

Historical Background and Field Analysis

MACK FLECK DITCH
Southwest Corner of Section 7 & North ½ of Section 18
Township 5 South, Range 81 West
South ½ of Section 12
Township 5 South, Range 82 West

Avon, Colorado



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Location, Use & Ownership

The Mack Fleck Ditch is a linear historic feature that runs generally from northwest to southeast along the south side of Highway 6 and the Eagle River. Its western terminus is along the east side of Beaver Creek, just south of the entrance to the Beaver Creek Resort. On the east, it historically ended in the golf course to the west of today's Stone Creek Drive. This agricultural irrigation ditch has been out of use for many decades and is abandoned. It crosses through a number of private and public parcels of land along its less than two-mile length.

While the original length of the ditch cannot be seen on the ground, it was possible to view it on maps and aerial photographs. Through a combination of field and aerial/map inspection, a reasonably adequate amount of information was obtained about the ditch as a whole.

Description of the Resource

The Mack Fleck Ditch appears in the Eagle River Valley landscape as a gently sloping, mostly hidden line of ground that is embedded in trees and shrubs. Because it is obscured by vegetation, it is unnoticed by area residents and visitors. This is typical of historic irrigation ditches, which are excavated below grade and usually cannot be seen until one is right upon them. Erosion and vegetative growth also obscure many ditches such as this.

Every irrigation ditch has a legally established headgate, where water is drawn into the ditch from a nearby body of water. The headgate for the Mack Fleck Ditch appears to be located along the east side of Beaver Creek, approximately 1000' south of the Highway 6 entrance to the Beaver Creek Resort. The headgate itself could not be located due to the thickness of vegetation in the area.

From that point, the ditch hugs the lower flank of the high bluff to the east as it heads to the north and then curves toward the east and southeast. While the slope of the ditch can still be seen in the forest at the base of the bluff, it is difficult to discern because the upper bank has eroded and filled the ditch with

soil. Consequently, the ditch today appears as if it were a flat pathway covered with grass and relatively young trees and shrubs.

At the northwest end of the River Oaks residential complex, the ditch disappears entirely. From that location, it originally continued toward the southeast, south of and essentially parallel to Deer Blvd. Still south of Deer Blvd., in the open field between Lark Ct. and Grouse Ct., the ditch reappears as a faint line on the landscape. However, it quickly disappears again as it heads eastward through the houses and greenery along the Eagle-Vail golf course. The ditch's termination point just west of Stone Creek Dr. is no longer visible (the creek through the golf course does not appear to have been part of the ditch).

Alterations to the Ditch

As discussed above, substantial segments of the Mack Fleck Ditch have been erased from the landscape by modern development. In addition, the surviving segments appear to be altered as they were filled with soil from erosion. The headgate could not be found, but may remain in place at the ditch's western beginning point along Beaver Creek. Along the surviving ditch segments, there do not appear to be any release gates or diversion structures that remain in place.

Historical Background

The history of the Mack Fleck Ditch was assembled through archival research completed for this report. Until this time, no one appears to have looked into the life of Mack Fleck. A bibliography of the sources consulted is found at the end of this document.

The story of the Mack Fleck Ditch in Avon revolves primarily around the background of pioneer Mack Fleck, who constructed it during the late 1800s. Colorado's mineral rush began in the late 1850s, and over the following decades attracted thousands of men to the high country in search of wealth. However rather than finding riches, most discovered that a career in mining was exceedingly difficult and dangerous, and their prospects for acquiring wealth were not as great as they had hoped. While a few made fortunes, more acquired modest wealth and the majority remained relatively poor.

Some of the miners gave up on Colorado and either returned east or headed to other western destinations. Some stayed put and lived the remainder of their lives in mining communities that eventually withered. Others relocated within the state and built futures from new, and often familiar, lines of work. Many of the miners were raised on farms and understood agriculture as a way of life. Among those residing in the mining towns and camps above Avon were men, some with

wives and children, who gazed downstream and realized that the land flanking the Eagle River below Minturn held characteristics that would allow them to reinvent their lives.

From its confluence with Gore Creek all the way to the county's western boundary, the fertile Eagle River Valley became the hoped-for paradise of ranchers and farmers of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Numerous single men and families ventured out of the mining camps during the final decades of the 19th century and headed downstream to seek their fortune and a more settled way of life raising beef cattle and cultivating fields of hay, oats, alfalfa, wheat, rye and barley. In the broad valley, they claimed homesteads or purchased property, secured water rights, and began raising livestock. Over the years, as their farms became more established and they adapted to high altitude agriculture, the farmers and ranchers added vegetable and fruit crops to their properties.

In addition to acquiring land, bringing in cattle, and planting crops, the early settlers of the Eagle River Valley improved their properties with the construction of buildings and the excavation of irrigation ditches to direct river water to their fields. As time passed and conditions improved, most of the pioneers replaced their original log structures with homes and outbuildings of milled lumber. The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad constructed a line through the valley in the late 1880s. This greatly improved both travel and shipping, connecting the district to all of Colorado and the nation. By the end of the century, 10,000 acres were under cultivation, hundreds of thousands more were used for grazing, and the logging industry operated six sawmills in the area.

