

# Cooperatives

People have had many ways to creatively accomplish what is needed or what they enjoy doing. One method is with a co-op, or cooperative, which is a business organization owned and operated by a group for the mutual benefit of its members.

More precisely a co-op provides services and is a nonprofit owned by members or shareholders, a definition that still leaves

## Rabbitbrush Rambler



Virginia Simmons

Alamosa. Others are as varied as member-owned credit unions or independent retail stores with associations that provide access to supplies and advertising, to cite only a couple of examples.

In an agricultural region such as ours, where farming and ranching are the most important economic drivers, cooperatives offer many essential services. Anyone producing and selling potatoes, barley, alfalfa, hay, livestock, and so on understands the necessity and benefits of cooperative activities.

To help farmers and ranchers stay above the red line, operators avail themselves of myriad forms of mutual assistance. It can be in the form of the Potato Growers Administrative office, Colorado Cattlemen's Association, or others which contribute benefits such as promotion, market information, educational services, distribution, or lobbying.

In rural areas like ours, and even in some urban settings, cooperatives are participating in activities like the farm-to-table movement. These producers and marketers have associations around the nation, with the SLV Local Foods Coalition being a well-known example here.

This coalition provides producers and the wider community, too, with information and education about production, promotion, marketing, distribution through food banks, nutrition, and conservation. Participants in this local program often produce foods on small or hobby farms, but their operations can be much larger.

The Coalition's Local Roots Farm and Ranch Guide lists more than 60 producers from Saguache on the north to the state line beyond Antonito and San Luis on the south. We can see firsthand evidence of what an organization like this accomplishes at farmers' markets, the Valley Co-op, food banks, and community gardens, as well as by seeing organic products that are becoming increasingly available in large food stores.

From another perspective, the Valley's irrigation ditches, canals, and reservoirs are evidence of large-scale cooperative investments of work or monetary investment or both. After starting with communal acequias, bigger networks for distributing water soon followed.

One canal in particular that caught my attention bears the name of the Farmers Union Canal, a cooperative project created in the 1880s by the Farmers Union which later evolved into the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union. The history of these organizations is told in John F. Freeman's "Persistent Progressives: The Rocky Mountain Farmers Union," a new book giving Colorado's story of cooperative enterprises before industrialized agriculture assumed its dominant role.

Freeman writes that "the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union takes pride in being the only major farm organization that engages consumers." This union now devotes much of its focus to insurance, but Freeman comments, "Through its education and outreach activities, the RMFU has a golden opportunity to attract urban dwellers to active membership."

"Persistent Progressives" offers a perspective on issues that remain relevant despite many cultural and economic changes since farmers first arrived in the Valley. In democracy, cooperative effort still has an important role to play.