High Mountain Lakes Heritage

From mountain tops to farm fields below, water has shaped the history of this area for thousands of years. Thirteen water-storing lakes or reservoirs in the High Uinta mountains, over six miles north of here, were built between 1916 and 1930 by settlers trying to make a living in the valleys. They created these small reservoirs to provide irrigation to farm fields during dry periods as part of a large irrigation network in the Uinta Basin.

From Many Lakes to One

Beginning in 2006, the dams that created these lakes were stabilized or made more reliable and safe as part of the Uinta Basin Replacement Project, a component of the Central Utah Project. Water that used to be held in these high elevation lakes is now stored downstream in the enlarged Big Sand Wash Reservoir, where the dam is easier to monitor and maintain. In the Lake Fork watershed, dams were stabilized at Brown Duck, Island, Kidney, and Clements Lakes. Stabilizing these historic dams restored lakes to their natural lake levels.

How was this Done?

The stabilization process required removing stop logs and rip-rap rock that lined the outlet portion of the historic dams. A V-shaped notch was cut into each dam creating a channel at each lake’s natural lake level. Old headgates were removed and historic outlets either removed or plugged.

Wilderness Designation

On July 1, 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt established the Ashley National Forest out of a section of the larger Uinta Forest Reserve, created in 1897. The Utah Wilderness Act of 1984 designated portions of the High Uintas (part of the Ashley National Forest) as Wilderness, including the watershed that houses these reservoirs.

The stabilization project resolved these concerns by moving water storage from the high mountain lakes to a reservoir outside of the wilderness area.

“We are prone to speak of the resources of this country as inexhaustible; this is not so.”

Theodore Roosevelt, December 3, 1908

Visiting the Dams Today

Parts of each historic dam remain intact, preserving them as part of the local heritage. They can be accessed by many trails in the area.

The outlet control box at Clements Lake was removed, but portions of the dam remain. Note the names of the workers, and the date the structure was built.
**Early Life in the Uintas**

Archaeological research completed as part of the high lakes stabilization led to discovery of the rich heritage of the Brown Duck Basin. For thousands of years, these lakes and their surroundings were an important resource for Native people who spent a portion of their summer and fall in this area hunting game and gathering plants.

Recent excavations at Brown Duck Basin indicate obsidian, used for making tools, was brought to Brown Duck Basin from sources over 250 miles to the south.

The High Uinta Mountains and its rivers are sacred to the Ute who gather plants with spiritual and medicinal properties here to be used in traditional ceremonies and individual blessings.

Ute Tribal Elder Clifford Duncan suggests the High Uinta Mountains were a place where shamans, or sacred healers, took their sick people to be healed.

The Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation was the last region in Utah to be settled by European Americans.

President Lincoln established the Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation in 1861, before Euro-American settlers arrived. The Reservation was occupied by several bands of Ute Indians on over two million acres of land.

Land Rush!

Earliest Euro-American settlers were farmers from the Heber and Salt Lake City area arriving in the 1870s. These farmers established small homesteads where cattle grazed in mountain pastures and crops of wheat and corn were sown. A short growing season, and most importantly, limited water supplies made farming difficult. These farmers were the first to divert water from nearby rivers and creeks to irrigate their crops.

In 1905, the Reservation was opened to non-Indian settlers. Thousands of families flooded in looking for the best land available for farms and homesteads. The Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation was the last region in Utah to be settled by European Americans.

Fremont petroglyph of elk and bighorn sheep in the Uinta Basin. Though the Fremont farmed crops like corn, they also hunted game and gathered plants in the High Uintas as early as 1500 years ago.
Building a Future

Exploration and development of these lakes brought hundreds of workers to the area in the early 1900s and resulted in establishing the nearby town of Mountain Home. Information gathering focused on how much water these lakes could store. By increasing storage capacity, captured runoff would provide Uinta Basin farming communities with necessary late season irrigation.

The Long Haul

Dam construction was hard work. By 1916, a rough road was cut to the Brown Duck Basin. Teams of horses hauled excavation equipment, dynamite, concrete mix, corrugated metal pipe, canal gates, lumber, and food supplies. Workers built a cabin at Kidney Lake to store these materials. Transporting heavy, bulky, and explosive materials over steep terrain was difficult. Dam workers eventually resorted to bringing provisions on sturdy sleds or sleighs during winter months.

Drawn by horse cart, the Fresno Scraper leveled and scraped large volumes of soil during dam construction.

Birth of Irrigation Companies

By 1884, farmers created the very first irrigation company in the greater Uinta Basin known as the Ashley Central Irrigation Company. This company established large-scale irrigation canals to provide for the valley's growing farming communities.

