

Prospects of new irrigation in the drylands of northeast Colorado generated great excitement. In October 1908, the *Greeley Tribune* published a special issue entitled "The Great Prosperity Edition." This publication outlined accomplishments of completed irrigation ventures in the Cache la Poudre River Valley, and at the same time encouraged support for the proposed project. Favorable articles, eventually incorporated into promotional literature for financial markets, were written by well-known and respected water developers. For example, Charles Hansen wrote, ". . . does it pay to transform land that was five years ago sold for \$1.50 an acre, into land that will sell for \$100 an acre as soon as the water comes and the first crop put in? This question is a sufficient answer."⁵

By the end of July 1911 the Greeley-Poudre Irrigation District had been formed, construction bonds sold

and the diversion tunnel completed. In anticipation of the needs of district farmers, two railroad spur lines were built and eight new towns were established. (Figure 2) Mr. Hansen was so optimistic about the project he predicted the District would soon support a population of 20,000 to 25,000.⁶

Despite favorable publicity and much local fanfare, the Greeley-Poudre Irrigation District was a failure. The project was doomed by several inter-related factors, not the least of which were errors and miscalculations by those promoting it. For one thing, boosters underestimated the flow of the Laramie River. Much more important, however, was the boosters' disregard of the law. Even though "prior appropriation," the basic water doctrine of the west, had been incorporated into the Colorado constitution, Wyoming's water claims were ignored.

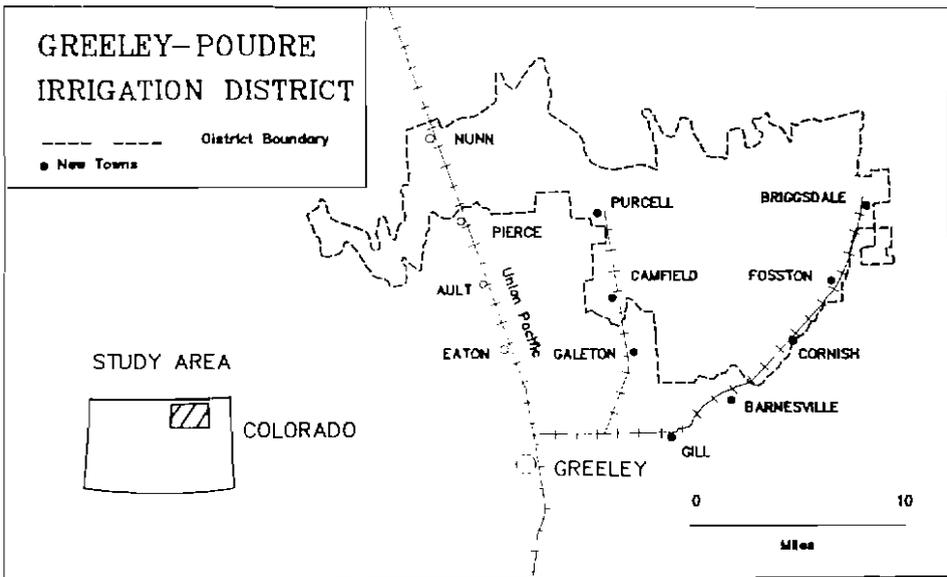


Figure 2

The Politics of Water

Resistance by Wyoming to diversion of the Laramie surfaced soon after details of the project were made public. As Figure 1 illustrates, the headwaters of the Laramie River are in Colorado, but the stream flows for most of its course through Wyoming. In 1911, fearing it would lose all rights, the State of Wyoming filed suit in the United States Supreme Court, seeking to enjoin Colorado from diverting appropriated water.

Wyoming based its suit on two arguments. First, it claimed that it had legal rights which required that water could not be diverted from the Laramie watershed without its consent. Second, it held that the doctrine of "prior appropriation" gave Wyoming water users rights senior to those of the proposed diversion. For its part, Colorado claimed rights to dispose of "any part or all of the waters flowing in the portion of the river within her borders."⁷ Colorado also argued that the proposed diversion would not exceed its share of Laramie water, and an adequate supply was available to satisfy Wyoming's senior appropriators.⁸

In February of 1915, the governors and other officials of Colorado and Wyoming gathered in Cheyenne to try and settle the dispute amicably. However, resistance to settlement was strong, especially in Wyoming where former Governor Carey and the *Laramie Republican* were vocal in their opposition.⁹ When parties to the suit failed to agree, the controversy moved to the United States Supreme Court.

