

## FIRST DRAFT

# Nucla's cooperative roots were part of 19th century movement

In November 1895, The Altrurian — newspaper of the Colorado Cooperative Co. that was trying to establish a collective colony in western Montrose County — issued a warning to people who might wish to join:

“We do not invite any indolent individual, man or woman, that seeks a Colony with the expectation of living easy,” the paper said. “We want willing muscle owners that can swing a pick, turn over a rock, cut down a tree, load a wagon, hold a scraper, drive a team and do a thousand and one things.”

Before the colony could succeed, The Altrurian said, a 17-mile-irrigation ditch had to be built from the San Miguel River to Tabeguache Park. The park sits on a large bench on the west side of the Uncompahgre Plateau above the San Miguel.

No one knew then that it would take another nine years to complete the ditch.

The ditch was completed, however, and irrigation water began flowing into Tabeguache Park in 1904. A town was built at the eastern edge of the park. It was called “Nucla” because colony members believed it would be the nucleus of the entire San Miguel Basin.

This colony in western Montrose County was part of a movement that flourished in the second half of the 19th century.

The Union Colony at Greeley is Colorado’s most famous collective, having been founded in the early 1870s.

More collectives developed, especially in the West, after the economic crash of 1893, often with anti-capitalist views.

The Colorado Cooperative Co. was formed in Denver in early 1894, with a location for its colony not yet chosen. Founding members included two state senators, a state engineer and a founder of a statewide farmers’ group.

In its Declaration of Principles, the Colorado Cooperative Co. lamented “the present competitive system” under which “only the strong and cunning can ‘succeed,’ rendering it almost impossible for an honest man or woman to make a comfortable living.”

“Therefore,” it said, “we believe in the enactment of laws that will, when enforced, tend to an equalization of production and distribution, as well as an equality in all matters pertaining to ‘Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.’”

Colony members purchased stock in the company, and they were to file homestead claims for their own lands in the park. But to get water they had to work, for 20 cents an hour, on the ditch, at the colony’s sawmill, on roads, or, for women, cooking and cleaning for the work crews.

Wages weren’t paid in cash. Instead, they were offered in “labor certificates” that could be redeemed for water in the ditch or “for anything the Company may have for sale.”

Tabeguache Park was chosen as the colony site after one of the founding members, B.L. Smith, toured Colorado and determined that the unoccupied bench above the San Miguel River was perfect.

The Altrurian, which derived its name from the word “altruism,” published a letter from Smith in January 1895 that told of 25,000 to 40,000 acres of arable land in the park.

“About 50 percent of the land is covered with black sage brush,” he wrote, “but the balance has neither rock nor brush that would stop a plow for miles.”

By early 1895, 20 members



COURTESY OF RIMROCKER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A worker surveys the Cottontown Trestle near the now-defunct town of Piñon, Colorado. The trestle was built to carry irrigation water from the San Miguel River to the Colorado Cooperative Company’s colony near Nucla.



Members of the Colorado Cooperative Co. at work on the colony’s irrigation ditch, circa 1900.

COURTESY OF RIMROCKER HISTORICAL SOCIETY

had moved to a camp just outside Naturita. Most took the train from Denver to Montrose, then traveled by horse and wagon over the Uncompahgre Plateau.

Work on the irrigation ditch began in February of 1896. Soon, a new community was created, known as Piñon, about 12 miles east of Naturita along the San Miguel River. A sawmill to cut timbers for the project was established nearby.

The Altrurian and speakers promoted the colony around the country, and many new members joined.

As a child in 1900, Ellen Peterson moved with her family from Minnesota to the colony. A half-century later, she wrote a book about the colony. In it, she described her first view of Tabeguache Park as the family descended the Uncompahgre Plateau:

“We were coming out of the aspen when we found ourselves out on a point of land that overlooked the entire San Miguel Basin, including the Tabeguache park ... The scene was breathtaking.”

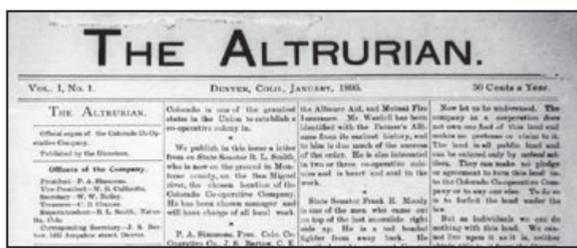
Peterson’s father went to work in the colony’s sawmill, while her mother helped cook for the men.

That same year, an ongoing dispute boiled over between colony members who had made the move to the San Miguel Valley and those who were still living around Denver.

“Denver stockholders especially objected to the aggressive policy of a few of those living at the colony, who they said were endeavoring to freeze them out,” a Front Range newspaper reported.

