

Mesa Rats Unite for Community Water

Dawn Kohorst – West Rim Mutual Domestic Water Users' Association, Taos, New Mexico

West of Taos, New Mexico, the sun sets in paint-brush splendor after a hot and shadowless trek across a vast, harsh, and very dry land. “No agua” warns the topo map. Here, in the southern tip of the Puche Valley, a band of homesteaders stake their claims in sagebrush and capture meager drops of rain. They settled on the West Rim, wrestled green rattlesnakes and built homes, mostly sawmill-lumber shacks, with bare muscle and simple tools. Taos locals call them “mesa rats.”

The “rats,” however, are artists: silversmiths, poets, painters, and survivors of war. Hermits, they came in the 1960s and formed close-knit colonies away from the locals on the rocky, snake-infested slopes of extinct volcanoes. It is the land of banished witches.

Winds blow hard across the mesa and tell many stories. Here, Kit Carson battled marauding Apaches while chasing Navajos over small, breast-shaped mountains. Kit barely escaped with his scalp still intact, but it was “flappin’ in the wind” as he rode his pony in hot pursuit.

No agua. No water.

But deep in a steep canyon 1,000 feet below the rim, where the Rio Grande snakes through black basalt, the Old Klauer Spring percolates from rocks high above, collects in pools, and magically

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gathers pressure to gush forth through a 2-inch rusty pipe, splashing on to moss-green boulders below. Klauer Spring allows the “mesa rats” to survive. They load algae-coated barrels on the backs of abused trucks, drive thirty miles on rutted roads, and descend, slowly, down a treacherous old stagecoach road, down into Rio Grande Gorge.

At the bottom, the water-haulers back their trucks under the old pipe and fill their crusty barrels with clear spring water under the watchful eyes of hidden deer. With barrels full, the water-haulers slowly grind their way to the top of the gorge, pass the crosses of those who did not make it, and arrive home with 2,000 pounds of sloshing water. There, they siphon the water into a large cistern beneath the floor to

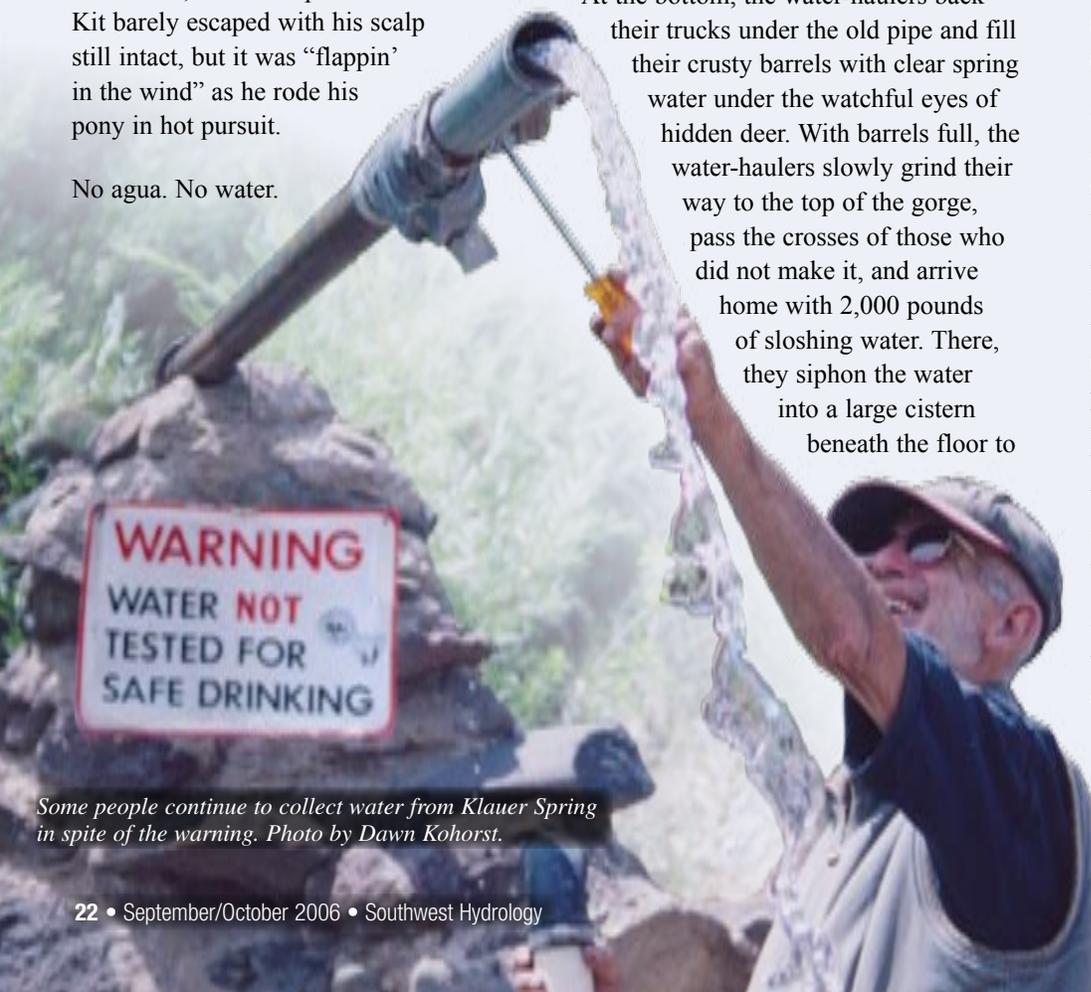
help keep the house cool. This chore, the hauling of water, is a life-style choice and enjoyed by most.