Soon after, several other prominent irrigation companies developed in the Uinta Basin. In 1905, the Dry Gulch Irrigation Company was granted water storage rights at Clements Lake. In 1916, the Farnsworth Canal and Reservoir Company acquired water storage rights at Kidney, Island, and Brown Duck Lakes. In 1934, the Moon Lake Water Users Association was organized. It was an association of eight irrigation companies, of which the Farnsworth Reservoir and Canal Company was a member.

Top photo: Headgate used to control the amount of water released downstream at Island Lake.

Outlet at Island Lake with concrete collar releasing a large volume of water downstream.

Outlet control gate on top of Island Lake dam regulating water flow downstream.

The factor that has held the Uintah Basin back much more than the absence of a railroad has been the unmerciful years of drought.”

- Byron O. Colon, Uintah Basin Water Commissioner, cited by Dillman, Early History of Duchesne County.

Dam Architecture

These dams were simply designed, but required hard labor to construct. They are a monument to early irrigation companies' pioneering efforts to boost agricultural potential of the Uinta Basin. Each dam has a compacted soil foundation and an earthen-fill structure reinforced with a stone riprap face.

Stockrollers compacted earthen-filled dams. The roller was made on site from corrugated metal and concrete hauled up to the lakes.

Cross Section of Dam

Water conveyance pipe

Reservoir level

Earthen-fill

Soil foundation

Downstream outlet

Water intake valve

Headgate to control water flow downstream

Ashley National Forest
Caring for the Land and Serving People
High Mountain Lakes Heritage

From mountain tops to farm fields below, water has shaped the history of this area for thousands of years. Thirteen water-storing lakes or reservoirs in the High Uinta mountains, about six miles north of here, were built between 1916 and 1930 by settlers trying to make a living in the valleys. They created these small reservoirs to provide irrigation to farm fields during dry periods as part of a large irrigation network in the Uinta Basin.

From Many Lakes to One

Beginning in 2006 the dams that created these lakes were stabilized or made more reliable and safe as part of the Uinta Basin Replacement Project, a component of the Central Utah Project. Water that used to be held in these high elevation lakes is now stored downstream in the larger Big Sand Wash Reservoir, where the dam is easier to monitor and maintain. In the Garfield Basin, dams were stabilized at Superior, Five Point, Drift, and Bluebell Lakes. Stabilizing these historic dams restored the lakes to their natural lake levels.

This project is a result of cooperation among the Department of Interior-Office of Central Utah Project Completion, Central Utah Water Conservancy District, Duchesne County Water Conservancy District, Moon Lake Water Users Association, Utah Department of Natural Resources, Utah Reclamation Mitigation and Conservation Commission, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, and the Forest Service.

How was this Done?

The stabilization process required removing stop logs and rip-rap rock that lined the outlet portion of the historic dams. A V-shaped notch was cut into each dam creating a channel at each lake's natural lake level. Old headgates were removed and historic outlets either removed or plugged.

Visiting the Dams Today

Parts of each historic dam remain intact, preserving them as part of the local heritage. They can be accessed by many trails in the area.

Headgate to control water flow downstream at Five Point Lake was removed during stabilization, although portions of the dam remain intact.

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Theodore Roosevelt, December 3, 1908
Early Life in the Uintas

Archaeological research completed as part of the high lakes stabilization led to discovery of the rich heritage of the High Uinta Mountains. For thousands of years, these lakes and their surroundings were an important resource for Native people who spent a portion of their summer and fall in this area hunting game and gathering plants.

Land Rush!

Earliest Euro-American settlers were farmers from the Heber and Salt Lake City area arriving in the 1870s. These farmers established small homesteads where cattle grazed in mountain pastures and crops of wheat and corn were sown. A short growing season, and most importantly, limited water supplies made farming difficult. These farmers were the first to divert water from nearby rivers and creeks to irrigate their crops.

President Lincoln established the Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation in 1861, before Euro-American settlers arrived. The Reservation was occupied by several bands of Ute Indians on over two million acres of land.

In 1905, the Reservation was opened to non-Indian settlers. Thousands of families flooded in looking for the best land available for farms and homesteads. The Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation was the last region in Utah to be settled by European Americans.

By August 1905, over 16,000 people arrived in Provo, Utah to register for the right to enter the Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation.

The High Uinta Mountains and its rivers are sacred to the Ute who gather plants with spiritual and medicinal properties here to be used in traditional ceremonies and individual blessings.

Ute Tribal Elder Clifford Duncan suggests the High Uinta Mountains were a place where shamans, or sacred healers, took their sick people to be healed.

Recent excavations in the area indicate obsidian, used for making tools, was brought to the High Uintas from sources over 250 miles to the south.

