

The Blanding Tunnel

Albert R. Lyman

INTRODUCTION: The City of Blanding, located in the Four-Corners region of southeastern Utah, operates and maintains a 5,400-foot long Blanding Tunnel. Conceived in the early part of this century, the tunnel—which delivers water through the Blue Mountains from Indian Creek south to Johnson—represents a monumental effort by citizens to bring culinary water to their community. The short history below is testament to the difficulties of developing water in San Juan County.

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(From: *History of Blanding, 1905–1955*)

In giving the long and devious account of this tunnel, I shall quote freely from Thora Black Bradford, who has a right to know more about it than any other woman. As a true daughter of David P. Black, here inherent love for him, and for his projects, one of which was the tunnel, she did more than any other woman in the long fight of making the cherished dream come true.

EARLY EFFORTS

Her account begins: "In the spring of 1914, while David P. Black was working at the Grayson Saw Mill, he spent a lot of time hiking around the mountains, and looking it over to see where the most water could come from. He got the idea then that there was a good stream on the other side of the mountain, and some day he would go over there and see. In the year 1919 he tried in April to go but could not get on the other side for snow drifts. He waited till the middle of June, and then rode a horse up on the south side, but even yet he couldn't ride a horse on the north side, but had to tie the horse up and walk on the snow drifts. He arrived home late that night with his clothes all torn from going through the brush, and wet and cold from wading in the snow. But he had found a beautiful stream of water, and believed that in some way it could be brought to the south side."

"In the spring of 1920 he took Uncle Ben Black up there to see that water, and Uncle Ben said, "Get Walter C. Lyman: he's the man that understands this sort of thing."

"Dave took Walter C. and road-surveying instruments up there. They camped there two nights and did some surveying to see if it would be practical to make a ditch over the lowest part of the summit. Walter C. was a spiritual man, and could see things which most people could not understand. He saw as in a dream the way things should go and would go. He said: "Brother Black, I think a tunnel could be built that would bring the water through the mountain, and be more practical and easier than a ditch."

She relates that Walter C. brought Peter Allan over to that Indian Creek stream and had him make a survey to determine which would be the most suitable place for a tunnel. He took with him also ten or a dozen of the leading men who, when they saw the crystal stream said, at their first sight of it, "We've simply got to have the water, regardless." Walter G. presented the project to the people of Blanding, radiating the same enthusiasm by which he had made converts to the Johnson Creek ditch seventeen years before. Yet now, as then, some people condemned it as visionary, fantastic, out of the question. It was a matter about which everybody liked to talk, either for or against.

On the 18th of July, 1921, a mass meeting was held to determine the prevailing sentiment. The cost of the tunnel then was estimated at \$50,000, and the majority of those present favored making a beginning. "David P. and Walter C. began to build a road straight up Johnson Creek to the mouth of the tunnel. It took a good four-horse team to pull much of a load. This was all donation work, and yet they had a very large group of men working on it. When the road was completed they moved in and built two long cabins, one of the south side and one of the north."

Then a little crew of men with their primitive equipment began a hole on each side of the mountain. It was like a brave little mouse nibbling at the hard crust of a ponderous log, and it was going to be thirty years before that little mouse and others after him gnawed a hole clear through. That thirty years, distracted by world-war and dark depression, was to bring times of distress and discouragement when the completion of the long hole would look like but a remote possibility, or no possibility at all. Uncle Walter, its chief advocate would die in that time, and instead of by his persuasion, the project would be driven by the sharp lash of necessity.

Nibbling away on the north side and south side, they had to timber every foot of the way, for they had not yet reached the petrified depths where the roof would sustain its own weight. At times before their enthusiasm grew wan, they had twenty men on the job, and they bored in the south side to a depth of 240 feet. The work was under the auspices of the White Mesa Irrigation Company, and it included the development of a mine in the nearby vicinity, from which it was hoped that enough could be made to complete the tunnel. Working for tunnel-stock and half-time wages was difficult for men with families, and the continuous grind of the undertaking impelled them to ask, "Do we really believe in the thing, or don't we."

Thora's account relates: "When the tunnel started they worked in shifts and the only light they had to work with was candles. It was all hand drilled, and the muck had to be wheeled out with wheelbarrows. Every young man in this generation should swing a single jack or double jack just a few times, so they would know what these men were talking about when they started that tunnel through the mountain. In the spring of 1922 all the men got the flu and sent to town for help. Sam Wright came up and acted as doctor and nurse till they recovered."

The crew dwindled to a few in number, and when Uncle Walter found himself alone on the job, his efforts seemed to promise more from the mine than the tunnel, and he worked there for long months at a time, alone but for his faithful wife, Leah, to whom also credit should be given as a contributor to the tunnel.

As Thora tells it, "When the tunnel shut down and the gold mine people even accuse Walter C. of mining for his own personal interest, and pushed with the hope of getting money to go on with it, some said they wouldn't have anything more to do with it. Walter C. Lyman was a man who never had a selfish thought; his whole time was given to the interest of San Juan and its people. If he had been looking out for himself, he could have been a wealthy man. If he had worked the mine, it was for the sake of getting money for the tunnel."