The case, *Wyoming v. Colorado*, was presented to the Supreme Court in December 1916. Initial arguments were made, and the Supreme Court asked attorneys for each side to return in 1918, prepared to pay special attention to the amount of water involved.¹⁰ Both

sides presented their arguments in 1918 and again in 1922. Finally, in June 1922, the Supreme Court issued its verdict—in favor of Wyoming.¹¹

The Court found prior appropriation to be in effect in both states, and declared that the doctrine would determine distribution of the Laramie. In addition, it was determined that after Colorado's senior appropriations were deducted, 288,000 acre feet remained to be distributed and Wyoming had prior rights to 272,500. Only 15,500 acre feet remained for Colorado, clearly not enough water to irrigate 125,000 acres.¹²

The Supreme Court ruling should have curtailed promotion, but boosters were not easily discouraged. An additional \$300,000 was raised, some ditches were lined, and the McGrew Reservoir inlet was completed. Optimism continued to soar, and even as late as 17 September 1926, 2,600 people attended a picnic in Nunn, Colorado, to celebrate the future prospects of the Greeley-Poudre Irrigation District and the benefits that water would bring. At the big event, County Commissioner Straight predicted, "within a few years people who have been here before won't know the town of Nunn or the country roundabout."¹³ Later, District officials also discussed the possibility of raising more capital to build another diversion to bring Colorado River water to the Poudre.

By the 1920s, though, the District was forced to rent water to other irrigation companies to raise cash to pay operating expenses, and the Great Depression finally ended the boosters' false hopes. Final dissolution occurred in 1945 when about 20,000 acres and tax sales certificates worth \$1,020,000 were sold at public auction for about 10 cents on the dollar.¹⁴

The Project's Legacy

Two railroad spurs, completed in 1910, were built to serve the Greeley-Poudre Irrigation District. By the end of 1911 town plats had been filed for eight communities along the new rail lines—Galeton, Gill, Camfield, Briggsdale, Purcell, Barnesville, Cornish and Fosston. Each town was a typical Great Plains service center, but thanks to the project's failure, their public institutions had exceedingly brief lives. All had post offices, but even before the Supreme Court had made its ruling, they began to close. Camfield's was the first, and others soon followed; by 1989, only Briggsdale, Galeton and Gill had operating post offices. Public schools were also opened in every town, but because the population in each school district was small, enrollments were modest. By the 1948-49 school year the Fosston district had been dissolved, and Barnesville, Purcell and Cornish had fewer than 30 children enrolled.¹⁵ In 1989, schools remained open in Briggsdale and Galeton, although Galeton enrolled students only from kindergarten through fourth grade. Of the eight communities founded to serve the Greeley-Poudre Irrigation District only three--Galeton, Gill and Briggsdale--continue to provide goods and services. Galeton and Gill remain because of high quality farmland that is irrigated from the successful Colorado-Big Thompson Project, or from wells--not from Greeley-Poudre water. Briggsdale (Figure 3) is the only surviving village actually located in the Greeley-Poudre Irrigation District. Briggsdale's persistence is due to its location on Colorado State Highway 14, the main east-west highway through the northern part of Weld County. It services a large trade area, and its amenities include churches, a grain elevator, and a motel.



Figure 3
Briggsdale, Colorado, A Surviving Place

Camfield, Purcell, Barnesville, Cornish and Fosston were abandoned many years ago. Buildings remain at some of the town sites and business structures have been converted to residences at others, but the towns as viable entities no longer exist. Camfield, in fact, has totally disappeared. The town was platted in 1909 and according to one source, ". . . included neatly graded streets, a general store, a lumber yard and several homes."¹⁶ Today the old site is inaccessible with most of it under cultivation.

Other relics of the Greeley-Poudre Irrigation District are still observable in the landscape. Particularly noticeable are railroad grades--Union Pacific planners and developers thought the spur lines would eventually serve an area that included about 150,000 irrigated acres, but when the Supreme Court ruled against the District, they were abandoned. Removal of the line between Galeton and Purcell began in 1943, and was completed by 1965. Only grades and old bridges are still in evidence.(Figure 4)

Much of the irrigation project infrastructure was completed and it, too, remains prominent in the landscape.

