

SAN LUIS PEOPLES' DITCH  
San Luis  
Costilla County  
Colorado

HAER CO-96  
*HAER CO-96*

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

FIELD RECORDS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

# HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

## SAN LUIS PEOPLES' DITCH

HAER No. CO-96

**Location:** San Luis, Costilla County, Colorado

**Dates of Construction:** 1851 or 1852

**Current Owner, Use:** San Luis Peoples' Ditch Association, irrigation

**Significance:** The San Luis Peoples' Ditch is the oldest irrigation ditch in Colorado in continuous operation. It is representative of organized irrigation efforts initiated by the Spanish in the Southwest.

**Description:** The ditch is located outside the town of San Luis in southern Colorado at an elevation of 8,000'. Culebra Creek, originating from high in the mountains to the south and east of town, furnishes an adequate supply of water to the canal. Today, the San Luis Peoples' Ditch is about 4 miles long and used to water approximately 1,600 acres of livestock feed (such as alfalfa) and garden plots.

A new steel and concrete diversion and headgate structure was added in 1969 to replace the original headgates.

**History:** Spanish-American settlers from New Mexico founded San Luis in 1851. The ditch is said to have been laid out in 1851 or 1852 by digging a small trench with a shovel and letting the water follow. A wooden plow was then used to enlarge the trench to a size sufficient for carrying water to the fields nearby. Land along the ditch was divided into narrow strips so that each land owner would have an irrigated field and land for grazing and timber. Each settler was to receive a strip of land 100 varas wide adjoining the ditch.<sup>1</sup> An additional strip of 100 varas was added for each family member. The narrow strips were originally 16 to 20 miles long and ran north and south across the valley. In 1890, the District Court of Costilla County awarded the San Luis Peoples' Ditch priority number one in water district 24 of water division 3. The allotment of 23 cubic feet per second for irrigation of 900 acres was dated April 10, 1952.

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<sup>1</sup> A vara is equal to 33- $\frac{1}{3}$ " and therefore each parcel of land is less than 100 yards wide.

**Sources:**

*A Hundred Years of Irrigation in Colorado*. Denver: The Colorado Water Conservation Board; Fort Collins: Colorado Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1952.

Cheetham, Francis T. "Early Settlements of Southern Colorado." *The Colorado Magazine* V, no. 1 (February 1928): 1-8.

Smith, S. Eban, Town Clerk, San Luis, Colorado. Interview by field team, July 23, 1971.

Steinel, Alvin. *History of Agriculture in Colorado*. Fort Collins, CO: n.p., 1926.

Van Diest, Edmond C. "Early History of Costilla County." *The Colorado Magazine* V, no. 4 (August 1928): 140-143.

**Historians:** Steve Rae and T. Lindsay Baker, July 23 and October 2, 1971

**Project**

**Information:**

The San Luis Peoples' Ditch was inventoried for the Historic American Engineering Record as part of the Southwest Water Resources Project, a joint project with the Texas Tech Water Resources Center. The survey was subsequently published as *Water for the Southwest: Historical Survey and Guide to Historic Sites* by the American Society of Civil Engineers in September 1973.