

Iron County History Closely Tied To Concern For Water

Tue, Feb 23, 2021



Two horses and their riders cross flood waters on Cedar City's Main Street in the city's early days. // Special Collections, Sherratt Library, Southern Utah University

BY CICWCD for IRON COUNTY TODAY—When the first pioneer settlers came to Iron County, the waters of Coal Creek and a few springs made forging their community possible, but as the city was affected by growing populations, leaders had to reach further and further for needed water.

According to the book “A History of Water in Iron County” by former Cedar City Manager Clemont Bauer Adams, “Even the casual student of the history of Iron County, Utah, will recognize the unavoidable connection between water and whatever other element of history might be discussed. Water in Iron County (or the lack thereof) has controlled, or influenced in some way, nearly all decisions regarding settlement location; community growth, local prosperity, individual and family prosperity, and the ability to support industries.”

From approximately 1851-1908, new residents drew water exclusively from Coal Creek. According to Adams’ book, which is a 732-page compendium and history of local water issues, water was diverted from Coal Creek and ran in small ditches along city streets where residents drew water into barrels for family use and channeled it onto their properties for yard and garden irrigation. Each morning, residents would fill their water barrels, which were positioned near the ditches.

In 1854, just three years after the city was settled, an ordinance was passed “to preserve the purity of the water,” and declaring a fine between \$5 and \$100 for anyone who would “foul or filth the water” by throwing dead animals, raw hides, or dirty clothing into a ditch. Emptying

chamber pots, slop buckets or wash tubs, or washing one's hands or feet in the ditch was also prohibited.

By 1884 a water tax was established on city lots, amounting to \$1 per family and 50 cents per lot for irrigation, or 45 pounds of grain per resident lot and 30 pounds of grain per non-resident lot. In 1891, the waters of Coal Creek were incorporated and that same year discussion began in city council meetings about bringing spring water to Cedar City for culinary use, the Adams book reported.

In October 1902, a city bond was on the ballot for the purpose of procuring a water system. Of the ballots cast, 128 were in favor of the issuing of bonds, while 8 were opposed. In 1903 the city water system committee recommended using Coal Creek to supply the system, and suggested building a series of settling ponds instead of using a filter. The city's first reservoir was constructed in 1904, but it immediately had leakage problems. By 1912, it was decided to connect the city's water supply to tanks and build a new reservoir in another spot. None of the canyon reservoirs were ultimately successful because of leakage and sediment buildup.

In 1908 citizens voted to begin tapping into springs in Cedar Canyon, which led to creating a series of pipelines to the east of the city. According to www.drought.gov, 1934 was the most severe drought year on record until 2003. By then, 21 wells had been drilled in the Cedar Valley. During the 1934 growing season, "six large irrigation wells were drilled and equipped by (the) State Drought Relief Committee," the Adams book reported.

In December 1938 Cedar City purchased rights to the springs south of the city in Shurtz Canyon. It paid \$30,000 for the rights and \$90,000 for system improvements. That \$120,000 is equivalent to more than \$2.1 million in today's dollars. According to www.population.us, the city had a population of about 4,500 that year. The valley's population has grown by about 10 times since.

The city drilled a well to the north, in Enoch, in 1952, and then to the west, near Quichapa Lake, in 1956. Even as these wells were established, investigations and efforts were underway to import water from greater distances. Throughout the years the city explored the possibility of bringing water from other sources such as Navajo Lake and Mammoth Creek, Quail Creek, Pinto Creek and Ash Creek.

The city invested funds to help create Kolob Reservoir and planned ways to bring its water to the valley over a span of more than 30 years, but in 1994 the Cedar City Council abandoned the project and reached an agreement with the Washington County Water Conservancy District.

It was 1997 when Cedar Valley residents petitioned and the state formed the Central Iron County Water Conservancy District, under the Utah Water Conservancy District Act. It was created with the understanding that water is a geographical issue larger than what each municipality in the Cedar Valley can manage on its own.

The Cedar Valley began discussions about the Lake Powell Pipeline Project in 2005, with hopes to pump 20,000 acre-feet of water per year from the lake, to the St. George area, and then uphill

to Iron County. However, the CICWCD withdrew from the project in 2012, citing cost and other concerns.

In an effort to secure a viable solution for Iron County's increasing demand, the CICWCD had hired the consulting firm Barnett Intermountain to look for additional sources of water. Larry Anderson, former Utah Division of Water Resources director, was working for the company, and recommended filing applications for water rights in the West Desert.

In 2006, the CICWCD filed on water in three valleys northwest of Cedar City – Pine Valley, Wah Wah Valley and Hamlin Valley. In May 2014 it received approval and in February 2019 the court decreed 15,000 acre-feet of water in Pine Valley and up to 11,275 acre-feet in Wah Wah Valley. The Pine Valley Water Supply Project is currently in the Environmental Impact Statement process with the Bureau of Land Management.

Additionally, with studies showing the Cedar Valley Aquifer is overdrawn by more than 7,000 acre-feet per year, the CICWCD in cooperation with all local government agencies began an extensive recharge program in 2016 that now includes six recharge facilities and has already added more than 14,000 acre-feet of additional water to the aquifer so far.

Recharge efforts are beneficial, but Utah is currently in its second driest year in the past 127 years and Iron County has grown to a population of about 55,000 people, with most of them in the Cedar Valley. Paul Monroe, who has been CICWCD General Manager since 2013, said the district has been working with scientists and specialists to determine the best course of action and create long-term solutions.

“Iron County is one of the fastest growing counties in one of the fastest growing states in the Union. When you couple that with the extensive drought, which is shaping up to be two of the driest consecutive years on record, it is easy to see the importance of a diversified water portfolio. Following the history of our forebearers, we are planning again to develop a new water resource. The additional water from Pine Valley will restore our aquifer levels, provide safe and reliable drinking water, and ensure there is a future for our children not only to grow up and leave but to remain here and thrive,” Monroe stated.