

Locally there has been much talk about the future of the water supply. Citizens wonder about the addition of new reservoirs or expansion of existing ones. All this discussion of the future strikes a curiosity for the past.

How long ago were reservoirs introduced to North America? Recent research indicates that reservoirs have been a component of the American landscape since as early as 750 A.D. Anasazi Indians created these early reservoirs in what is now known as Mesa Verde National Park.

Mesa Verde, or “green table” in Spanish, is so named as the area sits upon a lush green mesa in Southwestern Colorado, just 8 miles from Cortez and approximately 35 miles from Durango. Much of this lushness was lost a few years ago to fires, but the area is regenerating and will soon again be a beautiful “green table.”

Mesa Verde is best known for its elaborate stone villages built amongst the canyon walls and commonly referred to as “cliff dwellings.” These cliff dwellings were occupied for only the last 75 to 100 years of the Anasazi’s over 700-year occupation of the area. Their inhabitation began around 600 A.D.

The long existence of this population has provided ample opportunities for study of early Indian cultures. Mesa Verde alone has 4,000 known archeological sites. It is the first and only cultural park within our National Park System. Included in these 4,000 archeological sites are four locations now recognized as ancient reservoirs.

For years archeologists had speculated on the existence of a water system built by the Anasazi. The sites that are now recognized as reservoirs were originally suspected to be amphitheaters, as the arid environment of Colorado did not lend itself to the creation and use of reservoirs.

Further research has however shown that the Anasazi did indeed capture and store water at Mesa Verde, thus permitting their long existence in this arid land. Ultimately a drought from which the reservoirs could not recover occurred and the pueblo Indians from Mesa Verde scattered to the surrounding areas of Colorado, Arizona and Northern New Mexico, although their reservoirs had likely prolonged their existence at Mesa Verde.

*(Many believe this drought was brought upon the Anasazi as punishment. Folklore has it that Kokepelli, the pueblo Indian Christ figure, visited the Anasazi last in his travels to teach the pueblo people agriculture. The Anasazi were so upset that he visited them last that they murdered him in a fit of jealousy before he was able to teach them how to survive through drought.)*

The first reservoir built at Mesa Verde, Morefield, was nearly 200 feet in diameter and held up to 120,000 gallons of water. It remained operational for as many as

350 years. Later, the rudimentary tools and technology used to build Morefield were put to use in the construction of Box Elder, Far View and Sagebrush reservoirs. The later two being used until the Anasazi vacated Mesa Verde.

In September 2004, nearly 900 years after the Anasazi left Mesa Verde, The American Society of Civil Engineers designated these four early reservoirs within Mesa Verde National Park as Historic Civil Engineering Landmarks.

As we plan for the next 50 years of our local water supply it is humbling to think that public water supply planning has been occurring in North America for over 1,200 years.