Among the early pioneers to descend from the mining camps to settle the lower elevations of the Eagle River Valley was Mack Gaylord Fleck. Born in March 1856 near Upper Sandusky, Ohio, Mack's parents moved the family five years later to Shawnee County, Kansas. In 1876, he married Mary Stahl of Auburn, Kansas, who appears to have grown up on a neighboring farm to the Flecks. The couple had eleven children together, and around nine of them survived infancy. Mack Fleck first came to Colorado in 1875 and reached the Eagle River mining camps in 1878. However, until 1884 he kept traveling between Eagle County and his home in Auburn, Kansas, where his family remained.

In 1884, he brought his wife and children to Colorado, where they first lived in the mining town of Red Cliff. Mack worked there for a number of years as a carpenter, miner, and then town marshal. Around 1895, the Fleck family moved again, this time downstream to a property near Avon that Mack had purchased from William Nottingham. There they built a farmstead and excavated an irrigation ditch for their crop fields south of the river. While the location of their home and farm buildings is not currently known, the irrigation ditch installed by Mack Fleck is known to have drawn water from Beaver Creek and transported it to the east-southeast into his open crop fields.

In November 1898, Mary Fleck died at the family home near Avon. Just two weeks earlier, she had given birth to a child and they were both considered healthy until her sudden demise. By that time, Mack was not only running their ranch but was also serving as Eagle County Sheriff, a position he held from around 1894 through 1902. He remarried in January 1900, this time to May Ault of Nebraska City, Nebraska, who was fourteen years his junior. Noted by the *Eagle County Times* (13 January 1900) as one of the county's most reputable and successful men, Mack made the most of his good reputation and in November 1901 ran for a seat as Eagle County Commissioner, won the election, and went on to serve through 1905. In addition, he was a long-time member of the Eagle County High School board.

When Fleck's term as County Commissioner ended in 1905, he was appointed to serve as a sheriff's deputy in Minturn. In late June 1908, the Fleck home near Avon caught fire and burned to the ground. All of their possessions were lost in the blaze, including a large sum of cash kept in the home. With no insurance, the family struggled to get back on their feet. However, they remained on their ranch, persevered, and in August 1911 appeared in an *Eagle County Blade* article about their success in growing a bumper crop of strawberries. In addition to all of Mack Fleck's varied pursuits, he operated a blacksmith shop in Avon from around 1905 to 1915.

In 1919, Fleck sold his ranch near Avon to a Doctor Sawyer of Laramie, Wyoming. Sawyer reportedly was a sheep rancher and desired the property to use as a home ranch for his Colorado operations. In October, Mack and May Fleck finished harvesting their crops and turned the property over to the new owner. They announced that they would be visiting family in Kansas, and then intended to settle on the eastern slope of Colorado, where he planned to open an automotive garage. Before they left, their friends and neighbors showed up at the Fleck ranch house late in the evening, woke the couple from their bed, and threw a surprise party in their honor.

After leaving Avon, the Flecks ended up settling in Salida, west of Cripple Creek. In September 1925, Mack Fleck traveled to Long Beach, California by auto. While visiting his daughter and son-in-law there, he died on 4 February 1926 due to a case of pneumonia aggravated by asthma.

Conclusions

Based upon the findings of this project, the following conclusions are made regarding the Mack Fleck Ditch:

- Although the ditch would normally be considered an important late 19th century and early 20th century remnant of Avon's agricultural heritage, it has largely been erased from the landscape. This was the result of

both erosion and modern development along its course. Consequently, it appears unlikely to be eligible for National or State Register designation. For the same reason, the Mack Fleck ditch does not appear to be a good candidate for local listing.

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"Sketches of Some of the Earlier Pioneers." 11 November 1921, p. 1

Holy Cross Trail (Red Cliff)

"Mack Gaylord Fleck, 6 February 1926

United States Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office, 1882 Plat Map, Township 5 South, Range 81 West.

United States Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office, 1942 Resurvey of the 1882 Plat Map, Township 5 South, Range 81 West.

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United States Census Records. Eagle River, Summit County, Colorado, 1880.

United States Census Records. Minturn Precinct, Eagle County, Colorado, 1900 & 1910.

United States Geological Service, Edwards Topographic Quadrangle, 1962 (revised 1987)

United States Geological Service, Grouse Mountain Topographic Quadrangle, 1962 (revised 1987)

United States Geological Service, Minturn Topographic Quadrangle, 1970 (revised 1987)

Photographs of the Mack Fleck Ditch



**Segment of the Ditch in the Tree Line South of Highway 6
View to the West**



Segment of the Ditch in the Tree Line South of Highway 6

View to the East
Aerial Photograph of the Avon Area
October 1970



The Mack Fleck Ditch is found in the upper center of the photograph. In this image, it can be seen extending from its headgate along Beaver Creek, wrapping around the bluff at center, and then heading toward the upper left of the photo along the south side of Highway 6.