

Project Category

NSBF Byway Organization Partnership Award

Project Name

New McElmo Creek Flume Interpretive Stop

Byway Name

Trail of the Ancients National Scenic Byway

Date of Establishment: 1996 Byway

Overview

The McElmo Creek Flume is the ONLY SURVIVING flume of the original 104 flumes on the Montezuma Valley Irrigation system that was constructed in the 1890s. This irrigation system diverted water from the Dolores River via a mile long tunnel, which brought water to the Montezuma Valley in southwest Colorado. This allowed large-scale farming and ranching to develop, and also created the town site of Cortez. James W. Hanna, the original developer of this irrigation project, laid out the town of Cortez as housing for his workers. The McElmo Creek Flume, constructed ca. 1892, was Flume No. 6 on the Highline Lateral, and delivered water to the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's reservoir north of Towaoc.

The McElmo Creek Flume remained operational until 1992, when McPhee Reservoir and its laterals replaced the original irrigation system. The Flume remained in good shape until a heavy rain in August 2006 sent debris from the open ditch into the wooden trough and damaged the northern end. Heavy winds in the winter of 2011 caused the southern end to deteriorate. It is fortunate that this Flume, the only one left of the original 104 flumes, is located adjacent to Highway 160, which is part of the Trail of the Ancients (TOTA) National Scenic Byway. In 1996, TOTA included a future stop at the McElmo Creek Flume in their comprehensive Management Plan. The Flume is located on Montezuma County and Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) land, 4 miles east of Cortez, CO.

TOTA partnered with Montezuma County and 14 other agencies, tribes, businesses and granting organizations to make this new interpretive stop a reality. Susan Thomas, TOTA Byway Coordinator, James Dietrich, Montezuma County Public Lands Coordinator, and Linda Towle, Historic Preservation Consultant, worked closely together for 7 years to make this new stop a reality.

Intrinsic Qualities

The creation of this new stop on the Trail of the Ancients (TOTA) Scenic Byway is significant because it broadens the travelers' experience to include aspects of the Byway beyond archaeology, which is TOTA's primary intrinsic quality. This new stop at the McElmo Creek Flume presents the history of water use in the Montezuma Valley from the late 1800s to the present day. Visitors on the Trail of the Ancients see many sites that discuss prehistoric water issues, and this stop at the McElmo Creek Flume continues this story into the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries. Broadening the visitor experience beyond archaeology is goal 5 in the TOTA CMP. The strategy under this goal specifically names the McElmo Creek Flume as an additional point of interest that could be added to the Trail.

For the last 20 years or so, there was a dirt pullout adjacent to the Trail, between stop #4 and #5, just prior to the Montezuma County Fairgrounds. This was used by CDOT to stockpile materials when they were resurfacing highway 160. The amount of trash in the area indicated that travelers did stop there for a rest, and may have noticed an old wooden flume out in the field a few yards to the southeast. Today, it is a signed "Point of Interest" with a paved parking area, an interpretive kiosk, an accessible overlook for the restored Flume with panels which tell the story of the McElmo Creek Flume and the water history of Montezuma County. The location of the new stop at the Flume, between the City of Cortez and the entrance to Mesa Verde National Park, has the potential to attract a high volume of visitors on their way to the park. More than 500,000 people visit Mesa Verde annually. Thus the creation of this new interpretive stop on TOTA accomplishes one of the goals in the 1996 CMP.

Partners

There were many partners involved with TOTA in this project. The most important partner was Montezuma County. The Board of County Commissioners strongly supported this project, and James Dietrich, the County Public Lands Coordinator, spent countless hours preparing Requests for Proposals, overseeing contracts, and administering the grants. TOTA does not have a staff or funding to hire anyone who could have taken on these responsibilities. In addition, the County provided \$55,000 of in-kind match for the Federal Byways grant to build the new TOTA parking lot and overlook. This match included materials for the parking lot construction, and trucks and drivers to deliver the materials.

Two other significant partners were the Southwest Basin Roundtable (part of the CO Water Board) and the Southwest Water Conservancy District. Both of these water agencies contributed the majority of the matching funds (\$70,000) needed for the various grants for this project. Neither of these agencies had ever funded a historic preservation project or a public venue to tell the story of their water history. They also were very enthusiastic about this new TOTA stop.

