

RIFLE'S BLAST FROM THE PAST

RIFLE HERITAGE CENTER

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As I write this, we finally got a good rain last night. It really brings to mind this story of the construction on the Rifle Gap Dam and the Silt Irrigation project. The importance of these facilities to our area is often not recognized but they have played a major role in the economic life of our community. We all know the dams exist but the why and how they came about is a part of our local history. I hope you enjoy reading about the construction and realize that local people were involved in the hauling of the dam fill and other parts of the construction.

George Pearson, Newsletter Editor

The first organized irrigation works in the Rifle/Silt area was the formation of Grass Valley Land and Water Corporation which was formed in 1877. This corporation constructed Grass Valley Reservoir at Harvey Gap in 1894. This reservoir washed out in April of 1895 causing extensive damage to crop land and washing out the railroad. Unable to fund a new dam, the corporation failed. Another early irrigation project was started in 1890 and was known as the Cactus Valley Ditch. It was completed in 1898 and served until the 1960's. In 1903 the Farmers Irrigation Company was started up to replace the Grass Valley Reservoir dam which they did with a dam that formed a reservoir 28 feet deep. In 1907 Antlers Orchard and Development Company expanded the reservoir to provide more water for local farms.

The Colorado River Compact formed in 1922 forced a study of the Colorado River by the Colorado River Commission, the Bureau of Reclamation, and other federal agencies to determine how to provide the water agreed upon in the Compact. In 1936 the Bureau of Reclamation started investigations and studies into the development of the "Silt Project". In 1946 a report on the Colorado River described a plan for the Silt Project, but it was not until 1951 that a supplement to the 1950 report on the Colorado River Storage Project described the Silt Project.



Construction of the dam showing the tunnel construction

This study was presented to Congress in 1950. Congress authorized revised studies in 1951 and 1953. These studies were made but it was not until President Eisenhower sent a letter in March of 1954 to the Secretary of Agriculture and the Secretary of the Interior requesting that the benefits of the Colorado River Storage Project be determined that action was taken up by Congress that brought about a bill that was passed into law in 1956. This is called the Colorado River Storage Project. Dams such as Glen Canyon, Flaming Gorge, Navajo, Marrow Point, Crystal, and Blue Mesa were established by the project along with the locally approved project called the Silt Project.



Colorado River Storage Project Map

The Silt Project considered providing irrigation water for some 7,067 acres of land. In order to do this, the Project proposed the construction of Rifle Gap Dam and Reservoir on Rifle Creek, the Silt Pumping plant on the Colorado River, and the continued use of Harvey Gap Reservoir. The total project would be able to deliver approximately 11,730-acre feet of water per year. The areas served by the project were then known as Harvey Mesa, Dry Elk Valley, and Davie Mesa. The study is 166 pages long and goes into great length to provide the economic value of the water. The study was completed by the USDA office in Salt Lake City and was published in 1961.

The Bureau of Reclamation started the Silt Project in March of 1964 with the appointment of Frank. D. Carlson as the project engineer. Carlson established the first construction office at Anvil Points in house number 17. From there he sent out invitations to bid on the field office and laboratory. Bid was opened on April 28th of 1964 and was awarded on May 8, 1964 to Lee Johnson Construction Company. The main office for the Project was moved on May 4, 1964 to 125 West Third Street in Rifle, CO. Two days later bids invitations were put out to construct the Rifle Creek Dam and relocate Highway 13. Lee Johnson Construction Company completed the field office and laboratory on October 12, 1964. It was built on the dam site and was a 24 X 60 metal building complete with plumbing, heating, and electrical.

On June 23, 1964 bids were opened for the dam and road construction and on August 1, 1964 a contract was awarded to Northwest Engineering Company who was told to proceed on August 12, 1964. A twenty-five man crew began removing vegetation and other unsuitable materials from the dam embankment area; East Rifle Creek was diverted to into West Rifle Creek and in October the dam embankment was started. Work stopped in November of 1964 due to winter weather.

In 1965 additional contracts were bid and awarded. Western States Construction Company won the bid in February to construct the Silt Pump Canal. In April Crown Construction Company of Hot Springs, South Dakota was awarded the contract for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Davie Ditch. In September Lee Johnson Construction was awarded in the contract for the construction of the Dry Elk Valley Lateral and rehabilitation of the Grass Valley Canal. Work continued on the dam and pumping station and by January of 1966 the first of the concrete for the Rifle Gap Dam Intake Structure was put in place.

The work was not without its problems. In 1966 rock slides closed the highway and an additional 110,000 Cubic yards of dirt and rock had to be removed to repair the highway. Additional contracts were awarded in 1966 in August. The National Park Service awarded GMCO Corporation of Grand Junction Colorado the contract to build the boat ramp. In December Lee Johnson Construction was awarded the contract to construct the gauging stations on Rifle Creek. By June of 1966 the project was at the point that Director of the Upper Colorado Region Reclamation notified the Silt Water Conservation District that water would be available for use for the 1968 irrigation season.

The Silt Water Conservation District held a dedication ceremony on September 8, 1967. A barbeque lunch was held and speakers included Senator Gordon Allott, Representative Wayne Aspinall, Governor Edward Johnson, and the President of the Silt Water Conservation District, M. Ryden. The operations of the Project were turned over to the Silt Water Conservation District on January 1, 1968. In June of 1963 prior to the construction of the project, a re-payment agreement between the Conservation District and the Bureau of Reclamation had been established. The Conservation District takes in approximately eighty-seven square miles of land in the Colorado River Valley of western Colorado. There is no industrial or municipal use of the water from the project.

The Rifle Gap Dam is an earth filled dam and is 157 feet tall and 1450 feet long and took 1,768,000 cubic yards of fill to construct. When full the Rifle Gap Reservoir covers 360 acres of the surface area and hold 13,602 acre feet of water. The drainage area behind the Rifle Gap Dam is 136 square miles and takes in the East, West & Middle Fork of Rifle Creek. The dam has two high pressure gates that control the release of the water into the outlet works that include concrete tunnels to release irrigation water into the Davie Ditch. The dam was also constructed with a concrete spill way and chute to release water when the dam is over full.

The Silt Pumping Station has the capacity to pump thirty-six cubic feet per second of water from the Colorado River into the Silt Pump Canal. The Canal is 7.6 miles long and provides irrigation water for the lower portion of the Harvey Mesa.

The field office and lab building were moved from the dam location to Silt, Colorado for use by the Conservation District.

After completion of the dam the National Park Service and the Bureau of Reclamation contacted the State of Colorado Department of Game, Fish and Parks and worked with them to create the Rifle Gap State Park. It was created to provide to provide recreational use of the lake created by the dam in 1967. The park contains 1,341 acres of ground and is operated by the State of Colorado Division of Parks. The historic community of Austin was located from the junction of East and West Rifle Creek. The Austin school house was moved during the construction and was located across Highway 13 from the Rifle Creek Golf Course and became the first location for the Rifle Creek Museum. Once the museum was moved to the old Rifle City Hall, the school house was moved to the Silt Historical Park and is still in use at the park as the main meeting hall.

The dam has withstood two underground atomic bomb blasts in the area, the first at Rulison and the second at Fawn Creek near Rio Blanco Colorado. Fifty-one years later the dams and irrigation projects still provide recreation and irrigation for the Rifle and Silt areas.



Rifle Gap Reservoir looking towards the gap and the dam.



Harvey Gap Reservoir looking across from the swim beach