
***MORE QUARRIES FROM
LAST CHANCE GULCH***

The Park Ditch

Early water venture often troubled by financial, legal woes

Stretching from Park Lake to near Unionville, by a serpentine route, the Park Ditch is a testament to 1870s surveying and engineering skill. Portions of the ditch are still in excellent condition, other portions have been obliterated by time.

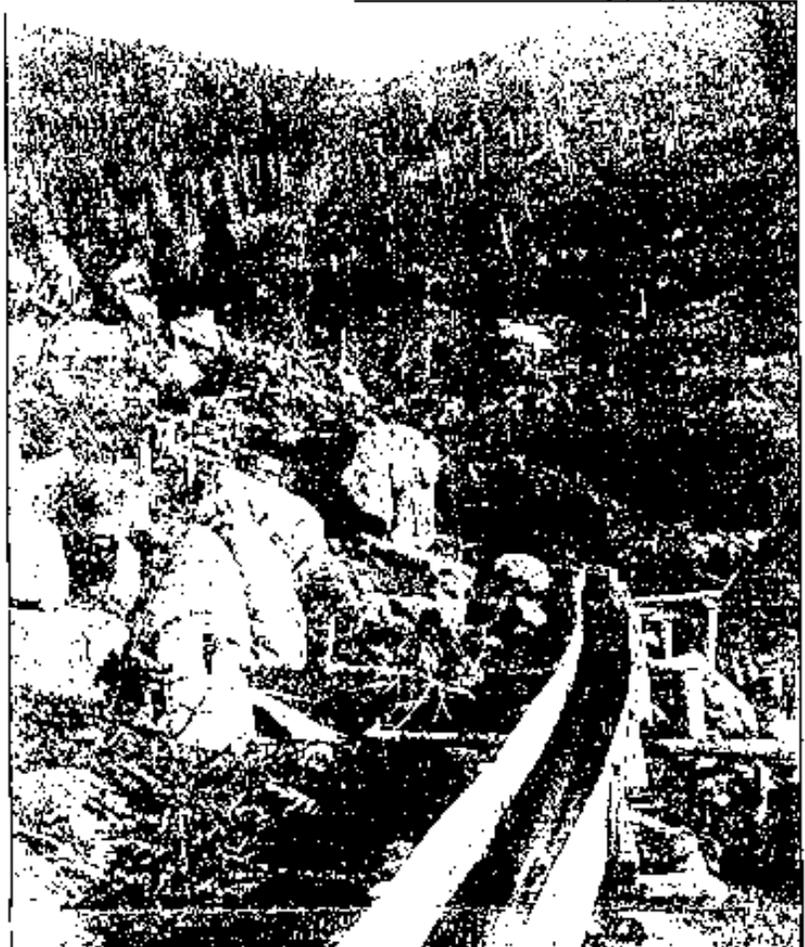
The Park Ditch was the brainchild of an elite group of Helena's most prominent businessmen. In 1870 the mines at Unionville and surrounding country were showing excellent promise but lacked water to extract the ore. During the 1860s several unsuccessful attempts had been made to bring water to the mines. William Freeborn, Barclay B. Belcher, and George Cleveland were among those who had tried and failed.

In the spring of 1870 Helena's Rocky Mountain Gazette began to promote the ditch, featuring articles on the dire consequences to Helena businessmen including John H. Ming, Robert S. Hale, Anton M. Holter, John Kinna, Samuel T. Hauser, Alex Woolfolk, and Thomas Ray incorporated the Park Ditch Company. The company hired deputy U.S. Mineral Surveyor Benjamin F. Marsh and surveyor D.L. Griffith to locate a lake rumored to be at the head of Lump Gulch and to survey a route. Setting out on June 14, 1870, Marsh, Griffith, Ming, and others crossed Grizzly Pass (now referred to as the Lump Gulch Divide), and bushwhacked over rugged terrain above Travis Creek and the north fork of Lump Gulch. At the head of Lump Gulch they discovered a lake which they christened Park Lake. They built a raft and poled out to the middle of the lake and discovered they could not touch bottom with a 20 foot pole and that the level of the lake could easily be raised another 15 feet. Elated that they had found an adequate water

source, one of the men shouted "Twenty five per cent increase on my Helena property!" The men quickly claimed the water right for the Park Ditch Company.

The following week Marsh and Griffith returned to survey a route for a ditch to bring the water to Unionville. The stickiest problem was maintaining sufficient elevation to clear Grizzly Pass. In case they couldn't, they planned an alternate route over the lower divide east of Sheep Mountain. The surveyors made a detailed report of the cost of the project, which they estimated at \$60,000 over the shorter route and \$95,000 over the longer, more rugged route around Sheep Mountain. During the summer of 1870 the Company contacted many of the Prickley Pear farmers to discuss the impact of taking water from the Park Lake drainage. Most were enthusiastic, feeling that demand for their farm producer would be increased by prosperity in Unionville. However, to improve the security of their water right, the Company also purchased B.B. Belcher's partially built ditch, survey route and water right.

