

## **The Highland Ditch**

**Extracted from a paper by the same name, originally written in 1889 by L.C. Mead.**

By, Pauli Driver Smith for Highland Ditch Company Annual Shareholders Meeting, Feb. 7, 2009

On February, 21, 1889, Lorin Cassandre Mead, presented a paper for the Highlandlake Lecture Course, entitled “The Highland Ditch. This was a first person account of the building of the Highland Ditch, and probably one of the more complete primary sources still in existence.

L. C. Mead was the founder of the community of Highlandlake, named after his favorite Sir Walter Scott, poem, “The Lady of the Lake. He also named the lake and his first son Malcolm, after the same. Based on this history, and his early involvement with the Highland Ditch Company, it is probable that he also named the ditch company.

Mead was a charter member of the Highland Ditch Company, serving as their treasurer. He also worked as one of the surveyors and eventually as superintendent of construction for the ditch.

Once the ditch was finished, Mead went on to serve our area and the State of Colorado’s water needs by being elected in 1879, to the first State Legislature, where he chaired the Irrigation Committee and was responsible for passage of many irrigation laws still followed to this day. After his term in the State Legislature, he served two terms as Weld. County Clerk and Recorder. Mead died in 1908 and is buried in the Highlandlake Cemetery.

A.D. Holt, also a well-known figure in the Highland Ditch history, and whose name appears on many of the early stock certificates, located his farm approximately one mile south and west of present day Mead.

George Davis was an early Congregational Missionary to Colorado, founding the first four United Church of Christ – Congregational churches in Colorado, including the Longmont and Highlandlake churches. He arrived in Colorado about 1857 or 1858.

### Time Line

- 1870. The organizers of the Colorado-Chicago Colony, which was to become Longmont, purchased 20,000 acres surrounding Longmont on the north, east, and west, from the railroad. The alternate sections of government land were pre-empted in the name of fictitious persons, giving the colony about 50,000 acres of land.
- L. C. and Elizabeth Mead arrived in Longmont, the last day of June 1871. They noted that Longmont, while only a few months old, already had around 500 citizens who were “full of faith in the enterprise so auspiciously commenced.”
- After spending the Sabbath in Longmont, the Mead’s took Dave Baumert’s stage to Greeley, to look for land there. Another passenger on the stage was a young, sandy complexioned, Scotchman by the name of A. D. Holt. Finding Greeley too “booming” the Mead’s and Holt returned to Longmont.
- The colony was set up so that every man who paid them \$155 had the right to buy two lots in town at the low price of \$50 ea and then he might also select an additional 40 acres of land (which the \$155 was to pay for), together with a perpetual water right sufficient to irrigate it. Mead chose 40 acres surrounding a prairie pothole, he first noticed on his trip to Greeley, and named it Highland Lake. The community surrounding the lake became known as Highlandlake.
- By the summer of 1871, there was already a ditch called the Pleasant Valley Ditch, down to a point north of town. The big colony ditch, to be called the Excelsior Ditch, was surveyed, but the 18 foot wide, and 3 foot deep ditch was too large to be completed that first season. The summer of 1871, a meeting was called, and two companies, Abram Clawson and Head, and Holt & Co. (which L.C. was one of the partners) were awarded contracts.
- Because of various delays, it was November before the contracts were signed, and then they had to go to Denver for tools and horse-feed, build shanties to live in and stables for their horses, and to top it off, the winter set in early that year.

- To get through the winter, Holt and company, located a camp on the line of the ditch directly west of the south end of Terry Lake, built three shanties, all joined together, and called their camp, Ditchville. Three families lived there that winter the Shaw's, the Hinman's, and the Mead's. A.D. Holt lived with the Mead's and had a bedroom four feet wide between the Mead's room and the Hinman's. Privacy was non-existent. Mead comments that, "it would not do for the women to scold, because they could be heard by the other families. This enforced restraint and produced a wonderful effect upon their habits."
- 'To keep themselves occupied until work could start in the spring, they carved croquet balls out of pine knots, playing many a game on the beaten snow and organized a literary society where spirited debates were held almost nightly. To keep warm, they hauled wood from the hills and chopped it for firewood, and mostly tended to their horses. Sometimes they chased antelope over the plains, and one time, A.D. Holt actually succeeded in hitting one with a rock, whereupon, they then marched home in triumph, dinner in hand.
- Starting about February 17, 1872, they started work on the ditch in earnest and worked without interruption for 30 days. Then word came that the colony's treasurer had made some very bad investments and Longmont was broke. Since there was no more money in the coffers, work on the ditch would have to stop. To pay them for the work already done, rather than the promised money, the colony offered each of them two lots in town.
- Because of the financial collapse of the colony, the \$155 the Meads paid upfront for their 40 acres of land (they had a warranty deed) was also among the missing funds. Since only 1/5<sup>th</sup> of the purchase money had actually been paid to the railroad company, they were also in danger of losing their land if they did not come up with the additional money themselves. To add injury to insult, if they wanted any of the promised water for their land, they would have to build the ditch themselves.
- Thus the Highland Ditch Company was organized in the summer of 1872. Investors in Chicago promised funding. The money was to arrive in the fall, so in the meantime Mead worked some land shares along some of the older ditches and did everything he could to earn

an extra dollar or two.

