

A WARRIOR IN IRRIGATION BOOTS

Ruth Hutchins' legacy lives on

By Bob Silbernagel

Ruth Hutchins understood the value of water in the West, and she also knew the importance of supporting her community.

She believed, "if you made a living in a community, you owed it. You had to give something back," her son Will Hutchins said. "And you did it with absolute integrity."

Ruth eventually combined those two ideas and until her death in 1997 she was known as a water activist. She was unafraid to challenge federal agencies and local authorities or to enlist the aid of elected officials to protect small farmers and other water users.

Hutchins also helped found the Mesa County Water Association to encourage discussion and seek solutions to water issues. Her legacy was enshrined when the Water Center at Colorado Mesa University became the Ruth Powell Hutchins Water Center in October.

"She was always so active in the Mesa County Water Association," said her son Tad Hutchins. "She believed that the more people know about water and Colorado water law, the better off we are." When the Water Association morphed into the Water Center at CMU, the four Hutchins siblings decided an endowment for the center would be a great way to honor their mother.

The naming is entirely appropriate, said CMU President Tim Foster. "We're talking about someone who really cared about water and about making the system work better."

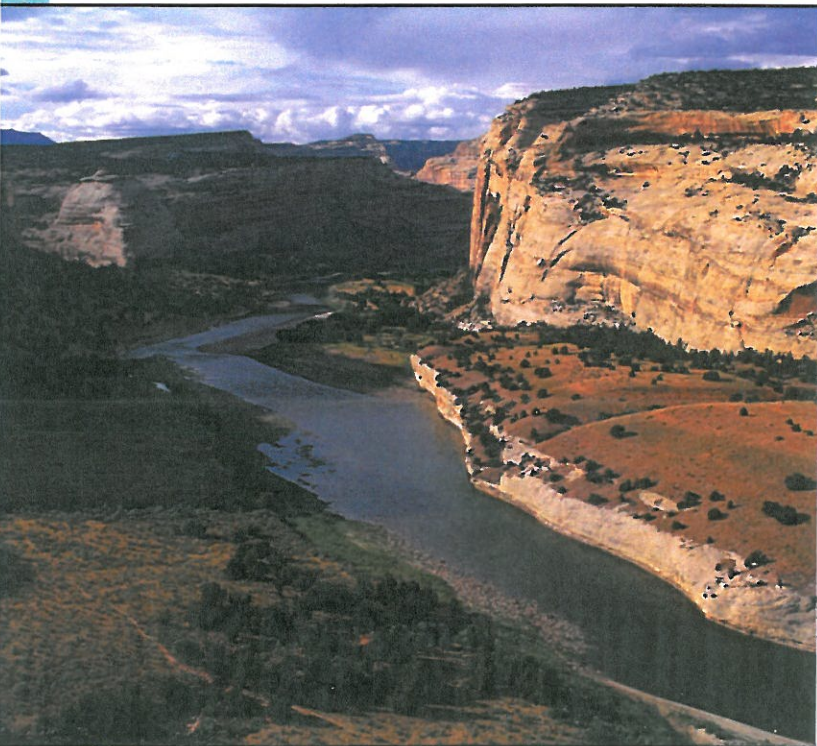
Foster became acquainted with Ruth when he was a state representative in the 1980s. Through all the water rights-related legislation they worked on together, Ruth pushed to get things done without seeking the limelight. "Ruth didn't want to be the leader of the parade, but she wanted to make sure the parade was moving," Foster said.

Her husband, John, who died in 2012, was even more private than Ruth. However, "whatever my mother did, John my father was right behind her," said Will. He provided philosophical and financial backing for Ruth's activism.

John and Ruth Hutchins were both raised on the East Coast, and they developed a love for the West. They met while working at a dude ranch in Montana, married and lived briefly in the East before moving to Denver.

They dreamed of having their own farm and purchased property in Fruita, Colo., in 1955, Will said. The seniority of water rights in Mesa County, as well as the quantity and consistency of the water were keys to their decision.

