

JOHN HATCHER DITCH  
R.L. Bar Ranch  
Trinidad vicinity  
Las Animas County  
Colorado

HAER CO-94  
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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

## JOHN HATCHER DITCH

### HAER No. CO-94

- Location:** R.L. Bar Ranch, Trinidad vicinity, Las Animas County, Colorado
- Dates of Construction:** September 1846 – April 1847
- Engineer:** John Hatcher, foreman
- Original Use:** Irrigation
- Current Use:** Part of Lewelling-McCormick Consolidated Ditch, irrigation
- Significance:** The John Hatcher Ditch is one of the oldest examples of Anglo-American irrigation in what is now the Southwest. It is clearly the oldest irrigation ditch in Colorado, although it has not been in continuous use.
- Description:** The John Hatcher Ditch is located on the south side of the Purgatoire River, about 20 miles downstream from Trinidad, Colorado. The original ditch, begun in 1846, runs southeast parallel to the river and is about 1-<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> miles long. In 1885, Calvin Jones, a long-time resident of the area, estimated Hatcher's original ditch to be 4' wide, 3' deep, and capable of carrying 18" of water. It originally watered about 60 acres of corn. The ditch is now part of the Lewelling-McCormick Consolidated Ditch, a 6-mile long ditch delivering 3.75 cubic feet of water per second for irrigation of 300 acres.
- History:** Originally begun in September 1846, the John Hatcher Ditch is the oldest irrigation ditch still in use in Colorado. It was built by a gang of fifteen or sixteen Mexican laborers supervised by John Hatcher, an employee of Bent, St. Vrain, and Company. The site was chosen midway between Taos and Bent's Fort to serve as a ranch and as an intermediate stop for trade wagons passing between the two points. The purpose of farming at the site was to grow corn for feeding oxen pulling the trade wagons.
- Work on the ditch stopped during the winter of 1846-47 but started again in spring 1847. In the last week of April 1847, the first water flowed in the ditch. However, the ditch was little used because the ranch on the Purgatoire was abandoned in autumn 1847. There were some unsuccessful efforts to use the Hatcher ditch in the next two decades, but it

was basically not in use until 1865 when J.W. Lewelling incorporated it into the Lewelling-McCormick Consolidated Ditch as the central section.

**Sources:**

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**Historians:** Steve Rae and T. Lindsay Baker, July 22, 1971

**Project**

**Information:** The John Hatcher 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.