

Uncovering a Mystery of Dry Fork Canyon



Flume supports as they look today.

Where does the water go in Dry Fork Canyon? For nearly a century, residents of the Uinta Basin tried to solve this mystery. Dry Fork Canyon is known for its natural sinks, which capture water in an underground drainage system. Approximately nine months of the year, water flowing down Dry Fork Creek disappears into these sinks. Only in the spring, when water volume is high, is there enough water to fill the stream bed and allow the creek to flow over the sinks. During these few months the water can be used for irrigation or other purposes; the rest of the year the stream bed remains dry.

The first recorded attempt to divert the water away from the sinks was in 1887 when local residents dug ditches around the largest sink in hope of using the water for irrigation downstream. Their efforts failed when the water sank into a different sink. Frustrated, but not defeated, the residents of Dry Fork Canyon formed a company to harness Dry Fork Creek for irrigation and milling purposes.

The Uinta Milling and Flume Company was established and worked from 1893 to 1897, building a road down to the sinks and constructing a flume. The flume, or wooden ditch, was designed to divert water away from the sinks. It was $\frac{1}{4}$ mile long with trestles measuring 10-15 feet high. Materials for the project had to be transported from a mill site over 7 miles away. Once in use, the flume leaked horribly. Dirt supporting the trestles was washed away and a few sections toppled over completely. The flume was abandoned and attention was turned back to solving the mystery of the disappearing water.

In 1912, a civil engineer by the name of J. Winter Smith reported that water entering the Dry Fork sinks was lost forever. This “lost water” hypothesis created a drop in public interest for several decades, but in 1967 several government organizations chose to challenge Smith’s idea.



Intact flume about 1920. Courtesy of Thorne Studio.



Flume supports about 1920. Courtesy of Thorne Studio.

The Bureau of Reclamation and the U.S. Geological Survey proposed that the water from the sinks was not lost at all. According to them it was emerging in Ashley Creek Springs, the main municipal water supply for the city of Vernal. If the water from Dry Fork Creek was reappearing in Ashley Creek Springs, it could be tracked to the city with a dye within a number of days. Citizens of Vernal had no way to prepare for what happened next. On August 22, 1967 a non-hazardous pink dye was added to Dry Fork Creek near the sinks. The pink-colored water showed up in municipal water supply on August 25th, and for the next few days all water distributed to Vernal was pink in color. Alarmed citizens refused to use the water until a local radio station announced that the dye was harmless. The experiment was a success, and the mystery of Dry Fork Canyon was finally put to an end.

Directions from the Ashley National Forest Office in Vernal

- Drive west on 500 North (Maeser Highway) past Uintah High School, through Maeser
- Turn right (north) at 3500 West
- Follow this road for 8.5 miles to the Dry Fork Settlement.
- Turn right onto Dry Fork Canyon Road
- Continue through the Dry Fork Settlement to the junction with Red Cloud Loop Road (FS Road 31)
- Turn left onto Red Cloud Loop Road
- Follow this road for 3.7 miles to the boundary of Ashley National Forest, where the pavement ends
- Continue on the dirt road for 2.5 miles to the fork in the road
- Take the left (west) fork toward Massey Ranch and Massey Meadow
- Drive another 1.6 miles to Massey Meadow

If your vehicle is high-clearance you should be able to drive from Massey Meadow and park at the trailheads. If your vehicle is low-clearance, or if the road seems wet or muddy, please park at Massey Meadow and walk to avoid difficulties on the road.

Dry Fork Flume Trail:

This trail begins on BLM land, before the boundary of Ashley National Forest but can be accessed from the road directly across from Massey Cave (see map below). The trail crosses a bridge to the south side of Dry Fork Creek, then continues west toward the historic Dry Fork Flume remains. Along the way you'll see several historic drainage ditches on the north side of the trail. These ditches were used to carry water from Dry Fork Creek to ranches in the surrounding area. The flume remains are located about 1.2 miles from the bridge. You'll be able to see over a dozen supports in the open meadow. Many of the supports were washed away when the flume leaked and collapsed. Can you find where the flume washed out?

Sink Ridge Trail:

This trail begins about 1/2 mile west of the Dry Fork Flume Trail access point. You'll see the trailhead sign on the right side of the road, just before the dirt road ends. The trail takes you up above the water on the north side of Dry Fork Creek. Some sections may be washed out between 300 and 500 yards from the trailhead, so please be cautious. The sink is located about 750 yards from the trailhead (see map below). It sits down in the creek bed, about 50 yards below the trail. Look for a small path leading down to the creek on the left side of the trail, just before you reach the Sink Ridge Trail sign. The sink is clearly visible in the spring when it fills with water, but may be harder to recognize the rest of the year. Remember, what happens to the water when it hits the sink? It disappears!

