

Flume Brought Water and Recreation to El Cajon Valley

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Many parts of El Cajon Valley have underground springs and high levels of groundwater, so it was easy for settlers in 1869 and later to dig wells to provide water for their households and gardens. But, the wells did not supply enough water for field crops.

San Diegans needed water, too. In 1886, English investors started a 33-1/2 – mile-long redwood flume line, which ran from Lake Cuyamaca to the Grossmont knoll on Mount Helix. The 9 million board feet of lumber for the flume were floated from Northern California and required digging eight tunnels through local mountains. One tunnel was 1,900 feet long.

Then came construction of 315 trestles to raise and secure the flume. This required 100 wagons, more than 1,000 men and 800 horses and mules. Men building the flume lived in tents, although enough of them wanted to sleep indoors that Amaziah Knox added 40 rooms to his hotel to accommodate them and others passing through the valley.

It took four years to build the flume. When completed, it ran from Lake Cuyamaca through mountains, over passes, by Boulder Creek and the El Cajon Valley before ending near the Ireton stage stop on Grossmont knoll. It was the longest wooden flume in the world.

Along the flume, water was released to backcountry ranchers for agricultural purposes. At Grossmont the water was transferred to a pipe, which took the water into San Diego. That transfer site today is parkland on Wakarusa Street, near Grossmont Hospital.

A problem arose when the flume was finished: What to do with debris, logs and dead animals that regularly dammed the flow water?

Someone figured out that the flume could be patrolled by flat-bottom boats. The idea inspired a new sport. Stringing boats together with chain and rope, boatloads of adventurous souls began “shooting the flume,” floating from Cuyamaca to Grossmont in a fraction of the time it would take to ride or walk. Unfortunately for ranchers along the line, these noisy excursions did not end at dusk.

Miners, for instance, after enthusiastically imbibing whiskey during an evening of cards, had a habit of flinging themselves aboard the little boats to sing rousing renditions of “Oh, Dem Golden Slippers,” “Alouette” and “Sweet Adeline.”

Accompanying the boozy chorus were small explosions whenever riders discarded whiskey bottles against boulders and rocks.

Unfortunately for the investors, rowdy riders were the least of their problems. As impressive as the flume was, the sudden end of the land boom in 1888 and a seven-year drought ended any hope of profit. Portions of the flume can still be seen hugging the backcountry foothills. A newer metal flume carries water from the Cuyamaca Mountains to backcountry preserves and lakes. But it remains San Diego's water, and when the city needs it, water is drained from the lakes and sent to the city . . . to the loud dissatisfaction of fishermen and boaters.