

# Gone into history

## Early Dolores Valley once home to several bustling communities

**B**ig Bend was small, never more than a hundred people. It's not clear exactly how many people lived there because it wasn't counted in the census of either 1880 or 1890, even though it existed both of those years.

Even so, the tiny community was at a geographically and historically important location: the Big Bend of the Dolores River in southwestern Colorado — where the Dolores makes a sweeping turn from flowing primarily southwest to almost due north.

Natives visited the Big Bend of the Dolores regularly over the centuries, including the Utes who found good pasturage for their horses there. Ancient people built rock shelters and cliff dwellings in the nearby hills, and later visitors found the area littered with broken pots and other artifacts.

Spanish explorer Juan Rivera probably camped in a meadow at Big Bend in July 1765. Fathers Dominguez and Escalante used the same spot 11 years later, on their famed 1776 expedition through Colorado, Utah, Arizona and New Mexico.

Rivera referred to the Dolores River as the Rio de los Dolores in his 1765 journal, although it's not clear why he attached that name to it. Father Silvestre Vélez de Escalante expanded on the name in his journal from 1776, calling it El Rio de Nuestra Señora de Dolores — the River of Our Lady of Sorrows, apparently in reference to the Seven Sorrows of Mary.

The Big Bend of the Dolores was also an important camping spot for early 19th century merchants utilizing the southern branch of what became the Old Spanish Trail. Several U.S. military expeditions also stopped there in the mid-19th century.

A century before the first American settlers began to arrive, Escalante proclaimed the area around Big Bend ideal for settlers. "Here there is everything that a good settlement needs for its establishment and maintenance," he wrote on Aug. 13, 1876, "irrigable lands, pasturage, timber and firewood."

Eight decades later, members of the U.S. Army's Macomb expedition camped at Big Bend, and geologist John S. Newberry wrote: "The bottom-lands are nearly level, half a mile wide, and very fertile, covered with fine grass, with groves of cottonwood and willow, and scattered trees of yellow pine."

The Macomb expedition, officially called the San Juan Exploring Expedition, conducted its field work in 1859, but the report of the expedition wasn't published until 1876. So it's unlikely the first ranchers who settled in the area, beginning around 1877, had read the report. But they also found the valley around Big Bend attractive, with plenty of grass and water for irrigation.

One of the earliest written accounts from a resident of the area comes from the journal of Mrs. S.O. Morton, who moved to Big Bend in 1880 with her husband, George. They had come from Costilla County and planned to start a store. But Mrs. Morton wasn't impressed.

"To me it did not look like a favorable location for a home," she wrote. "I thought too of our children needing school privileges, the inconvenience of building and no railroad. It seemed to me to be the jumping off place."

Although she and her hus-



FROM THE OFFICIAL REPORT OF THE 1859 MACOMB EXPEDITION, VIA GOOGLE BOOKS

The Big Bend of the Dolores River as it appeared to Macomb expedition geologist J.S. Newberry in 1859.

band purchased 40 acres at Big Bend for their store and a small farm, their plans were put on hold by what Mrs. Morton described as Indian troubles.

The Ute Indians, who were about to be removed to reser-

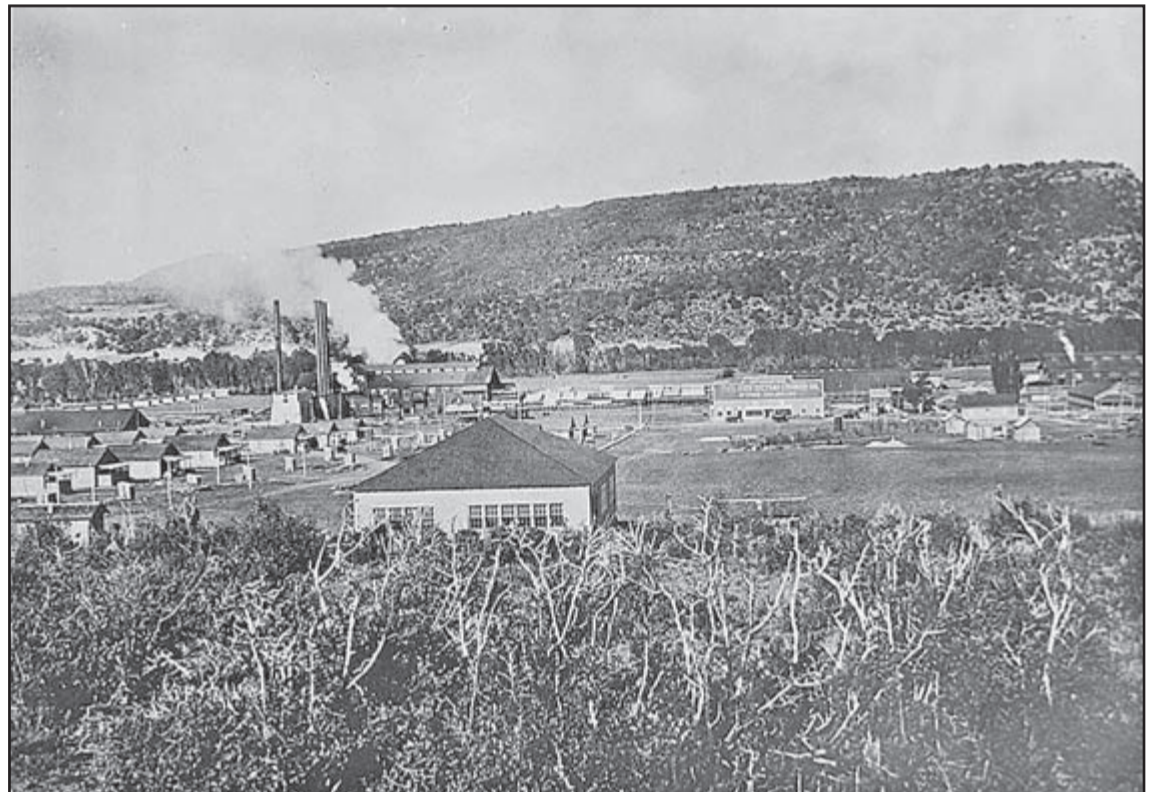
ervations in Utah or small ones in southwestern Colorado, weren't happy about it. A small group of Utes allegedly began stealing some of the ranchers' horses and butchering