A truce was reached, but the dispute continued to cause problems.

There were other setbacks. A boiler explosion at the colony’s sawmill in 1898 killed two men and injured a third, and sparked a fire that burned most



COLORADO HISTORIC NEWSPAPERS COLLECTION

The masthead and upper portion of the first edition of The Altrurian.

of the mill. It had to be rebuilt to construct trestles for the ditch.

Providing sufficient food for members was difficult, even though the colony had its own dairy and gardens.

“Food was rationed,” Peterson wrote. “There was a shortage of practically everything excepting flour and beans. Even these items could not be bought indiscriminately.”

There were arguments over why the ditch work was proceeding so slowly, and whether the work should be turned over to private contractors instead of relying on colony members.

But life was not just hard work and hardship. Plays and concerts were held frequently, and they often attracted people from neighboring communities. There were dances and taffy pulls, and school for the children was held in a boarding house in Piñon.

Finally, the ditch was completed and water began flowing to Tabeguache Park in 1904. People who had built homes in Piñon dismantled them and hauled them in pieces up to the park.

The Colorado Cooperative Co., once the heart of the collective, eventually became a private entity to manage the water for the park. It continues to do so today.

In 1895, The Altrurian had published articles predicting revolution to overthrow America’s capitalist system.

“The hundreds of cooperative associations that are being organized all over the United States form the one bright star that shines out above the dark horizon of the future,” it said.

But, after water arrived in Tabeguache Park, and colonists began to build their own farms with their own labor, the collective aspect of the community gradually disappeared, said Jane Thompson, president of the Rimrocker Historical Society in the San Miguel Basin.

“It was one thing to work side-by-side to build a ditch for the community,” she said. “But it was something else to work individually to clear and irrigate your own farm.”

“Certainly, they still had a spirit of cooperation” and worked together to build a school, church and community buildings in the new town of Nucla.

By 1914, however, the agricultural community with its center at Nucla was much like many other farming communities in western Colorado.

Sources: *The Altrurian*, at [coloradohistoricnewspapers.org](http://coloradohistoricnewspapers.org); “*The Spell of the Tabeguache*,” by Ellen Z. Peterson; *Rimrocker Historical Society*; *historic newspapers at newspapers.com*; “*Colorado’s Utopian Colonies: Greeley and Nucla*,” at [history.denverlibrary.org](http://history.denverlibrary.org).

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# CMU scholarships can help displaced workers

By JAMES BURKY  
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Colorado Mesa University and Western Colorado Community College are offering help to adults affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both schools are ramping up efforts to find candidates for the Colorado Opportunity Scholarship Initiative, known as COSI. The schools are focusing their efforts on adults who may have been displaced by the pandemic.

“This covers any fee like books, or everyday expenses like day care for their child or gas to get to campus,” said Stephanie Parsons, COSI grant and academic coach at CMU. “This is designed to help the adults who lost their job because of COVID-19.”

Requirements for applicants are that they were not students before the fall 2020 semester and that what they are attending school for can be completed by spring 2022, whether it be a technical certificate or an associate degree or they’re resuming their pursuit of a bachelor’s degree. They also need to enroll or be enrolled in at least three credit hours.

The scholarship also isn’t restricted only to those who personally lost their job. People who have had work hours decreased or if their spouse or partner lost a job are also eligible. Parsons also said that the school will reach out to first

generation students.

The school has already been in touch with companies that have gone out of business. Parsons also said that CMU is in touch with former employees of the Russell Stover plant in Montrose, which announced in February that it would close in 2021. CMU offered free tuition to those who lost their jobs at the plant. On Friday, CMU received an additional \$120,000 for funding of the program, said Liz Meyer, CEO of the CMU Foundation.

Both CMU and the community college offer a slew of certification programs, while the latter offers associate degrees. In some cases, students can register for a single semester certification course for spring 2022 and still benefit from the scholarship.

“If something happens and your course takes longer than anticipated, we won’t take this scholarship away from you,” Parsons said. “You can also stack this with other scholarships.”

Students can find the application with other scholarships through the MavZone. Turnaround is pretty fast, as Parsons said 23 students have already received the scholarship.

“This is designed to help people who need it and fast,” Parsons said.

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To submit photos, go to [gjsentinel.com](http://gjsentinel.com), click on contests.

Please include your name, email address and phone number so we can contact you if you are a winner. This info will not be published. Winners will be chosen by popular vote from Oct. 24<sup>th</sup> to October 29<sup>th</sup>. Photos should be high resolution.

Deadline to submit photos is Friday, Oct. 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. By submitting your photos, you are agreeing to let The Daily Sentinel and The Nickel publish your photos in print and online.



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