

FIRST DRAFT

1909 water war erupted in Grand Valley's east end

Note: This is the first of two columns regarding the history of Palisade and Mesa County Irrigation Districts.

Whisky is for drinking, as the old dictum says, but water was definitely for fighting over in the east end of the Grand Valley in the summer of 1909.

Ditch riders were deputized, court injunctions were issued and defiant irrigators were arrested and fined.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

A special train carried hundreds of angry water users from Palisade and Clifton to the Mesa County Courthouse in late July. There they awaited a judge's decision on water issues for the Palisade Irrigation District, which operates the Price Ditch.

Irrigators in the east end of the district wanted their headgates left alone by ditch riders so they could use as much water as they wanted. But because of supply problems, that left irrigators in the west end of the district near Clifton without sufficient water for their orchards and crops.

Eventually, Palisade Irrigation District joined with its neighbor, Mesa County Irrigation District, in 1910 and 1911 to build a new diversion dam to make water delivery more dependable.

In less than a decade, that new system would be replaced by yet another dam and distribution system — one that still operates today.

Palisade Irrigation District holds some of the oldest water rights on the Colorado River, dating from 1890, when a man named Frank Burger filed for private water rights for what was then called the Mount Lincoln Ditch. Later, the company operated two canals.

The Mount Lincoln Ditch system went through several ownership changes until 1904. Then irrigators in the area formed Palisade Irrigation District and purchased all the land and what was known as Canal No. 1 from the company.

Two years later, another group of irrigators formed Mesa County Irrigation District and purchased the water and land associated with Canal No. 2, which is now called the Stubb Ditch. The two districts had separate small dams and ongoing difficulties with their water supplies.

The problems in the Price Ditch in 1909 actually stemmed from recurring high water in what was then called the Grand River. The excessive water washed out the riverbed where the Price Ditch diversion began, making it impossible for Palisade Irrigation District to meet its water demands simultaneously.

As a result, the district's board of directors and superintendent set up four sub-districts. Then they instructed ditch riders to begin rationing water, making it available to each sub-district every few days.

That meant closing headgates in the east end for several days at a time so that irrigators in the west end — as far as today's 29 Road — would also have water. But



Palisade Historical Society, Marie Tipping Archives, McClenaghan collection

Workers are building a diversion dam in 1910 that would serve Palisade and Mesa County irrigations districts. The dam was authorized after water disputes in 1909.

that didn't sit well with orchard growers in the east area.

"Growers in a Mass Meeting Protest: Orchardists Under Price Ditch Claim Water is not Equally Divided" read a July 17, 1909, headline in The Daily Sentinel. "New Ditch Rider Asked For."

The accompanying article said orchard owners demanded "that all headgates at the upper end of the valley be opened and that every grower under the big canal be awarded his full complement of water each day."

The same article said "the desired changes will probably be made at once."

But that wasn't the case.

By July 22, the irrigation district had obtained a temporary court injunction against some 50 east-end irrigators.

The Sentinel said the defendants had "defied the board, the superintendent, the ditch riders, refused to permit ditch riders ... to close the headgates near their ranches, but persisted in taking water ... as often as they wanted it and in whatever quantities they wanted."

Consequently, no water flowed to orchards in the west end of the district, and if that situation wasn't remedied quickly, the west-end orchards "will be ruined or irreparably damaged," the paper said.

On July 24, the newspaper reported that Dr. J.H. Divine, "one of the wealthiest and best known fruit growers of the Palisade end of the valley," was arrested by Mesa County Sheriff Charles Schrader on a charge of contempt of court after he reportedly violated the injunction.

Divine told the newspaper he and other growers had indeed refused to allow a ditch rider to close their headgates. But, he said, that was before they were served with notice of the injunction.

On the morning of July 27, the Sentinel said, "a special train left Palisade ... carrying about 200 fruit growers and other citizens" to Grand Junction. Another 100 people arrived by automobile "and vehicles of various kinds."

