

Reflections: Dillon Reservoir by Ann Depperschmidt, Denver Water Community Relations, April, 2009

Just after Ron Sampson graduated from Idaho Springs High School in 1960, several of his friends spent a summer moving the Dillon Cemetery to higher ground.

They were helping Denver Water make way for a new reservoir, one that would eventually become one of Colorado's largest bodies of water.

"I thought it was exciting," said Sampson, who now lives in Arizona. "It provided a lot of jobs."

In the early part of the 20th century, it became clear that Denver's growing population would need more water supply than the South Platte River could provide. Officials started looking at West Slope water as a way to supplement East Slope water. In the 1950s, crews began building the Roberts Tunnel, a concrete-lined, 23-mile tunnel that could move water from the West Slope through the mountains to the East Slope.

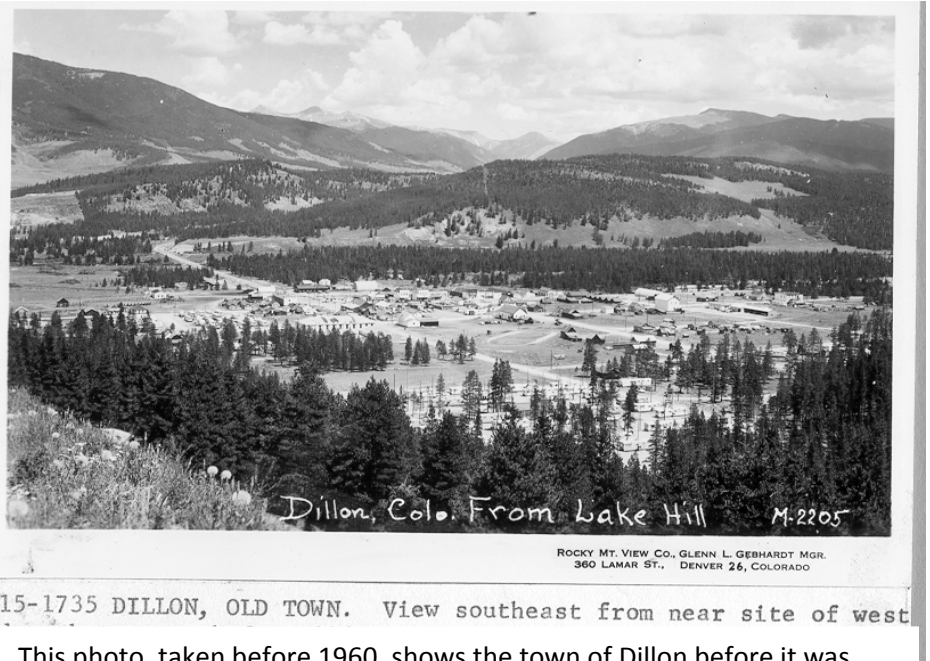
As part of the tunnel project, Denver Water moved forward with plans to build Dillon Reservoir at the west portal of Roberts Tunnel. To do that, however, the water utility had to relocate the town of Dillon.

"I remember some of the old-timers arguing about whether it was good or bad," Sampson said. "But all of us kids were excited."

The site, about 70 miles west of Denver, was ideal for Denver Water because of the large basin for water storage, the ability to send water via gravity down the Roberts Tunnel and the confluence of three rivers – the Blue River, Snake River and Ten Mile Creek – according to Sandra Mather's book, *Dillon, Denver and the Dam*.

Denver Water had been buying land near the site since the Depression, and by the mid 1950s, it owned most of the town of Dillon. In the late 1950s, Dillon's town government began making plans to relocate the town, choosing its current location from three possible sites.

Moving the cemetery was one of many things that had to happen before the dam could be built – vacant houses had to be torn down, 13 miles of highway had to be rerouted, and a hydroelectric generating plant and a U.S. Forest Service ranger station had to be moved. Most townspeople took advantage of Denver Water's offer to rebuild or relocate the buildings that had to be removed for the project.



This photo, taken before 1960, shows the town of Dillon before it was relocated to make way for Dillon Reservoir.



Crews work on building the reservoir's "Morning Glory" spillway, which discharges water into the Blue River downstream of the dam.

In the end, it took two years and 12 million cubic yards of fill to build the 231-foot-tall dam. When the reservoir opened in 1963, its 254,036 acre-feet capacity almost doubled Denver's raw water storage. And, with more than 26 miles of shoreline, it quickly became one of the prime recreation spots in the state.



"People absolutely love Dillon," said Denver Water's recreation manager Neil Sperandeo, who, as a child in Arvada read stories in the Denver newspapers about Dillon Reservoir's construction. "You can stay in the Dillon area and be entertained all day long."

The high alpine reservoir is easily accessible to people on the east and west of the state via Interstate 70. The towns of Dillon and Frisco have marinas at the reservoir, and boating, fishing, camping and picnicking are all popular activities there.

Dillon Reservoir is a popular place for people to go boating, as seen here in this photo taken of Dillon Marina in late fall.

In the late 1980s, Denver Water signed an intergovernmental agreement with the U.S. Forest Service, the towns of Dillon and Frisco, and Summit County to manage the recreation of Dillon Reservoir. The agencies employ boat patrols and maintain 313 campsites and various picnic sites and trails in the area, Sperandeo said.

Throughout the summer, people camp, sailboat, kayak, bike, fish and enjoy the mountains surrounding Dillon. And, on a good windy day in the winter, people ice sail and kite board across the frozen reservoir.

“It used to be that the area’s economy was based on skiing in the winters,” Sperandeo said. “Now Dillon is a draw to the area in the summers too.”



Throughout the summer, people camp, sailboat, kayak, bike and fish at Dillon