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**CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/CHRIS
MCLEAN**

**The Bessemer Ditch snakes
its way toward the city as
Pueblo Dam stands sentry.**

DITCH of destiny

The Bessemer helped Pueblo develop, grow

**By MARGIE WOOD
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

The Bessemer Ditch winds through Pueblo's South Side and onto the farms and ranches east of the city, carrying life-giving water to the fields. It also carries fascinating links to Pueblo's earliest days, when a strapping steel town, and the farms to feed it, came to life alongside the Arkansas River.

Most of the early records of the ditch were swept away in the devastating flood of 1921, but it is known the ditch was incorporated in May 1888 with Gen. William Palmer's Colorado Coal and Iron Co. holding 10,000 of 16,000 shares.

Palmer was developing both a steel mill to build rails for his Denver & Rio Grande Railroad and the town of South Pueblo, and the ditch apparently was envisioned to supply water to both enterprises. Colorado Coal & Iron may have started the ditch before the formal incorporation; the water rights of the ditch carry appropriation dates stretching back to 1861 and its largest right for 322 cubic per second has a May 1887 date.

The board issued \$200,000 in bonds, and contracts were let for engineering

services and construction of the ditch in 1888. But by July 1889 the chief engineer, one Joseph Simons of New York, was castigated and then fired for buying shoddy but overpriced materials, according to a history compiled by M.F. Hockemeyer in the Pueblo Historical Society's Lore publication in June 1984.

The consulting engineer was J.S. Greene, who also was the state engineer at the time, and he was credited with designing and building the redwood siphon under the St. Charles River, which at 3,000 feet was said to be the longest siphon in the United States.

In 1894, Colorado Coal & Iron went into receivership and a New York company acquired all its water rights and irrigated land. Palmer's company was merged into Colorado Fuel Co., giving rise to the Colorado Fuel & Iron Corp.

CF&I eventually built a different canal, the Minnequa Canal, to supply the steel mills. The ditch company incorporated again, this time as the Bessemer Irrigating Ditch Co., "stating as its purpose the acquisition of all rights, franchises, laterals and other property lately owned by Bessemer Ditch Co., which had been foreclosed by unnamed holders of the first mortgage bonds," according to Hockemeyer's history.

Of the original board, only W. L. Graham and James B. Orman remained with the company. Other new board members were O.M. Ladd, C.K. McHarg, Henry Page and Robert Grant, who was vice president of a bank in Pueblo and owner of 2,700 acres of land 14 miles east of Pueblo.

Colorado Coal & Iron's land holdings, said to extend 20 miles east of Pueblo, went on the market and Irrigation Era magazine (quoted by Hockemeyer) said the Bessemer Ditch was to become property of the farmers when all the water rights were sold.

The ditch, when completed, stretched 43 miles on the south side of the Arkansas, from its headgate west of Pueblo to the Huerfano River near Boone, where it empties.



**CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/CHRIS
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**Water flows from a pipe
into an irrigation ditch on
South Road near 36th
Lane.**

The ditch, like most of Pueblo, was devastated by flooding on the Arkansas and Fountain Creek June 3-5, 1921. Besides the massive damage to the ditch, its office in a building at South Union and B Street was flooded and its records, including all the engineering sketches and plans, were destroyed. But on June 9, less than a week after the flood, the board met to authorize its superintendent to hire crews to rebuild.

More than 75 horse teams with slips were hired, as well as a clamshell excavator and a steam shovel, and the board's goal was to turn water back into the ditch by July 15. The going rate for unskilled labor was 43 cents an hour, or for a team of horses and driver, 80 cents an hour.

J.N. Ritchie, who was superintendent at the time of the flood, remained in the job until he died on duty in 1932, but he was a short-timer compared to two of his successors. A.N. Dallimore was superintendent of the ditch from 1935 to 1974, and William Mullen served from 1974 to 2003. Michael Hill is the superintendent now.

By 1960, the ditch was crossed by 32 bridges in Pueblo, some footbridges and some carrying cars. It is used to irrigate yards and gardens in the West Park area west of City Park, as well as the park itself and Elmwood Golf Course, then wanders through the city, past the steel mill and through a pipe over Salt Creek, to the St. Charles Mesa. It still irrigates about 20,000 acres at the rate of an 1 acre per share, and has about 900 shareholders and 200 miles of laterals

supplying farms in the system. Since 1964, the Bessemer has been a principal source of water for the St. Charles Mesa Water District, formed in that year to replace cisterns that many area residents used for drinking water in their homes. Now the district serves 11,000 people, many in subdivisions that have grown on the Mesa.

David Simpson, manager of the water district, said Bessemer Ditch water amounts to about 50 percent of the district's supply to customers, and it also supplies four farms that the district owns. "We're keeping them in ag as long as we can, but if we ever had to pull that water into the system our water would probably be about 70 percent from the Bessemer," Simpson said.

The building of the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project and Pueblo Dam in the 1970s brought a new era - and it brought both good news and bad news for the Bessemer.

The headgate that had served for almost a century was inundated by Lake Pueblo, so a new headgate was built in the dam itself. Both shareholders and the city neighbors of the ditch soon noticed a serious seepage problem. It turned out that the new headgate wasn't letting the river's natural silt into the ditch along with the water. Without the silt to line the ditch, it flooded basements in town and lost as much as 40 percent of its water before it got to the shareholders on the Mesa.



Bert Hartman

In 1980 the federal government appropriated \$1.5 million to line about 8,000 feet of the ditch with Gunite, a concrete product, and eventually the whole channel through town was lined.

The other by-product of the Fry-Ark Project was good news for the shareholders. Lake Pueblo provided room for Bessemer and other Arkansas Valley farm ditches

to store water over the winter, rather than either trying to irrigate in the winter or let the water go on by.