Tad now operates the Fruita farm, while Will has his own farm near Delta, Colo. Their sister, Judith Hutchins, lives in Montana, while another brother,



"Ruth didn't want to be the leader of the parade, but she wanted to make sure the parade was moving"

CMU President Tim Foster

Thomas, is in Virginia. All four have found some outlet for the community activism model their mother taught them.

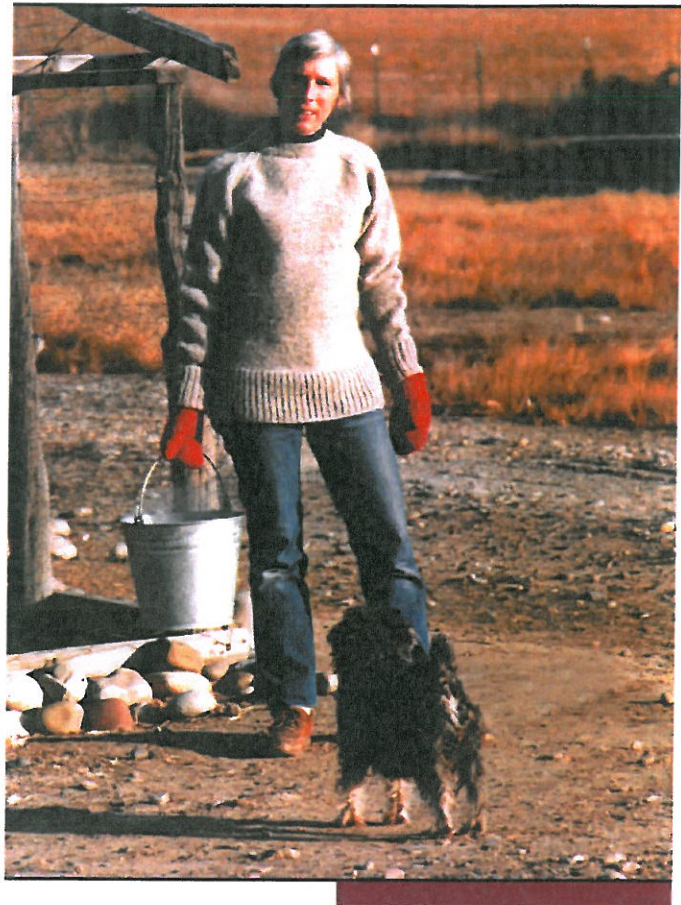
That activism wasn't always about water. Early on, Ruth helped raise money for the Fruita hospital. And she established a farm labor pool to connect local youngsters with farmers who needed workers. In the early 1970s, she and John led a petition drive to change the way the county landfill was managed. They also ran unsuccessfully as independent candidates for the state legislature — John for the Senate and Ruth for the House.

In 1985, when the Grand Valley Irrigation Company considered taking over private lateral ditches to assist the federal government in a salinity control project, Ruth turned her attention to water. Based on her research, she decided the plan was a scheme to give the government more control over the private irrigation system, and she worked with other irrigators to kill it.

She next developed an interest in the Colorado River Water Conservation District, attending meetings of the Glenwood Springs-based entity, challenging budget decisions and demanding more transparency.

"She was definitely driven," Tad said. "She was a voice for a lot of people" who didn't understand details of water law but felt their interests weren't adequately represented.

Locally, she often attended meetings in blue jeans and irrigation boots. She was more stylish when she went to Denver to testify on a bill, but people often dismissed her initially. "You underestimated Ruth at your own risk," Foster said. "She was sort of



unassuming, but once she opened her mouth it was clear she knew what she was talking about."

Hutchins' legacy lives on through the Ruth Powell Hutchins Water Center at CMU.

The Mesa County Water Association went dormant after her death but was resurrected in 2008. With the help of former CMU political science professor John Redifer, it became the Water Center at CMU in 2011.

The center's mission is "to perform and facilitate interdisciplinary and collaborative research, education, outreach and dialogue to address the water issues facing the Upper Colorado River Basin." As part of that mission, the center hopes to support regional water research by CMU students and faculty, said Hannah Holm, acting coordinator of the water center. The Hutchins family's endowment will help meet that goal. Nearly 20 years after her death, Ruth Hutchins and her family are still giving back to their community. •