- Fall arrived, but the expected money from Chicago did not, probably due to losses from the great Chicago fire the year before. The Mead family's future looked serious, with little money or food, or even clothing, and winter was coming on. It was also becoming increasingly obvious that unless a miracle happened, the Highland Ditch was not going to be dug.
- Misery loves company and it was a good thing that there were so many of them, as they needed to dig a ditch 25 miles long, and 1800 feet of it was through solid rock. The cost was estimated to be \$50,000. A common term about the project was "root, hog, or die." Many turned the saying around to 'root, hog, and die.'
- Unhappy with the way the current board trustees were running the company, a meeting was hastily called and it was decided to reorganize. Mostly by getting rid of the old trustees. George Davis, was elected president and L.C. Mead was elected as treasurer and made responsible not only for the books, but also for soliciting subscriptions to the stock.
- Several days later, Mead had sold \$13,000 in stock subscriptions. The colony, which had already spent about \$7,000 in surveying, work, etc. offered to sell the ditch company in return for shares of stock. Their offer was accepted, but sources of cash investments continued to be almost impossible to find.
- While the banks in Longmont were willing to give loans at a shocking 24%, most people felt that stock in the Highland Ditch company would never pay dividends. In addition, everyone in Longmont and the surrounding farms was entitled to receive water from the ditch whether they owned stock or not, so why pay for what they felt they should be getting free.
- Finally, late in the fall of 1872, someone in Chicago was persuaded buy \$500 worth of stock – up front, and the company was finally able to purchase the needed tools and powder to blast out the 1800 feet of rock at the entrance to the canyon.

- Blasting through the rock canyon, started in early winter of 1872. George Davis acted as foreman, and his wife, Mary, took care of the boarding house and the responsibility of keeping everyone fed.
- Mead took on the added duties of superintendent of construction. He noted in his paper that it took a lot of strong nerves to start a \$50,000 project with only about \$1,000 left in the bank (after purchasing the required supplies and tools). What drove them on was that the rise and fall of Longmont (and thus their own fortunes), depended on this ditch being built. Without it, three-sevenths of the St. Vrain Valley would be without irrigation water.
- A few weeks after work started, there was a strike, and most of the workers walked off the job. It seems that several of them felt that another one of the workers should be the foreman instead of Davis, however, the trustees disagreed, especially since Davis's wife, Mary, who ran the boarding house and cooked the meals was a pretty darn good cook. I suspect that since Davis was also the president of the company, that played a major hand in the final decision as well.
- Another hasty meeting was called, and one of the stockholders, an angry – and obviously frustrated - Mr. Starbird, offered to pay 50 cents on a dollar for a substantial number of additional stocks so that workers could be paid with cash rather than stocks.
- With the new flow of cash, posters appeared all over town, offering \$1.00 per day plus room and board, to any man who would work on the ditch. People were desperate for any kind of work, and a \$1.00 a day, plus room and board was like a godsend. The strike was over, and the strikers, along with a number of new workers, returned to work.
- It took all winter to cut through the rock and so one sunny day in March of 1873, a large group went up to the canyon to have a picnic and a day of rejoicing. Lawyers and talking men made speeches, and everyone was happy as larks. However, when the water was turned into the ditch, it was found that it was leaking badly through cracks in the rock in the bottom of the ditch, so all went home much more sober than when they arrived.
- Eventually they had to flume the whole of the rocky channel, as nothing else seemed to stop the leaking.

- By early spring of 1873, the ditch was finished to about where Judge Terry's farm was (probably located somewhere around Terry Lake).
- Mike Howlett, a railroad contractor, who had no work on his hands, was hired to dig the remainder of the ditch to the depth of one foot on the lower side, and level on the bottom. He was supposed to complete it by the spring of 1873. However, he only completed it to Howlett Lake, where he owned land, and quickly lost interest in doing any further work.
- The spring of 1873 was dry, and while L. C. Mead's wheat crop came up, by the first of June, it began to die. With 18.5 miles of ditch left to dig, Mead was desperate.
- Mead announced that he was going to finish building the ditch from the Howlett lateral to Highland Lake. He did the first plowing, and then went up the ditch, appealing to ten or twelve men, offering them \$10 worth of stock for a day's work. They came to help, rather than to get paid, and work hard they must of, because Mead claimed to "have never seen so much dirt moved by the same number of teams in one day, before or since."
- With these men's help, both Mead and Waite were able to get water to their farms in time to save their crops. After running the water for the first time into Highland Lake, they discovered that that the water washing the dirt had deepened the ditch so much that no further excavating was necessary, excepting in a few rocky places.
- The first three or so years, there were no dividends paid by the company, as all money was used to pay bills, improve the ditch and build the flume in the canyon.
- About 1875, the company adopted the rule that in the case of scarcity of water, stockholders had the preference, to the amount of seven inches to a share of stock. This finally encouraged people to buy stock, and all available stock quickly sold. Shortly thereafter, the first dividends (about 15%) were paid.
- After the first dividends were paid, people started clamoring for stock, and the price quickly started rising from 50 cents on the dollar, to 150 cents and then 300 cents. Because there was no more available stocks, the people who once refused to buy the stock were now angry because the stock was not more evenly distributed.

- This resulted in another ditch being built and a reservoir company organized. Eventually both companies were consolidated. I do not know the name of this other company.
- Sometime before Mead wrote his paper (1889), an auditor, commissioned to examine the businesses of all the then ditch companies in Colorado, concluded that the Highland Ditch company sold water for the lowest price and declared the largest dividends of any company in the state.