The Magic Touch of Water: A History of the Greeley Water and Sewer Department

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Poudre River Forum
Greeley, Colorado
February 2, 2018
The Great Desert is frequented by roving bands of Indians who have no fixed places of residence but roam from place to place in quest of game.
MAP

Showing the Route taken by the Exploring Department...

NEW MEXICO
AND
SOUTHERN ROCKY MOUNTAINS

In the Course of the

TRAVELS OF

CAPTAIN PIERCE & ASSOCIATES, Etc.

Drawn by

J. W. BURCHELL, Topographer, U.S. Army.

Scale

[Map of New Mexico and Southern Rocky Mountains]
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MAIN OFFICE, IRON BUILDING, DENVER.
Desert or Garden? The Union Colony Generation (1870-1900)

• Primary emphasis of colonists was water for irrigation

• Inclusion of urban water uses made Union Colony different

• Poudre River water: abundance, cleanliness, security and taste (selling points for new settlers then and now)
Water for the Union Colony (continued)

- **Number 3 Ditch** devoted three-eights of water flow to “lawns and gardens” of townspeople (water law said “use it or lose it”)

- Household water came originally from wells drilled in the Poudre aquifer
Greeley’s First Water Works Plant (1888)
Greeley Water and the Progressive Era (1900-1930)

• Static population growth (3,000 people by 1900) versus Denver’s 135,000 (larger than Los Angeles)

• Aging of the Union Colony generation

• Decision to encourage **food production** within city limits because of access to river, water wells, rail line, etc.

• **Great Western Sugar Company** arrives in 1901; invests $20 million in harvesting of sugar beets; processing of liquid sugar
Greeley Water and the Progressive Era (continued)

• Need to purchase more water from Poudre River

• **Whedbee Ditch (at right)** above Fort Collins in 1901 (still in use)

• **Idea follows example of New York City:** taking of water from the Catskill Mountains by wooden pipeline to avoid pollutants

• **Result is NYC’s boast of “champagne waters”**
Greeley Water Responds to Challenges Local and Global (1930-1960)

• Next generation faces double burden of **Great Depression** and the **Dust Bowl**

• Efforts to find high-mountain water checked by state of Wyoming in US Supreme Court

• Greeley leadership turns to FDR’s New Deal agencies for help (private sector could not help anymore)
Greeley Water Responds to Challenges Local and Global (1930-1960)

- Building of the **Colorado-Big Thompson Project** (1937-1954): 310,000 acre-feet of water to augment limited supplies
- Farmers were first to use the water; Greeley acquired five percent of the “shares” for urban use (15,000 shares)
- Secure source of water from the Colorado River changes the face of the “Front Range” (**cities now own two-thirds of CBT waters**)

![Map of Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District](image)
Greeley Water and the Environmental Age: 1960-1990

- Denver and Northern Colorado start shift from agriculture to urban/industrial water uses
- Greeley continues emphasis on food processing within city limits with massive feed lots; **Monfort meat plant** built in 1958; Great Western stays until 1985
- Greeley pursues ambitious water purchases from retired farmers; engages in "lease-back" policy to keep farms in production; supports large storage dam above Fort Collins
- Pressure from federal government and environmental groups for cleaner water; “in-stream” benefits in the Poudre; blocking of dams and reservoirs, etc.
The 21st Century: Urban Growth and Rural Communities

• Colorado at a Demographic Crossroads: 10 million people by 2050 (5 million in Denver alone)

• Northern Colorado: 2 million people by 2050 (tripling of population); Greeley could have 240,000 people in 30 years (up from 100,000)

• How to provide water for all? What would the Union Colonists advise?

• Mixture of conservation and water purchases; density of urban development; new generation’s lifestyle that is less water-dependent?