

Hondo Valley acequias: Engineering marvels

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About 200 years ago, Hispano settlers in the Hondo Valley undertook an impressive feat of engineering: the construction of a miles-long acequia to carry water from the Río Hondo, along a steep hillside, to a series of fields that sit on a shelf of land perched between the valley and the Río Grande Gorge.

Looking north from the edge of the Hondo mesa, the acequia gives the illusion that it's steadily gaining altitude. In fact, if you trace the path of the Atalaya on a topographic map, it mirrors the same contour line from its diversion point just below the cliffs of Cañoncito until it crosses beneath NM 522 more than two miles away. According to the topo map, the elevation of the acequia falls only 40 feet while covering that rocky, arroyo-riddled distance. In that same stretch, the Río Hondo falls about 200 feet.

"It's amazing they could do this at all," says Richard McCracken, a commissioner on the Atalaya. He points to the spot on a map where the acequia diverts from the Río Hondo and shakes his head. "If this had been two feet higher, they probably couldn't have done it. They couldn't have gone any further up the river with the intake because they're right along a cliff." For the first two miles, the acequia clings to the side of a steep slope on the north side of the Hondo valley. The acequia follows the contour of the hill, and in some places, fill was used to build up the mountain to keep the water flowing.

The ingenuity it took to construct the Atalaya is mirrored by the Cuchilla ditch upstream. The Cuchilla shuttles water from the Río Hondo, along a steep embankment on the south side of the Hondo valley to the flatlands of Des Montes.

While the actual date of construction of these ditches is hotly debated, both were built sometime in the early 1800s with the same rudimentary tools — wood-hardened picks and shovels, and plenty of pure brawn. "It's really a testament to those early people, to their ingenuity," says Jai Cross, a commissioner on the Atalaya ditch. "You can imagine they're out there with horses or oxen, cutting through rock and the vegetation that's always been there. My God, what a labor."

According to historian John Baxter, the growing population of Taos proper led to the establishment of new communities like Arroyo Hondo in around 1815. Settlers immediately got to work digging the ditches that now permeate the valley. Before long, much of the rich valley bottom was put into production. While the fields had poorer soil and would be harder to irrigate, the flatlands of the mesa on the north side of the valley offered more room to expand the agrarian community.

“These are probably the last fields they were going to irrigate because the valley was taken,” McCracken says. “I don’t know why anybody would come up here otherwise.”

Spanish records show that in 1825, 36 settlers asked permission to occupy the mesa irrigated by the Atalaya. Baxter notes in his book that language in documents from the time suggest the settlers replaced Hispanos that had previously lived on the land and left.

The exact date of construction of the Atalaya has tremendous import to its parcientes today. New Mexico water law gives priority to the oldest water users. With so many acequias tapping the Río Hondo, there has been plenty of squabbling between residents of Hondo, Valdéz and Des Montes over who has first dibs.

Officially, the Atalaya has a priority date of 1825, which makes it one of the most junior ditches on the Hondo river system. While it’s only 10 years behind other Hondo acequias, it’s an eternity when it comes to water law. The disputed dates were somewhat resolved when the Hondo ditches agreed to a water sharing agreement to ensure no irrigators were left dry.

Questionable priority dates aren’t the only challenge the Atalaya is facing. Dwindling water supply is also a big problem.

Willows, which bound nearly the entire ditch, soak up a lot of the water. Leakage in the sandy soil along the ditch route also contributes to water loss. Even evaporation is a problem since water moves very slowly along the almost level ditch. Sections of the ditch are almost like a lake. “Combining all of that, there simply isn’t enough water now” McCracken says. “Whether there ever was, I don’t know.”

Also, because the acequia must traverse such challenging terrain, the ditch is constantly being washed out. Fixing the ditch in these spots takes a lot of work. And because the Atalaya irrigates just 300 acres owned by 40 people, there aren’t a lot of parcientes to lend a hand or cover the cost of maintenance.

Cross says things were probably even tougher for those who first used the ditch two centuries ago. “They must have had all kinds of blowouts,” Cross says. “If we’re still having problems, imagine what it was like before the banks were compacted. Every year must have been a series of disasters. And yet they persevered.”



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