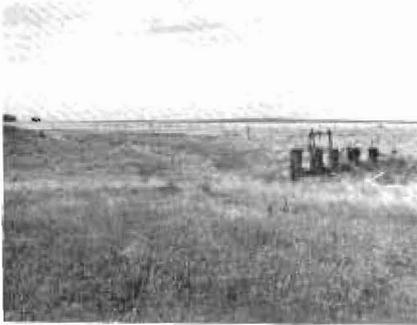


Figure 4
Abandoned Railroad Bridge Across a Dry Wash



Figure 5
Abandoned Farm in the Irrigation District

The original project called for the building of about 150 miles of ditches and laterals plus several reservoirs. A tunnel linking the Laramie River and Cache la Poudre was opened in 1911, and continues to divert limited amounts of water. With the failure of the project, though, most of the infrastructure was abandoned.

Finally, decaying farms are a significant part of the contemporary regional landscape. In his study of the Purcell area, D. Brooks Green determined that during promotion and development of the irrigation district between 1905 and 1915, 116 quarter sections in the 20 square miles around Purcell changed ownership.¹⁷ As

illustrated in Figure 5, many of these farmsteads are now deserted, and only foundations remain as evidences of farmer dreams.

Among water development schemes in the Western United States the Laramie-Poudre project was modest, but its impact had far-reaching effects. *Wyoming v. Colorado* was a precedent-setting case frequently cited in subsequent litigation all over the west.¹⁸ The contemporary landscape of the former Greeley-Poudre Irrigation District presents yet another reminder of the legacy of boosterism. The fruits of speculation, greed and their ill effects remain--not only strewn about the landscape--but in the national psyche.

NOTES

1. E.S. Pinney, "The Distribution of Water" *The Greeley Tribune* 21 October 1908. The author expresses his sincere appreciation to the University of Northern Colorado Faculty Research and Publications Board for financial support for this project. Also, a special thanks to personnel at the Western History Section of the Denver Public Library and Wyoming State Archives for their assistance.

2. Earnest A. Engelbert (ed.), *Water Scarcity: Impacts on Western Agriculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 246.

3. J.W. Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States, with a More Detailed Account of the Lands of Utah* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1879).

4. The sequence of irrigation development in northeastern Colorado is discussed in two works: Dean F. Karkel, *South Plate Country "A history of Old Weld County, Colorado" 1739-1900* (Laramie, Wyoming: The Powder River Publishers, 1954); and, Russell N. Bradt, "Foreign Water in the Cache la Poudre Valley" (M.A. thesis, Colorado State College of Education, 1948), 1-16.

5. Charles Hansen, "The Greatest Enterprise: The Laramie-Poudre Project," *The Greeley Tribune* 21 October 1908.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Wyoming v. Colorado*, 259 U.S.R. 456(1923).

8. *Ibid.*

9. "Two Governors Urge Procedure to Take Water Question Out of the Federal Supreme Court," *Laramie Republican*, 8 February 1915; and, "Court Should Decide," *Laramie Republican*, 12 February 1915.

10. *Wyoming v. Colorado*, 456.

11. M. Paul Holsinger, "Wyoming v. Colorado Revisited: The United States Supreme Court and the Laramie River Controversy, 1911-1922" *Annals of Wyoming*, 42 (April, 1970), 50.

12. Although modified five times since 1922 the current diversion of 49,375 acre feet is still far less than that needed to supply historic Colorado allocations plus provide for the proposed irrigation districts. *Ibid.*, 55.

13. "2600 Fed at Nunn Barbecue as Water Flows Thru Completed Main Canal of G-P Into McGrew," *The Greeley Tribune*, 18 September 1926.

14. *Ibid.*, 31.

15. Unpublished records of the Weld County Superintendent of Schools, Weld County, Colorado, Records Office.

16. Kenneth Jessen, *Railroads of Northern Colorado* (Boulder, Colorado: Purette Publishing Company, 1982), 216.

17. D. Brooks Green, "Irrigation Potential and Agricultural Settlement in Submarginal Land: An Example from Weld County, Colorado" (D.A. diss., University of Northern Colorado, 1980), 64-65.

18. Frank J. Trelease, Harold S. Bloomenthal and Joseph R. Geraud, *Cases and Materials on Natural Resources* (St. Paul, Minnesota: West Publishing, 1965).