

Guest editorial

Follow the Water

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Picture this: Swollen streams cascading out of the east face of a recently glaciated range, rolling down into lush wetlands, verdant grasslands as high as the belly of a buffalo. Imagine meadows incised with numerous meandering streams lined with willows and clustered with cottonwoods. Envision floods overflowing banks and beaver dams spilling into a wide and undefined floodplain, saturating the natural sponge of wetland organics and alluvial deposits, recharging near surface and deep aquifers that slowly bleed their stored volumes to keep streams flowing all year round. This was Parley's Park -- the Snyderville meadow.

Then came Parley Pratt with his tollbooth, Sam Snyder with his lumber mill, H. C. Kimball with his junction, the U.S. Army, the miners and eventually the farmers. The trees were cut for mines, homes and heat, the mines drained ground and surface water, and the meadows were grazed and farmed. The streams were diverted to better irrigate the meadows; water rights were claimed and shared, divided and decreed. From Thaynes Canyon and McLeod Creek, to White Pine, Willow Creek and Spring Creek, the upper reaches of East Canyon were developed. Water was distributed according to need, for beneficial use -- first come, first served. Disputes about flooding and drought were handled after church, in the bars or at the ditches and head gates with swinging fists and shovels. Everyone took his or her share of the surplus and the scarcity. The meadow still flooded, the streams still flowed.

Flash to the present: The boomers have taken over, trophy homes cluster the meadows and mansions dot the hillside. Shallow and deep wells mine ancient waters to slake the unquenchable thirst. Surface water and natural springs are collected and diverted to where it is convenient. A massive sewer pipe quietly moves wastewater away from the headwaters and provides a giant gravel under drain for its entire length. Pavement and pumps, under drains and storm drains, protect the subdivisions in the wetlands. Ski resorts and snowmaking, Kentucky bluegrass and bark beetles, mountain grazing and global warming change the hydrologic regime. It rains in January, it snows in July, snowmelt starts in March or ends in August.

Streams are put in pipes, ditches are abandoned and natural channels are made into plazas and parking lots. Spring floods are a nuisance to whisk quickly downstream or just divert towards neighbors. Summer drought is solved, not with conservation and cooperation but with a checkbook.

Disputes are not handled with reason and respect but are dragged vindictively through the courts -- wasting time, money, energy and water. Water flows toward money, yet entitled

farmers use water worth thousands to grow crops worth hundreds, just to perpetuate their rights and speculate on this new commodity, this old dichotomy. Use it or lose it.

The water has been subdued, the meadow no longer fills in the spring, and the streams no longer flow in the summer. Is this evolution toward a better world for all or is it lifestyle entropy, trending towards a more random and chaotic state of consumption and self-absorption? To find the answer -- follow the water on its frantic trip downhill, not knowing where it's flowing, but going there quickly.