The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, whose Tribal Park is a stop on TOTA, also partnered with the Trail by providing funds to assist in the construction of the new stop and the interpretation of their water history. The water that flowed through the McElmo Creek Flume for 100 years went directly to a reservoir in Towaoc on their reservation.

Several granting organizations also “partnered” with TOTA and Montezuma County to provide the funds for the construction of the new parking and interpretive stop, and to rehabilitate the Flume. The CO State Historical Fund (SHF) provided the largest amount, more than \$325,000 in grants. The Ballantine Family Fund, a regional organization, awarded \$13,500 in grants, and the National Trust for Historic Preservation provided \$10,000 in grants. Several local organizations and businesses also partnered with TOTA to fund the final phase of the restoration of the Flume.

Another partner was Linda Towle, a local Historic Preservation Consultant, who volunteered more than 1000 hours over 7 years to write grants, present Power Point presentations, raise matching funds, meet with contractors, and keep all the project elements moving forward.

Byway Best Practice

There is often an underlying tension between pre-historic and historic resources, in terms of preservation and celebration. Here in the Four Corners area, Ancestral Puebloan and even older cultures have gained international acclaim for the remarkable structures, artifacts and survival strategies they left for us to find. Foreign visitors in particular marvel at the ingenuity and beauty of these ancient sites. Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byway was designated state by state throughout the Four Corners, and now traverses Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona. The byway designations differ by state – national, state and tribal – but in all four states it is renowned for the archaeological resources that it protects and showcases.

Farmers and ranchers in our region have often felt overlooked and underappreciated by TOTA’s focus on ancient cultures, at their expense. Their families, often their own grandparents, also struggled to succeed in this arid, remote region and may have encountered circumstances similar to what the Ancestral Puebloans endured. The innovation and determination they displayed is still a lasting source of pride for many local residents. If they farm, the remnant pueblos that now appear as collections of shaped sandstone blocks in the middle of their plowed fields may be regarded as nothing more than a nuisance. Rural farmers and ranchers often are tired of the focus on cultures that disappeared one thousand years or more ago.

Commemorating the McElmo Flume with an informative and scenic overlook allowed TOTA to achieve several longstanding goals. The new byway stop links historic preservation to hard work and success, bringing history back to life. Through it, water becomes a connection over time and also establishes the Ute Mountain Tribe as another important member of the agricultural community. Finally, with the addition of the Flume, Trail of the Ancients has begun to feel more local and not so academic. Our elected officials often come from the old farming and ranching families, so TOTA has become “their” byway too.

Keys to Success

Partners were essential to the success of this project. Without them, TOTA would not have been able to fund or construct this new stop. Fortunately, the theme of this new stop was the water history of Montezuma Valley, and the local water agencies were very enthusiastic and provided a significant amount of funding. Montezuma County provided the administrative support for the contracts and grants, and materials for the construction of the parking lot.

It was also fortunate that this project was very visible to locals and visitors since it was adjacent to highway 160, the major east-west route in southwestern Colorado. Locals who drove by every day noticed that there was activity at the Flume itself, followed by construction of the new TOTA parking lot. The Flume went through various phase of rehabilitation, which included wrapping the wooden trough of the Flume in black plastic the winter that the foundation was being repaired, and the removal of the entire trough for a summer while the wood was evaluated and re-installed. This obvious activity generated discussion in Cortez and was written up in the local newspaper, the Cortez Journal.

When the fund raising for the final phase of the Flume rehabilitation began, local people and businesses were well aware of the project and wanted to help “finish” it. Fund raising to individuals and businesses included handing out a “Help Save the Flume” flyer, asking for donations at local events such as the Home & Garden Show, and having a booth at the Cortez Farmer’s Market one Saturday. Stories also ran on the local radio station, KSJD, and they posted the donation flyer on their web site. Personal phone calls to businesses generated additional funding.

Additional Information

Contact Information

Susan E. Thomas, Byways Coordinator

P. O. Box 759, Cortez, Co 81321

Email: susanethomas@earthlink.net

Phone: 970-739-3158

Project Year(s):

2011-2018

Website

[Trail of the Ancients Scenic Byways](#)

Photographs

