle Heritage Center

VOLUME 1, ISSUE 1

FEBRUARY 2022

Down and Dirty Ditches

By George Pearson

There is a historic event that took place on January 1st (read on to find out what it was) concerning the Colorado River so I decided this newsletter would be about our local water supplies and how they are part of our local historic heritage.

The first people to use irrigation water from streams in our area were Native Americans such as the Fremont culture who diverted the water to irrigate crops of corn, beans, and squash. In some areas of the southwest these ditches can still be seen. Flooding throughout the years has covered over many of these ditches so they are not able to be seen in our area. When the Spanish came in 1776, they found the Ute tribe in our area. The Utes were a nomadic horse people that lived on wild game and the root of the Yampa plant. The fields and irrigation of the Fremont Culture were long gone. In the 1876 the Hayden survey of the Grand River

We put the museum to bed for the winter last November after a good year although again we were unable to accomplish our goal of having heat in the building. That ne-

cessitated our closure during the cold season. It was a good year for the museum with admissions being steady, good sales in the gift shop and a very successful

and its tributaries only mentioned Divide Creek as an important tributary to the Grand (which later became the Colorado) River. In 1882 the former Ute Reservation was opened for settlement, and they brought the first agriculture in the area for over three hundred years. Orchards, gardens, and fields were soon developed and in this high dry climate the need for irrigation was quickly determined. The Colorado was wild and untamed and attempts to divert it for irrigation were unsuccessful, so tributaries were the solution. Creeks such as Rifle, Beaver, Elk, Divide, and Spruce soon became sources for irrigation and in the case of Beaver Creek drinking water.

With experience gained from the front range and the San Luis valley, irrigation ditches were plotted out to follow contours and allow for the proper flow of water. If the grade was too steep, the water

washed out the ditch; if the grade was too shallow the water would not flow to the fields. The first "ditches" brought about the need for regulations for use. This brought about our first water laws which might end up with both parties in water court. In the early days many disputes ended in hot tempers, and in some cases shootings. Ditch companies were organized and regulatory systems using priority usage and measurement were established by the courts and enforced by the law.

A ditch has a headgate which is the place on the creek where the water for the ditch was removed from the creek. At first these headgates were log or earthen dams but were later replaced with more substantial concrete or masonry structures with gates that could be opened when water was available and closed when the water needs to go on downstream.

Voices in the Dark event at Halloween.

Thanks to everyone that volunteered this year because truly the museum cannot make it without you.

RHC Board



Down and Dirty Ditches continued

In Colorado water rights most often go with property ownership. Many of these water rights in our area date to the 1880's. There are hundreds of named ditches in our area of western Colorado and many of those names are still in use. If a landowner had water rights, the state of the headgate is often a topic of conversation over the supper table!

The headgate is the first step in establishing a ditch and the second is the measuring device. The measuring device is often called a weir. The measuring device provides for the measurement of the amount of water flowing thru the device in cubic feet per second. A cubic foot of water is 7.48 gallons of water, so if your water right is 10 cubic foot per second you are receiving 74.48 gallons of water ever second or 4468.80 gallons a minute. To give you some perspective- the Colorado River at the junction of the Roaring Fork and the Colorado flows at an average rate of 2100 cubic feet per second, the Columbia River in Washington flows on average 265,000 cubic feet per second, and the Mississippi flows at an average of 593,000 cubic feet per second! Most ditch rights are in tenths of a cubic ft. By having a measuring device on the ditch, the ditch rider (an integral person in the ditch system) can set the proper amount at the head gate so that all water users get the amount their land is

allocated.

When the Colorado River Project was approved by Congress, the Bureau of Reclamation set out to measure the flow of the Colorado River and found that it was the most widely varying river from year to year that it had ever measured. This variation has cumulated in the historic event that occurred on January 1st with Colorado River water. For the first time ever, the Bureau of Reclamation has placed a "call" on the lower Colorado River (as of August 16, 2021). This "call out" or removal of water user's rights is the result of a multiyear drought in the Colorado River drainage basin. Hundreds of thousands of cubic feet of water will no longer be delivered to areas such as Phoenix, Tucson, and Las Vegas. The "never say never" event is intended to stabilize the water levels on Lake Powell and Lake Mead. So far, this call has not affected our local area, but it is possible that if the drought continues water rights out of the Colorado

could be "called out" one of which could include the Silt Project.

The Colorado River is the most regulated river ever, with every single drop of water being allocated to someone. Everyone seemed to know this was coming, but no one seemed to believe it really would happen.

If you have creek water, be thankful and use it wisely. Our forefathers and early settlers knew the value of the water and went to the trouble of establishing a user system that still survives today. Spring is arriving so get out there and check that weir and head gate, be sure it not full of debris, and is ready for use next spring.

Have a great rest of the winter. See you in May.

George