cattle in the Dolores River Valley. White settlers called for the Army at Fort Lewis to corral the Indians on their reservation.

Tensions rose and fell, but the Mortons and other settlers arrived permanently in 1882, and the town of Big Bend was firmly established.

But in June of 1885, the simmering discontent between white settlers and Utes boiled over in the Beaver Creek Massacre. Six Utes, including women and children, were killed by unidentified whites. Later, Utes killed a ranch owner and injured his wife in retaliation. There were fears of another major Indian uprising, but the commander of Fort Lewis worked hard to ease the fears of both whites and Utes. By early July, the crisis had subsided.

However, many settlers believed the Army response hadn't been forceful enough. One letter writer to a Durango newspaper urged shooting all Utes on site. A newspaper in Rico argued that it was right for the settlers to kill Ute women, arguing they were more bloodthirsty than the men. And it held up Col.



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The town of McPhee, Colorado, during its heyday. Sawmill is in the background.

John Chivington, leader of the slaughter at Sand Creek 20 years earlier, as a man to emulate.

Cooler heads prevailed, however, and life went on at Big Bend. There were three general stores by 1887, a saloon, a blacksmith and a stable. Eventually, there was a hotel and an irrigation office, as well.

But irrigation didn't bode well for Big Bend's future. A large canal and tunnel were constructed to take Dolores River water to the Montezuma Valley, where a new town called Cortez was being built. Farmers soon saw greater potential there than in the narrow valley at Big Bend.

The crushing blow for the town came in January 1892, when the Rio Grande Southern Railroad arrived in the new town of Dolores, several

miles away. Big Bend was soon abandoned.

The railroad prospered briefly with mine traffic from Rico, Ophir and Telluride. But the silver panic of 1893 significantly curtailed mining and cut the railroad's profits.

In 1924, another boom occurred in the Dolores River Valley. The New Mexico Lumber Co., acquired U.S. Forest Service rights to millions of board feet of timber, primarily yellow pine. The company built a sawmill and company town along the Dolores, a few miles downstream from Big Bend, but with easy access to the railroad.

The new community was called McPhee, after William McPhee, one of the owners of the lumber company. By 1926, the sawmill employed 350 people and the town's

population was estimated at 800.

In 1927, when operations at McPhee were at their peak, it was the largest sawmill operating in Colorado, and it produced more than half of the lumber in the state.

The Great Depression severely hurt the lumber mill, and it struggled in and out of bankruptcy with different owners through the 1930s. World War II demand for lumber re-energized the sawmill. But when the mill burned down in 1948, it wasn't rebuilt.

In the 1960s, McPhee Dam and Reservoir was included among major water projects in the Colorado River Basin. It was designed to supply irrigation water to Utes and to non-Indian farmers, and hydropower to the region.

The dam was completed in 1985, and water began flooding the locations where the communities of Big Bend and McPhee had once been located.

**Sources:** "Valley of the River of Sorrows: A Historical Overview of the Dolores River Valley," by Duane A. Smith, National Park Service, [www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online\\_books/rmr/river\\_of\\_sorrows/chap1](http://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/rmr/river_of_sorrows/chap1); "Living at Big Bend during the 1880s," by various authors, The Journal, <https://www.the-journal.com/articles/living-at-big-bend-during-the-1880s>; "Report of the Exploring Expedition from Santa Fe New Mexico to the Junction of the Grand and Green Rivers in 1859," by Capt. J.N. Macomb.

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The community of Big Bend, Colorado, as it appeared in the late 1880s.