

Idea for water project goes back decades

Editor's note: In March 1981, Charles "Tommy" Thomson gave a program for the Pueblo County Historical Society on the history of the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project. Eleanor Fry, a long-time Pueblo Chieftain editor, summarized his program for the society's newsletter.

Thomson was then general manager of the Southeastern Colorado Water Conservancy District, a position he held until his death in 1994.

The Arkansas River was used for irrigation from the time the valley was settled in the 1840s, and the first water decrees were issued in the 1860s. By 1880 the water in the river had long since been overappropriated, and it was generally recognized that a decree dated later than 1876 wasn't worth having in a dry year.

On the other hand, during a season of heavy snowpack and sudden runoff, the rancher had a lot more water than he either wanted or needed, where he neither wanted nor needed it, and at a time when it was most unwelcome.

As early as the 1920s, ranchers on the Eastern Slope were discussing how to obtain Western Slope water decrees and bring the water over the Continental Divide for use in the Arkansas Valley. The question was how to get it here, not to mention how to finance such a project. The original plan was to bring over water from the Gunnison watershed. During the 1930s, those dry and dusty years, government agencies became interested in the prospects of such a diversion project to alleviate some of the drought conditions in Southeastern Colorado.

In December 1943, a number of Arkansas Valley residents met at La Junta. This resulted in formation of the Water Development Association of Southeastern Colorado, including 12 counties, in 1946.

In the early 1950s the sponsors of the project got their act together and the bill first was introduced into the Congress in 1953. What a drama that was, and what frustration! Colorado's senators at that time were two trustworthy and politically savvy men, Eugene Milliken and Ed Johnson. The 3rd District congressman was J. Edgar Chenoweth of Trinidad and the 4th District was represented by Wayne Aspinall — both master politicians. Unfortunately (for the Eastern Slope) Aspinall felt it his duty to abide by wishes of his constituents on the Western Slope, and he opposed the Fryingpan-Arkansas Project.

Opposition was formidable. The California delegation, whose state obtains water from the Colorado River, and wanted more, naturally opposed the project. Rep. John Saylor of Pennsylvania was very vocal in his opposition; it is generally conceded that the was in the pocket of interested parties in Aspen. Most congressmen from the East and South seemed to be against the project. It was an uphill battle from the start.

Some of those who worked and worked and worked made numerous trips to Washington, D.C., to speak for the project and kept the momentum going here at home were Frank S. Hoag Jr., publisher of *The Pueblo Chieftain*; Charles Boustead, a Puebloan who became the first manager of the water conservancy district, and for whom a tunnel through the Divide is named; lawyer Charles Beise; Damian Ducy and Marc Williamson, president and manager of the Water Development Association; George Everett of Salida; Clyde J. Banta and John E. Beaty of Colorado Springs (where Banta was the Chamber of Commerce manager); and H.M. Christy of Pueblo.

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History highlights

1946 — Water Development Association of Southeastern Colorado forms.

1958 — Southeastern Colorado Water Conservancy District forms to administer the project.

August 1962 — Legislation is passed by Congress and signed by President John F. Kennedy.

November 1965 — Construction starts on Boustead Tunnel.

June 1969 — Boustead tunnel is "holed through."

July 1970 — Construction begins at Pueblo Dam.

January 1974 — Storage begins at Pueblo Reservoir.

July 1975 — Pueblo Reservoir opens for public recreation.

October 1981 — Mount Elbert power plant begins generating electricity.

July 1985 — First water goes through Fountain Valley Conduit.

September 1990 — Dedication of Pueblo fish hatchery marks completion of the last Fryingpan-Arkansas construction project.

Project

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The project gained the support of the Eisenhower administration. It was approved by the Senate and House Interior committees in 1954, but that's as far as it got. In August 1954, the water conservancy district was being formed to become the legal entity to handle the affairs of the project. In September it was learned that lobbying groups, mostly from California, had spent \$30,000 to defeat the project, and Ducey suggested a boycott of Southern California.

Aspinall also drew fire, and there was the comment, "He's wrecked most Western Colorado projects the same as he wrecked ours."

In 1955, the promoters came up with the golden frying pan gimmick, the frying pans to be carried on the backs of burros. The gold-painted frying pans sold for \$5 on up. There was even a lapel-size pan. This campaign brought in \$75,000, and some of those frying pans are still on display in Southeastern Colorado.

The proposal was introduced again in 1956, but failed to get onto the floor of the Congress. Fifteen of California's 30 delegates voted against the project. Craig Hosmer, a representative from Long Beach who had been particularly vocal in his opposition, for some reason did not vote.

In March 1957, a budget was adopted with costs of the project to be repaid over 60 years. In 1958, Aspinall promised amendments to make it more palatable to the Aspen area.

It was determined that much of the Western Slope opposition would be satisfied if a compensatory reservoir would be built near Ruedi. That reservoir would be a storage factor for both Western and Eastern Slope water projects. A storage decree was obtained for Ruedi Reservoir in 1959, and in 1960 the Western Slope put its support behind the Fryingpan project.

Meanwhile, Colorado had two new senators, John A. Carroll of Denver and Lamar's Gordon Allott.

The bill finally passed the House in June 1962 and the Senate in August. On Aug. 17, 1962, President John F. Kennedy stopped in Pueblo to celebrate the signing of the bill into law on the previous day.

"This project is an investment in the future of the country and the growth of the West," Kennedy said. "I hope this project will write a conservation record second to none."

Core drilling began on the site of the Ruedi Reservoir early in November 1962. The long-awaited project was under way.