Then, in Spring 2002, a firestorm of protest erupted on the mesa because the U.S. Bureau of Land Management proclaimed that on Easter morning, it was going to “pull the pipe” at the Klauer Spring: the New Mexico Environment Department had declared the spring contaminated with bacteria and wanted the BLM to shut it down. These simple, small pipes, like in other area springs that were already shut down, transformed wild springs into “community water systems” and were subject to strict, federal drinking water laws.

Klauer Spring was on land recently acquired by the BLM and is now part of the BLM-managed Orilla Verde Recreation area, its crown jewel. Tourists flock there and pose a liability, their attorneys said, if they drink the unsafe water from the pipe. It looks inviting, even though warning signs are posted. Tourists might get stomach cramps, the runs, or worse, die.

To fight the feds, a grass-roots coalition of spring-users was formed called “Save Our Springs,” which morphed into the West Rim Mutual Domestic Water Users’ Association. The “mesa rats” were now a legal, quasi-governmental entity and were given time by the agencies to find a safe source of drinking water before they pulled the pipe. Members at first wanted to make the spring potable with turbines and UV disinfection, but to mar the pristine beauty of the spring became insupportable, and they turned to drilling a community well on top of the mesa, closer to home.

The association had no water rights to bring to the well, so they filed at the Office of the State Engineer for 26 acre-feet per year of surface water rights on the spring, based on historic use, a right the BLM could not claim. Besides, the BLM was “not in the water business.”



Some people continue to collect water from Klauer Spring in spite of the warning. Photo by Dawn Kohorst.

The intent was to then transfer the water rights from the spring to the well.

But hard times lay ahead for the new water association. Board directors changed quickly. Meetings and elections became raucous and fractious. Selfish interests and money scams threatened funding and power grabs caused fights among old friends.

Sinking from lack of leadership, the infant West Rim Water Association sought help from the Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC). Together they revamped the bylaws and made them strong. A first in the state of New Mexico, representation on the West Rim Board of Directors by districts took hold and the terrible fighting stopped. RCAC trained board directors in management skills and parliamentary law. The West Rim Board became stable and stuck to agendas to get the work done. Tough decisions were made as the board grew into their power.

The West Rim membership increased to 100 and united behind the board to pursue funding for the community well, with RCAC guiding them down the path to success. Last year, the West Rim Water Association received a 100 percent emergency grant of \$469,887 from USDA-Rural Development, and began to drill its community well!

The local water-witch doused the spot to drill for water on donated land at a central location. Drillers hit an ocean of water at 658 feet and the hydrologist exclaimed, "This is one of the best wells in the Southwest!" The water is sweet, lacks arsenic, is very low in fluorides, and the recharge rate is excellent. Members will pay 3 cents per gallon and continue to haul now-potable water, but much closer to home. The well is a West Rim miracle and the "mesa rats" feel blessed.

But two rich West Rim ranchers, whose buffalo and cattle herds take what is left of the drought-stricken land, don't feel "blessed" by the new community well. Before the drilling, the water association secured from the State Engineer three acre-feet per year of water rights to use

until it can transfer its 26 acre-feet per year of water rights from the spring to the well, to then serve 450 West Rim families. The ranchers are concerned this transfer will have a negative impact on their future acquisition of more water rights, encourage development, and make their ranches vulnerable to the association's power of eminent domain.

So, the ranchers filed protests with the State Engineer to stop the West Rim's transfer of water rights from the spring to the well. When negotiations failed, the

water association in turn filed a protest against one rancher's recent application to the State Engineer to transfer 700 acre-feet per year of water rights from his own well to a new, supplemental well, to better irrigate 619 acres of alfalfa for his buffalo herd. If attorneys cannot resolve the disputes, the State Engineer will.

Despite these setbacks, the West Rim Water Association has made great progress and, with the county's help, soon will start a volunteer fire department.

Contact Dawn Kohorst at 505-613-0825.



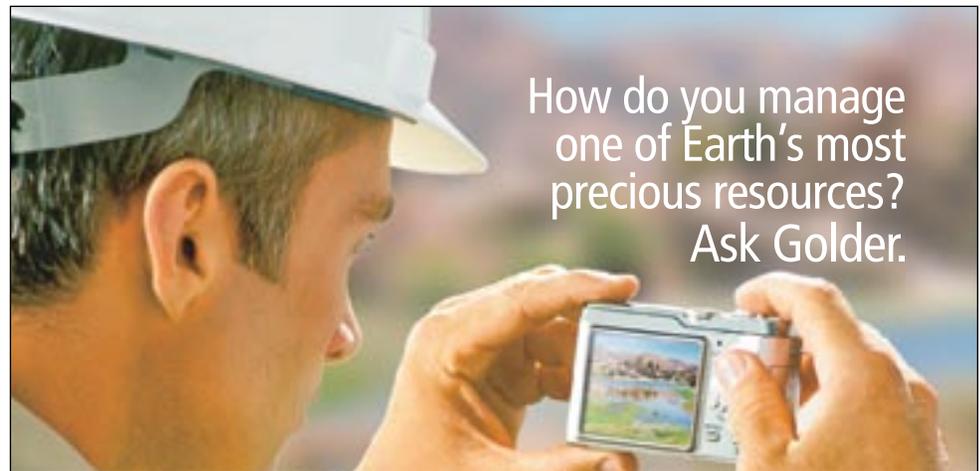
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