



BLUE MESA RESERVOIR

by Vic Lucero, July, 2007



Blue Mesa Dam

I attended Western State College from 1968 to 1972 and during this time I enjoyed many wonderful experiences at Blue Mesa. It is located just eight miles west of Gunnison so I was able to slip away between classes for a little fishing. I am not able to spend much time at the reservoir now but I do have many fond memories of Blue Mesa from my college days.

Blue Mesa Dam was completed in 1965 creating the largest body of water in Colorado. Blue Mesa is one of the three dams designated as the Wayne Aspinall Storage Unit of the Upper Colorado River Storage Project (UCRSP). The other two dams are the Morrow Point Dam and the Crystal Dam 12 miles and 18 miles, respectively, below Blue Mesa Dam. The purpose of the three dams is to store water, produce electricity and regulate flow. Together the three dams produce enough hydroelectric power to support a community of 240,000. The Blue Mesa Dam is a 390 ft. high earth and rock fill dam with an elevation of 7,519 ft. The reservoir is 20 miles long with 96 miles of shoreline.

Human artifacts found in the area date back 10,000 years including remains of structures called "wickiups" that date back 4,500 years. Fur traders trapped in the area along the Old Spanish Trail from Santa Fe to Los Angeles. In 1882 the Denver & Rio Grand Western Railroad built a narrow gauge railroad which spurred the development of Gunnison and other small towns in the area. The railroad transported ore, coal, cattle and other goods and was operated until 1949.

Just 3 years after Blue Mesa was constructed an ambitious young man from Westminster Colorado moved to Gunnison to attend Western State College. Western State had somehow gained a reputation for being a party school. If there was a lot of partying going on, I wouldn't have known because my roommates and I were, at every opportunity, enjoying the hunting and fishing in the area. Much of our time was spent at Blue Mesa. Fishing was the biggest attraction for me. We used to go out to the dam between 10pm and 12am. The dam was lighted attracting some very large trout. Through experimentation we discovered that a green spoon with black speckles and a silver back was an assume lure. We caught many trout over 3 pounds this way. We would frequently take our catch to the Cattleman's Inn in Gunnison. They had a deal where you gave them 4 trout and they would cook two of them for you served with salad, a potato and a beverage for only \$2.00 (gas was only 45 cents/gallon); a great deal for a hungry college student with limited resources.

The ice fishing was also great. I remember one very cold windy day we decided to go out to Blue Mesa for some ice fishing. We had packed our lunch in a paper grocery bag. I sat the bag down on the ice to start drilling a fishing hole. The wind grabbed our lunch and pushed it down the lake on the smooth ice surface. I began to chase after it but it was soon out of sight.

Not all of my experiences were wonderful. One of my roommates father loaned us his motor boat. We decided to take it out to the lake one weekend in May 1969 for some waterskiing. I did not know how to water ski so I got drug throw the frigged water for about two miles before I decided to give it up. My ego caused me to stay in that water for far too long. I got out of the water and got a case of the chills and shakes that lasted for about 4 hours. I am surprised that I was able to father children after that experience. Take my word for it, Blue Mesa is not a good water skiing destination. Another demonstration of poor judgment came when my room mates talked me into going with them to Blue Mesa to jump off the bridge that crosses the lake at the inlet. It was in the spring and an early run-off had filled the lake to capacity bringing the water level to within 15 to 20 feet of the bridge. I was the last to jump and the only one to perform a perfect 10.0 belly flop. You only need to do that once to satisfy your urge to jump off a bridge into freezing water.

Then there were the keggers at the Stueben Creek inlet. There was a big mud hole that I got drug through a few times when I was on the loosing tug of war team. The keggers were only \$1.50 for all you could drink. Maybe the Stueben Creek Keggers contributed to Western State's party image. They may also have contributed to me becoming a city water department employee instead of a dentist like my mother wanted me to be. There were many more great experiences that keep Blue Mesa close to my heart. I would recommend spending some of your recreational time at Blue Mesa; you won't be sorry. If you have some of your own experiences surrounding Blue Mesa, I would appreciate

you calling me and sharing them with me (my number is on the website). We may even include them in a future Clarion edition.