On August 1, 1870, the Park Ditch Company contracted with W.W. Johnson and J.W. Buskett to build



Old wooden fluming, much like that on the Park Ditch.

the ditch for \$30,000, two thirds payable in money and the remainder in “water scrip” redeemable in the water that the ditch would produce. Johnson and Buskett were to begin construction at the Park Lake end by building feeder ditches and a dam. Distribution ditches from Grizzly Pass to the Park City, Unionville, Nelson, and Tucker Gulch mines would be built last. Specifications for width, depth, grade, and workmanship were attached to the contract.

With these detailed instructions Johnson and Buskett began construction of the ditch. On October 3 the Gazette reported that two miles of trestle had been completed at the Park Lake end, but delivery delays from Holter’s lumber mill slowed progress. Other crews were concurrently digging the various segments of the ditch. Ditch workers included “men from every state in the Union and the Canadas” including two ministers Elder Raymond and Deacon Williams. A week later the paper reported the ditch a half completed and heaved a sigh of relief that the route over Grizzly Pass was possible. In a prophetic view of troubles to come, however the paper reported that more money would have to be raised to build the distribution ditches to the mines.

In May 1871 water began flowing over Grizzly Pass. However, the quantity of water was nowhere near the 500 inches promised. The summer proved to be a bitter disappointment. With less than half the promised water flowing through the ditch, and with distributing ditches and flumes yet to be completed, revenues were not sufficient to repay the debt (at 2% interest per month). In addition the water scrip was rapidly becoming worthless.

By fall, troubles were mounting. On October 23, 1871, Joseph Hastie, a Lump Gulch miner, filed suit claiming the company had stolen his water right, rendering his mine worthless. Hastie alleged he had dug a ditch to his mine in 1868 and that the Park Ditch Company’s purported purchase of Belcher’s earlier ditch was made solely to falsely claim a prior water right. Further, he said that Belcher’s ditch was located on Sky High, not Lump Gulch. The Company countered that Hastie had never built a real ditch, that his mine was already worthless, and that his claim was based on extortion. In a non-jury trial Hastie’s claim was thrown out.

This was only the beginning of the Company’s troubles. In January 1872 W.W. Johnson and John W. Buskett, the ditch contractors, sued the Company for nonpayment claiming that the company had exaggerated the amount of previous work that had been done and had underestimated the length of the proposed ditch. The Company countered that the workmanship was sloppy, the ditch could not adequately supply the mines,

and that they had had to hire others to complete the work. This lawsuit dragged on for half a year, ending in a hung jury on June 27, 1872.

The Company’s financial troubles continued to mount. The ditch began to spring leaks, and repairs were paid for with promissory notes. In October 1874 everything fell apart: the notes fell due, the mortgagors foreclosed, the creditors sued, and about 6 intertwining cases ended up in court. The creditors were suing the company and each other, each claiming a prior lien on the property. When the smoke cleared the ditch was sold at Sheriff’s auction in February 1875 to Robert S. Hale.

This, however, was not the end of controversy. The Park Ditch Company had quietly transferred possession of the ditch to Thomas P. Newton, one of the creditors. Newton, who had been paid in water scrip for enlarging the ditch in December 1871, refused to turn it over to Hale. The case ended up back in court.

In the meantime Alex M. Woolfolk, superintendent of the company, hired contractors Priest and Pierce to make needed improvements, using both company and personal money. He had also extended the ditch into Tucker Gulch, using his own money. This project was costly since the rugged terrain northeast of Grizzly Pass had to be almost entirely flumed. Woolfolk expected reimbursement from future water revenue, but ended up suing Hale for possession.

After years of controversy, the Park Ditch fell into relative obscurity. Hale operated the ditch for a number of years afterwards. In 1904 he successfully defended his water right against a suit by the Ames Realty Company. However, as the mines in Unionville declined, the need for the ditch also declined. In June 1908 a flood destroyed the Park Lake Dam and portions of the ditch. The ditch was never rebuilt.

A mystery remains. Leaving Park Lake are two parallel ditches: a much longer lower ditch almost entirely dug into the ground, and a shorter upper one consisting largely of fluming over rugged terrain. Which one was built first? Was either of the Belcher’s 1868 ditch? And why were both needed? After extensive research I still have not found the answers.

Ellie Arguimbau has been an archivist at the Montana Historical Society for 18 years. She became interested in the ditch last summer while hiking it. Gary Fairchild and Pam Tennis of the Forest Service did much of the original research on the ditch in 1986.
