

Water Projects

Since prehistoric times, people of the Four Corners have attempted to improve their control of water. The original farmers, Ancestral Puebloans, built small rock dams and reservoirs throughout their lands to trap rainwater and snowmelt.

In 1885 farmers began to dig a mile-long water tunnel from the Dolores River southward into the broad, dry Montezuma Valley. A second canal cut 40 feet deep across a broad saddle to water another part of the valley.

The tunnel passed through weak, crumbling sandstone layers. Elsewhere, wooden aqueducts needed constant repair. The system's storage capacity was small, so irrigation ditches often ran dry in late summer.

McPhee Dam was completed in 1984. Its reservoir holds enough water to supply 61,000 acres of farmland, even during periods of drought. The adjacent forest and shoreline is managed for wildlife conservation and recreation.



Digging a canal through Big Bend, 1887. Photo courtesy of Andy Harris

A Lasting Gift

Research in the Dolores Project area was conducted by the Dolores Archaeological Program, whose findings are preserved at the Canyons of the Ancients Visitor Center & Museum and by the Historic American Buildings Survey and the Historic American Engineering Record, whose photos and drawings are part of the Library of Congress archives.

The river, though changed, lives on – still sustaining us in a challenging environment. We honor the people who came before us. Their memories and our past will not be forgotten.

To learn more about Dolores River history, read ***River of Sorrows***, edited by Gregory Kendrick and published by the National Park Service; and ***Our Past--Portals to the Future***, an oral history of Dolores and the surrounding area, published by the Dolores Public Library.

This brochure and exhibit were made possible through the assistance of many organizations and individuals who provided photographs, historical background information and technical advice.

River of Sorrows is an exhibit funded by visitor donations to the Bureau of Land Management Canyons of the Ancients Visitor Center & Museum. Visit us at 27501 Highway 184, Dolores, CO 81323, or online at <https://www.blm.gov/programs/national-conservationlands/colorado/canyons-of-the-ancients>.

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Cover photo: Ritter Ranch barn. HABS, Library of Congress



**NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS**

River of Sorrows

**Canyons of the Ancients
National Monument**



Lower Dolores River Valley

When a new reservoir covered ten miles of the Dolores River, the land's story was saved. Historians, architects, photographers and others worked to create a permanent record of human settlement in the valley. The result is a tapestry of memories, woven by strands from many eras and cultures.

Natural Wealth

The Dolores River flows from snowy peaks into a desert. It has carved a lush valley into a high, dry plateau. Fish, birds and other animals thrive, dependent on the water and vegetation.

The valley's first people were hunter-gatherers of the distant past. Later, Pueblo villagers and nomadic Ute bands took advantage of the valley's abundant resources.

In 1776 the Spanish explorers Dominguez and Escalante camped here, christening it *El Rio de Nuestra Senora de Los Dolores* or "The River of Our Lady of Sorrows." Later settlers called it the River of Sorrows or the Dolores River.



Dolores Valley, Bureau of Reclamation



Big Bend, Photo courtesy of Andy Harris

The nineteenth century discovery of silver and gold in the nearby San Juan Mountains drew immigrants from as far away as Germany and China. They arrived with ambitions that would change the Dolores Valley forever.

Ranches and Big Bend

The valley's first town was Big Bend, settled in 1878 where the river turned sharply north. It was three miles downstream from modern Dolores.

Big Bend supplied the mountain mining center of Rico with timber, fresh beef and vegetables-- though farming was not always reliable in this chilly, shaded valley. Cold-tolerant Longhorn cattle were the breed of choice for the early ranchers.

A new railroad from Rico to Mancos bypassed Big Bend in 1891. Merchants abandoned their old site and moved upriver toward the tracks, creating the town of Dolores.

Ranching families remained throughout the valley, expanding and diversifying their herds and adding cash crops like wheat, potatoes and pinto beans.

To make ends meet, homesteaders occasionally trapped beaver, mink and muskrat. They also worked seasonally on the railroad and in the high-country mines.

McPhee, the Lumber Town

A national demand for lumber transformed the region's economy. In 1924 the New Mexico Lumber Company created a new town in the Dolores Valley, named for company owner William McPhee.

McPhee had a school, doctor, church, tennis and basketball courts, housing for over a thousand people and a general store – all company-owned. Workers were partly paid in "McPhee money," minted by the company and redeemable at its general store. The sawmill produced over half of Colorado's lumber in 1927. Narrow-gauge rail lines penetrated the virgin forest to help extract raw timber.

The business changed hands several times during and after the Great Depression, but McPhee never regained its initial prosperity of the 1920s. A series of equipment fires, the last and largest in 1948, brought a final end to McPhee. Its homes and machinery were dismantled or moved away.



McPhee, 1928, U.S. Forest Service