They were awaiting a decision from a county judge on whether the temporary injunction would be made permanent. However, about 10:30 that morning, the judge said the case had been dismissed and the injunction lifted.

"This leaves the Palisade Irrigation District just where it was before the temporary injunction was secured," the Sentinel



Palisade Historical Society, Marie Tipping Archives, McClenaghan collection

Overflow gates for the new diversion dam that were under construction in 1910.



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

Dan Crabree, manager of Palisade Irrigation District, stands near remnants of the old Palisade-Mesa County irrigation districts diversion dam, built in 1910 and 1911. This dam, near the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's fish ladder just east of Palisade, no longer functions.

added. "For this reason, many of the growers today were heard to express dissatisfaction over the dismissal of the case."

Meanwhile, the water fight continued. On Aug. 10, the Sentinel reported that J.E. Griffith and Guy Tilden, "two Palisade fruit growers, have been arrested on the charge of unlawfully interfering with the waters of the Palisade irrigation district."

A third man, August Hegg bloom, was arrested the next day on a similar charge. All three were found guilty of the charges and fined \$10 apiece, plus court costs.

The water war of 1909 seemed to evaporate soon afterward. By October, 1909, engineer Charles Vail had developed plans for construction of a single diversion dam across the Colorado River to serve both the Palisade and Mesa County irrigation districts.

In December, voters in Palisade Irrigation District approved bonds totaling \$88,000 to pay for their share of the work, and construction of the new dam began in January, 1910. But a severe winter delayed work on the project, and it wasn't completed until 1911.

Disputes with water users continued in the meantime. In March 1910, the ditch rider reported that 12 new headgates had been constructed on

the main canal, but only three of them had been approved by the board.

By the next year, even as the new dam and diversion system was being completed, both Palisade and Mesa County irrigation districts were negotiating with the U.S. Reclamation Bureau to participate in the planned Government Highline Canal. They hoped more dependable water supplies could be secured through the government project.

The two districts would remain separate water entities, but they would become part of the new irrigation system that helped transform much of the Grand Valley beginning in 1915.

Sources: *Historic editions of The Daily Sentinel through www.newspapers.com; "Chronicles of Palisade/Mesa County Irrigation District History," courtesy of Palisade Irrigation District; Resolutions and correspondence of the Palisade Irrigation District, 1909; interviews with Dan Crabree, manager Palisade Irrigation District and Dave Voorhees, manager Mesa County Irrigation District; "The History of Irrigation in Palisade and East Orchard Mesa, Colorado," by Palisade Historical Society.*

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Conservation dog searches for bees in the mountains

By LINDSEY TOOMER
Summit Daily

FRISCO — Jacqueline Staab found a way to combine her two passions in her conservation research efforts: bees and dogs.

Staab's dog Darwin was trained as a conservation detection dog to seek out bumblebees and their nests, and Staab said he's the only conservation dog in the country that specializes in bees. The research Staab and Darwin do together is for her master's in evolutionary ecology.

For the past four or five years, Staab has been coming to Summit County on her own to research bees, and this year is the first she's had Darwin along for the ride. The duo specializes in alpine bumblebees, making Summit County an attractive research destination.

"I couldn't imagine a better place to do research with Darwin," Staab said. "Alpine bumblebees are

also like a canary in the coal mine for climate change. ... By seeing how they're reacting out here, it can help us predict future movements and shifts."

While her research season is just kicking off, Staab and Darwin have already done surveys around Hoosier Pass and throughout parts of the White River National Forest.

"We're not seeing very many bumblebees, so we definitely have our work cut out for us," Staab said. "This is honestly the lowest number of bumblebees I've seen out here."

Bumblebees are opportunistic nesters, meaning they will nest anywhere they can. Staab said they like abandoned animal burrows, sheds, wood piles or large grass clumps.

Staab said until recently, most research has only been focused on their need for floral resources.

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