Bessemer always had turned its water off in the winter to build and maintain bridges in Pueblo, according to longtime shareholder Bert Hartman. So even though Bessemer members didn't get as much water under the winter storage program as they had let go in the past, they still enjoyed the benefit of more water in the growing season.

In the mid-1980s, rumors flew that developers in Colorado Springs and Aurora were trying to buy Bessemer ditch water, and there were numerous meetings and debates over the idea. But shareholders reportedly were holding out for \$6,000 a share, and no offers came in for that much.

In the years since, several ditches in the Arkansas Valley have sold or leased water to Front Range cities, and there are always questions whether the Bessemer might be next.

Bert Hartman, whose family settled on South Road and 36th Lane more than a century ago, said he thinks one day farming will disappear from this area. Farming is a "non-earning asset" these days, he said. "If business is here, the water will stay here. If it isn't, the water will leave."

Doug Wiley, whose family has farmed and ranched on the last headgate of the Bessemer for many years, feels the same pressures of corporate farms and foreign food imports, but maintains the hope that specialty farming will still find a market.

"If we care about the future, we will maintain some form of irrigated agriculture in this valley," he said. "This generation will be judged by the way we deal with this issue."

ON THE NET:

Map: <http://www.lavwcd.org/maps/bessemer.htm>

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CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/JOHN JAQUES

Doug Wiley's family has been using the Bessemer Ditch for generations.

Farms along ditch see changes

**By MARGIE WOOD
THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN**

Bert Hartman, chairman of the Bessemer Ditch board, has lived all his life along the canal. "I started working for my father when I was about 10 years old, so I've been working more than 60 years," he said. He made his living primarily in cattle-feeding, but the family business now is doing more grazing and less feedlot operation.

Contemplating the construction of the ditch in the 19th century, he said, "There were some miraculous things farmers were able to do with just their horses and the little bit of equipment they had. The ditch still operates pretty well - I guess we have our ancestors to thank for that, though of course they make improvements every winter."

Hartman has toiled on the Bessemer board and through the Arkansas Valley Ditch Association to protect farmers' water rights, and he is outspoken in his opinion that water is a property right.

"Our water is an asset, and if we can't sell it, that's taking a property right away," he said. "I will never do anything to take another person's property right and I expect other people to allow me to do the same."

Irrigating with river water is far more costly than other forms of agriculture, he noted, and he believes government from the local to the national level hampers local farmers while it encourages food imports from countries that don't have the same level of government regulation.

"I think eventually farming will be gone (from this area.) I don't like to see all our money go to those other places, but we're in a world market, and it's too hard to compete," he said.

* * *

Doug Wiley, who represents the fourth generation of his family to work the land at the end of the Bessemer Ditch near Boone, says his life has been defined by the ditch.

"We wouldn't have the farmers we have without that ditch," he said. "We have the best soil and the best farmers and the best water. And Pueblo wouldn't be what it is without the Bessemer - those steelworkers had to eat before they could turn a wheel."

Wiley grows organic vegetables and raises cattle and pigs together on irrigated pasture. His dad, Bob Wiley Jr., is a retired dairyman and remains a pillar of the community and the Colorado Farm Bureau, "and he still gives me a lot of good advice," Doug said.

At 44, he is among the younger farmers on the land, but he takes a long view both of the meaning of irrigated agriculture and the perils of farming in the modern era.

"Small farmers are under a lot of pressure from overseas markets," he said. "Commodity crops probably are not a wise use of this water. But I think high value crops - vegetables like the Mira Sol chiles and the kind of specialty farming that I do - are the only things that will let a farmer make a living. The success of that depends on public support. People have to pay attention to what they're buying and where it comes from."

He said the irrigation ditches in the Arkansas Valley have created an "oasis effect," putting alluvial water in the ground to keep the river from drying up completely as it did in dry years before the ditches came to be.

"And under the Bessemer, we have real good quality of water, not running into the marine shale like some of the ditches down the valley. You can condemn some irrigation as wasteful and not good for the river, but you need to be selective," he said.

Will agriculture persist along the Bessemer, in the face of urban demands for water and a bad farm economy?

"I started to say I wouldn't bet on it," Wiley said. "But I guess I am betting on it. My whole investment is in farming, and it all depends on water coming down that ditch like it has for 140 years."



Lee Simpson

* * *

For Lee Simpson and his son David, the family business isn't farming, but water. Lee was a founder and first manager of the St. Charles Mesa Water District, and Dave moved into that office when his dad retired.

The water district holds almost 10 percent of the shares in the Bessemer Ditch, and relies on the ditch to carry its water supply from March to November. When the ditch is shut down for the winter storage period, the district's water is diverted from the Arkansas River near Runyon Field.

Lee Simpson said his steelworker dad moved the family to the Mesa in 1937, when Lee was in grade school. Most people in the area had cisterns for their homes, buying drinking water that was hauled in; and some had good wells, he said. And some people rigged up systems of cisterns and filters that enabled them to drink water from their ditch shares.

When the water district was formed in 1964, "we bought water from a guy who had a well just about 600 feet from the district office on South Road, so our water was pretty much like the water we were used to from the cisterns," Simpson said. As the district acquired Bessemer Ditch shares, it ran the water through a sand filter and into the ground to recharge wells.

"That water turned into my life's work," said Simpson, who is a longtime board member of the Southeastern Colorado Water Conservancy District and a board

member of the Bessemer Ditch. "We're pretty concerned about rumors of people wanting to buy the ditch. Water is a property right, but we have to be vigilant to make sure if some people do sell, the remaining people will still get the quality and quantity of water they have now.

"If the water's sold off this area, it will change the Mesa and the Vineland area forever."

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