

A MUTUAL IRRIGATION COMPANY AT 150: DEVELOPING A HISTORY OF THE STERLING IRRIGATION COMPANY LOGAN COUNTY

PROJECT INTRODUCTION

The Sterling Irrigation Company (SIC) has been a mainstay of the agricultural community in Sterling, Colorado, since 1874. Anticipating the 150th anniversary of the digging of the Company's ditch, Sterling No. 1, SIC partnered with Extension to create a comprehensive history of the ditch and the Company.

INTERNSHIP GOALS

The goal of the internship was to produce a pamphlet for use by the Sterling Irrigation Company in celebrating the 150th anniversary of the founding of the ditch company.



Figure 1.

The mechanization of the tractor in the 1920s and '30s fundamentally changed the ways that labor was used in agriculture in Colorado. SIC was invested in mechanizing early and saw success during the Dust Bowl and World War II as a result. (Photograph of two farmers and a tractor, c. 1930, Great Western Sugar Records, Box 4, Folder 56.)

WHAT YOU DID

To put together a holistic history of SIC, I spent time with shareholders in SIC, and the current President of the Company, who were able to point me in some important thematic directions. I was also able to see the ditch in person, which helped me connect the history I was researching to the physicality of the actual construction.

I took those themes and went to the archives, here at CSU in the water collection, and at the Stephen Hart Research Library in Denver. I was able to uncover some documents in the archive that helped clarify the broader narrative of water use and appropriation in Colorado.

I also spent time with SIC's archival material, which was much more specific than the material in other archives. I was able to tie the arc of water use that I had studied in the archives to SIC's local history and story, allowing me to put together a history that is focused on SIC, but also connects the Company to the institutions and history that facilitated the growth of the Company over the past 150 years.



Figure 2.

Nate Young (left), Tobin Gold (center), and SIC President Gene Manuello (right), stand on the headgate of the Sterling No. 1 Ditch, the beginnings of 15 miles of waterworks in Logan County. The headgate was rebuilt after extensive flooding in 1997 and currently siphons 113.9 cubic feet per second off the South Platte River for use by farmers and ranchers who work land adjacent to the Ditch. (Photo by Brent Young.)

WHAT YOU LEARNED

This project was a great opportunity for me to develop my skills as a historian, both academic and public. The project inherently emphasized utilizing both skillsets, which forced me, as a researcher, to approach the project in a way that I would not have previously. This project also gave me lots of experience dealing with primary sources, both in and out of archives, which is a skill set that is wonderful to develop early in my career.

By engaging in depth with the Sterling irrigation Company, both stakeholders and leadership, I gained an appreciation for how vital Sterling #1 and the Sterling Irrigation Company were to the development of Sterling and Logan County as leaders in agricultural output. This engagement also guided my research. I was able to streamline my research process to target areas of interest to SIC.

The project was also very rewarding in terms of the actual content. I went into the research process knowing very little about water in Colorado other than a basic understanding that it was important. It's very edifying to know why and just how vital the development of water rights and irrigation systems were to Colorado's modern success.

HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR EDUCATION

Beyond allowing me to practice the application of historical practices and principles in a professional environment, this project also gives me a great case study in the environmental history of the American West, which is a great asset. This project also gave me experience working in the field of environmental history, which is one of the fields I hope to pursue in higher study.

NEXT STEPS

There's still much to do to historicize the Eastern Plains of Colorado. My time spent in Sterling showed me that the area is ripe for a more in-depth historical study, especially one that emphasizes gathering oral histories from the older community of farmers in the area.

My research emphasized the use of water in farming and ranching, but the agriculturalists of Logan County also used water in industrial processing, and for communal use. Exploring the use of water in the area in nonagricultural contexts would be a fascinating study.