

Park County Historical Society honors Roberts Tunnel crew

Men worked 16 years to bring water to Denver under the Continental Divide

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Blood, sweat and proud

From left to right, Clyde Johnson, Bob Jones, Chuck Johnson, and Kenn Hicks are guests of honor at the Park County Historical Society monthly meeting. Over 50 years ago, the four men help build the Harold D. Roberts Tunnel which transports water from Dillon Reservoir to the North Fork of the South Platte River. (Photo by Walter L. Newton/The Flume) The war began when the Confederates bombarded Union soldiers at Fort Sumter, S.C. on April 12, 1861. The war ended in spring, 1865. Robert E. Lee surrendered the last major Confederate army to Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9, 1865. The last battle was fought at Palmito Ranch, Texas, on May 13, 1865.

Blood, sweat and water.

History tells us Denver City was founded on gold, but it was water from the mountains that enabled it to flourish. The Harold D. Roberts Tunnel is a transmountain diversion in the Blue River watershed that brought some of that water to Denver.

At the Oct. 11 meeting of the Park County Historical Society, four men that helped build that tunnel were honored for their accomplishment.

Clyde Johnson, 86, Chuck Johnson (no relation), 91, Bob Jones, 80, and Kenn Hicks, 87, worked on the tunnel until 1962 when it began transporting water 23.3 miles from Dillon Reservoir into the North Fork of the South Platte River.

Early on it was known as the Blue River Tunnel. In 1955, during construction, it was officially named for Harold D. Roberts, attorney and special counsel for the Denver Water Board. Roberts was instrumental in establishing the rights to Blue River water in the mid-1950s.

The men worked in an underground world, as deep as 4,465 feet below the surface at one point. It was dusty and noisy, sometimes wet, and they shared the space with machines, cables, lights and rail track.

They spoke their own language. “Jumbo,” “good rock, bad rock,” “spiling,” “muck and mucker,” “shifter,” “gunite,” all words familiar to the ear of a miner but foreign to an outsider on the surface.

There were at least four teams of men working each shift. A 985-foot deep shaft was dug in Montezuma. Then, the teams dug in four directions. The west teams dug from Montezuma toward Dillon and from Dillon in the direction of Montezuma.

And the east side teams dug from Montezuma toward Grant and from Grant toward Montezuma. It took 16 years to complete the tunnel.

The teams raced against one another, trying to remove as much rock as they could during a shift. The tunnel is 10-foot-three-inches in diameter and crosses the Continental Divide.

It was hard labor. They would use the jumbo to drill holes in the heading, set the dynamite, blast the rock. And then the scalers would pick at the blasted rock, dislodging pieces that still clung to the surface of the tunnel.

Someone asked if the men scaling the rock ever got hit by a loosened stone.

“If you’re dumb enough to stand under it,” Hicks said.

Then, the mucker would use a machine that scooped up the rock and tossed it into a ore cart and those carts would be hauled out of the tunnel to deposit the loose rock.

At one point, as they dug farther and farther from the Grant entrance, the men encountered bad air. Breathing became labored and the men were concerned for their safety.

They insisted that the contractor get a fan system installed in the tunnel. The contractor balked and all three shifts

stopped working. The temporary strike succeeded and a ventilation system was shipped in from California.

“If it was just one shift striking they probably would have fired us,” Clyde Johnson said.

The tunnel walls were sprayed with gunite, sealing the rocks’ surface. Steel arches were used to reinforce the walls where needed, molded and shaped to fit into the circular passage.

Feb. 24, 1960, the crews “holed-through.” It was like the blind meeting the blind.

“When we met, we were only off by six inches in height and two-and-one-half inches in alignment,” Hicks said.

The Historical Society premiered a DVD which contains a collection of eight-millimeter film clips, still pictures and a running commentary describing the various images.

The DVD is for sale to the public through PCHS.

As they watched the DVD and then answered questions from those in attendance, Clyde Johnson, Bob Jones, Chuck Johnson and Kenn Hicks became ageless. There was pride in these four men’s faces.