Recent excavations in Brown Duck Basin, west of the Lake Fork Watershed, found a number of stone tools used for hunting. Tools like this Gatecliff Split-stem point was made from local materials like chert and quartzite. The presence of this tool indicates human use of the area as early as 5,000 years ago.

This Humboldt Concave-base point, found in the adjacent Swift Creek Basin to the east, dates as early as 6,000 years ago.

A wooden drop in the Dry Gulch Irrigation Canal diverting water from the Lake Fork River (ca. early 1900s)

Ute Traditional Bear Dance, Uintah and Ouray Reservation ca. early 1900s

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Soon after, several prominent irrigation companies developed in the Uinta Basin. By the late 1920s, Farmers Irrigation Company was granted water storage rights to Superior, Five Point, Drift, and Bluebell Lakes.

The Long Haul

Dam construction was hard work. By the late 1920s construction began at the lakes in Garfield Basin. Teams of horses hauled excavation equipment, dynamite, concrete mix, corrugated metal pipe, canal gates, lumber, and food supplies. Transporting heavy, bulky and explosive materials over steep terrain was difficult. Dam workers eventually resorted to bringing provisions on sturdy sleds or sleighs during winter months.

Dam Architecture

These dams were simply designed, but required hard labor to construct. They are a monument to early irrigation companies' pioneering efforts to boost agricultural potential of the Uinta Basin. Each dam has a compacted soil foundation and an earthen-fill structure reinforced with a stone riprap face.

Ashley National Forest
Caring for the Land and Serving People
From mountain tops to farm fields below, water has shaped the history of this area for thousands of years. Thirteen water-storing lakes or reservoirs in the High Uinta mountains, over five miles north of here, were built between 1916 and 1930 by settlers trying to make a living in the valleys. They created these small reservoirs to provide irrigation to farm fields during dry periods as part of a large irrigation network in the Uinta Basin.

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How was this Done?

The stabilization process required removing stop logs and rip-rap rock that lined the outlet portion of the historic dams. A V-shaped notch was cut into each dam creating a channel at each lake’s natural lake level. Old headgates were removed and historic outlets were either removed or plugged. Stabilization at Farmers Lake required plugging a tunnel that carried naturally stored water, which dropped 12 feet down to White Miller Lake.

Farmers Tunnel was 300 feet long and 3 feet wide(top). The tunnel intake has been filled in and is no longer visible after stabilization.

Cross Section of Outlet After Stabilization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Natural Lake Level</th>
<th>V-Shaped notch excavated from the dam</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>outlet</td>
<td>11 ft Deep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dam Surface</td>
<td>80 ft Wide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Through time, operating and maintaining these historic dams, particularly under Wilderness regulations restricting motorized vehicles or equipment, posed challenges and safety concerns. The stabilization project resolved these concerns by moving water storage from the high mountain lakes to a reservoir outside of the wilderness area.

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Theodore Roosevelt, December 3, 1908

View of Farmers Lake from the upstream outlet channel.
Early Life in the Uintas

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Recent excavations in Swift Creek Basin found a number of stone stools used for hunting. Tools like these Humboldt points were made from local material like chert and quartzite. The presence of these points indicate human use of the Swift Creek Basin as early as 6,000 years ago.

Careful collection and dating of charcoal from the Swift Creek Basin provides archaeologists with clues to early use of the basin.

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The Long Haul

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Birth of Irrigation Companies

By 1884, farmers created the very first irrigation company in the greater Uinta Basin known as the Ashley Central Irrigation Company. This company established large-scale irrigation canals to provide for the valley's growing farming communities. Soon after, other irrigation companies were established. Between the 1910s and 1920s, Farmers Irrigation Company was granted water storage rights to the natural lakes in Swift Creek Basin, except at East Timothy Lake, which was the only privately financed dam in the Basin. By 1920, farmer Brigham Timothy constructed a simple sod dam across the lake's outlet. Timothy's water rights were later transferred to the Swift Creek Reservoir Company and the sod dam was replaced by an earthen-filled structure in 1951.

Spring runoff in the Yellowstone watershed west of Swift Creek Basin

Headgate wheel above intake valve at Deer Lake used to regulate water flow downstream.

At 11,000 feet in elevation, East Timothy Dam was the largest in the basin at 1,390 feet long and 34 feet high.

Drawing by horse cart, the Fresno Scraper moved and leveled large volumes of soil during dam construction.

Stockrollers compacted earthen-filled dams. The roller was made on site from corrugated metal and concrete hauled up to the lakes.

The Long Haul

Headgate to control water flow downstream

Reservoir level

Soil foundation

Water intake valve

Water conveyance pipe

Rip-rap facing

Downstream outlet

Dam Cross Section of Dam

Dam Surface

Earthen-fill

Reservoir

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