On the 30th of June, 1924, a meeting of the people was called to decide what they wanted to do; the secretary was asked to write John A. Widstoe, asking him whether the tunnel project was feasible. On February 13th 1925 another tunnel meeting was called, and some people voted for it, others against it. They were not converted; stern necessity would have to rub its hot salt into them for twenty-five years, and then they would be willing to do what they could more easily have done before finances were convulsed by a terrible depression and everything else made subordinate to a world-war.

Uncle Walter pecked away at the mine, and he pointed out that even with such primitive equipment as he was using single-handed, he was driving his tunnels at a rate of from ten to twelve dollars a foot, and at that rate the tunnel could be built through the mountain for fifty or sixty thousand dollars. It could be done in the winter season when other work was slack, and when completed it would be our own, and no bonded bondage. The people wouldn't be persuaded; they would wait till the need became very great and borrow a staggering sum to complete the job, and then pay interest on the sum for years to come. No one could challenge Uncle Walter's figures, he had proved every word he said in his driving of 2,000 feet of shaft, which he explained was as much as two-fifths of the tunnel.

REORGANIZATION

In 1935 the believers in the project tried again to inject some life into it, but the unbelievers were still in the majority. Everybody had been bitten by the depression, and the hole through the mountain looked more impossible than ever.

Again to Thora's account: "All this time Walter C. and Marvin Lyman were fretting, and waiting to see the tunnel start up again. In the summer of 1939 they took George A. Hurst Jr., John D. Rogers and Durham Bayles over the mountain to see the water again. The stream looked good after coming out of town that was drying up, and they called a mass meeting and it was decided to start again."

Marvin Lyman and Vernon Rowley were sent to Salt Lake to file application, and when they returned a Tunnel Committee was organized to make collections, and a crew of men began a new road from the crossing of Johnson's Camp to the tunnel. They had A. Z. Richards come and make a new survey, and mark new beginnings for the tunnel, as the first shafts had caved in or washed away. At this time Uncle Walter got Vet Bradford to come for a while from the Blanding Mines, of which Vet was foreman, and take account of the survey, a strange thing of which we shall say more later on.

On September 27th that road began on a crossing over Cooley's Gulch, and by the 18th of October they had it so they could drive across, build houses and begin cleaning at the new mouth of the tunnel.

"Leah Lyman says that in all the years Walter C. Lyman worked on the mountain, the only Sunday he ever worked, was the Sunday before the crew started on Cooley's Gulch. He worked all day to shoot rocks out so the men could start on the road next day."

On the 17th of November, 1939, George Hurst and Marvin Lyman took provisions up and moved Walter C. and Leah to the cabins right at the mouth of tunnel. Then Edward Lyman, Brother Nix, Jim Carrol, and Lynn Thompson came and put up the blacksmith shop, made a good cellar where vegetables could be stored, piped water into the house, put in a water heater, and Lynn Lyman put in electric lights. At this time the first timbers were placed in the mouth of the tunnel, and the ball was rolling again. Marvin Lyman had been given the responsibility of keeping it going, and he started to hauling up material in his old truck.

Discarding all the hole that the little mouse had nibbled in eighteen years, the work began again on the raw and rocky outer surface of the mountain. The intention was that work should go on all winter and proceed steadily from there on. But, "Along about the first of January, Brother Lyman got sick, and as he didn't improve, Leonard Jacobs and Justin Black walked to town and got Lynn Lyman to come and move his father and Leah to town."

Ezra and Jess Walker took a contract to make 500 feet of tunnel, to be paid for by sale of stock in the project but some still hostile to the project made it hard sledding. Bill Sheppard, Heber Carroll and others took a contract to make a thousand feet, but with getting snowed in or snowed out the enterprise still had the habit of lagging and wearing a far-away look, On the 19th of July, 1943, Uncle Walter died; the chief crutch seemed to have slipped from under the limping project. Yet in some strange but very real way, Uncle Walter's mantel had fallen on his son Marvin, at least the mantel he had worn at the tunnel.

Quoting Thora again: "There had been about 800 feel of tunnel built, and things were still going slow. Marvin was still responsible to see that it kept going, so he asked Vet why they two didn't take a contract on it. They took a contract to make 1,000 feet. On July 25th, Vet and Kay Bradford and Alma Jones started on the work. Others came and helped with the work, and they bought a mucking machine which made the work go faster. In the first week of December they had to pull out as snow was too deep to make trips to town, and breaks in the machinery made the trips necessary.

She related that they moved back in the spring of '46, and in the rest of her account she gives the names of every one who came to them and how long they stayed. "When Marvin and Vet had finished their thousand feet, the town was broke so far as the tunnel was concerned, so the thing stopped for a year. In all these years the people of the town had been donating to the tunnel and no returns. Many were discouraged and didn't believe it would ever be built, so again it was hanging fire."

In that summer of 1946 the Forest Service made a road over the mountain and out to Monticello. It lured many Blanding people up to Lookout Point where they could view the dry town in the heart of the dry prairie, and going over the summit they could view the crystal water of Indian Creek running off to small purpose or to no purpose at all. The sight of it made quite a change in the minds of many who had been indifferent.

FINAL PROJECT

"The legislators had passed a bill by which money could be borrowed on water projects, so the Blanding Irrigation Company borrowed money to run on." They got a bonded loan of \$75,000, and the movement was underway for good; it was going to go; it had to go.

"Marvin and Vet decided to take a contract to finish the job. They hoped they might make back a little of the money they had lost on the first thousand feet. And it might be added here, Marvin wanted to see the tunnel completed even if it took all he had. The tunnel was his father's idea, he had worked hard to see it completed; it meant everything to him. Vet and his wife waned to see it completed before her father died; he was the one who found the water and he wanted to see it coming out on the south side. Marvin Lyman had a garage, and all it could make and then some was put into the tunnel to keep it from shutting down again. When it was finished he had \$10,000 on the books. He had not been able to improve his business or his building, and many of his customers had gone to more attractive places. Vet and his wife had been working for nothing but their board, while other people in the good times were making more money than ever before."

In explaining why Vet and Marvin had so much loss and delay in filling their contracts, she names their help to show what a rapid turn over of men they had to deal with; retarded always by some raw hands; who, when they had become proficient at the job, went somewhere else to make twice as much as they could get at the tunnel. And also: "Right after Marvin and Vet took the contract, wages, materials, powder, fuse and everything doubled in price. Jobs were more plentiful than they had ever been before in the country, and the men who stayed with the tunnel did it more to help out than for what they made."

[missing fragment ed.] be spoken of more in detail later on, was right on the job with his bulldog tenacity to make true the dream of forty years. And no less potent than Vet's purpose and stamina, was the steady pull and gentle persuasion of his wife, Thora. From the time she took over as matron of the cabins in 1946, she was for six years the quiet drawing-card and ready dispenser of courage and cheer in the disheartening stations through

which the business still had to fight its way. With Vet and Thora on the mountain, Marvin in the garage, all three of them resolved to carry on in spite of dwindling finances, the hope long deferred was soon realized.

With their contract to finish that mile-long hole through the mountain, they set up camp again at the tunnel in August. "They thought if they had a cat to push snow they could stay at it all winter." Yet when they came down for Christmas, their cat couldn't push its way back through the snow. Before they could get back in the spring, somebody succeeded in getting in and carrying off hundreds of dollars worth of equipment. Their momentum plowed right over this too, and April, 1949, they had Frost Black take five days with his cat to push a way through to the tunnel. The snow lay ten feet deep at Bill Young's cabin.

By August of that year they began working on the north side as well as the south side. They expected again to stay all winter.

All the same the thing had gathered momentum to plow right on over every difficulty to the finish. The man whom the old seer, Walter C. Lyman, had named eight years before, Vet Bradford, to but they had perilous times and narrow escapes in the blizzards, and were thankful to get safely to town in late October to stay for the winter.

They got back on the works, May 4th, 1950 and worked on the tunnel from both ends while the whole country watched with eager interest. No more question, would it ever be done, but when would it break through. In the petrified heart of the mountain they found zinc ore, and some who saw it said, "To hell with tunnel; let's follow up that ore." We'll not fire a shot for that ore," Vet answered hotly, "that's the reason this tunnel hasn't been finished before."

SUCCESS

On May 7th 1951 the Bradfords got back to their cabin among the quaking aspens on the hillside, and pushed the work from both ends of the tunnel, while the country in general and Blanding in particular waited to hear the final shot. They broke through December 27th just before they had to come down for Christmas holiday and the winter. The floor of the two shafts met on the same level, but the sides lacked a foot of being just the same. In spite of it being winter a number of people were present from town for the occasion.

They were on the job as early as possible in the spring of 1952; certain preliminaries, including the ditch on the north side would have to be attended before the water was turned in. That was on the 4th (or the 7th) of June. The sight of that sparkling stream rushing along the hillside and disappearing into that hole in the mountain was breath-taking—no words to express it. To the old dwellers of White Mesa it was marvelous, almost supernatural.

But where it came pouring out, a sparkling, laughing emblem of life on the south side—we stood speechless with dropped jaws. Anyone who has not toiled and waited through years of drought and thirst, drinking water stale and filthy with dead frogs or something worse, cannot possibly understand how they felt who stood there in awe, some of them with bared heads, as in reverent recognition of a divine manifestation. The Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai could not have been no more deeply moved when Moses brought the water from the rock. All the hard and foolish things that had been said against the tunnel were forgiven.

On the 30th of the April just past, 1954, Blanding had bought the two bottom second feet of water from the Somerville Cattle Company for \$10,000, and of that much we were assured, along with a great amount of high water which otherwise would go to waste.

CONCLUSION

The tunnel is a little over 5,400 feet long, and is reported to have cost \$125,000. However, I have here a list of donations, work, cash and other deals for stock in the company amounting to \$30, 172, which may not be included in this \$125,000.