

A Land Made from Water: Appropriation and Evolution of Colorado's Landscape,
Ditches and Water Institutions

Report by:

Dick Jefferies

Author and Background: Robert R. Crifasi works in water management and planning and is an environmental scientist with more than twenty-five years of experience. He has served as the Water Resources Administrator for the City of Boulder's Open Space and Mountain Parks Department, was on the board of directors of eleven ditch companies, and, as the president of several Boulder Valley ditches, was responsible for supervising all regular ditch operations.

This book describes in detail a transformative journey spanning the last two-hundred years. While other basins are briefly touched upon, content focuses on water development in the Boulder Valley. Beginning with some history of natives who first inhabited the Front Range, including impacts of Spanish water management practices, the book dives deepest into the history of water development in the early 1800's as the white man first began his travel and reported observations of - The Great American Desert.

From Stephen Long's 1822 observation, "I do not hesitate in giving the opinion, that it is almost wholly unfit for cultivation, and of course uninhabitable by a people depending upon agriculture for their subsistence" thus his subsequent mapping and naming of the Great Desert, Crifasi describes a journey through a remarkable history of trapping; gold mining; logging; agriculture; to the ultimate development of settlements and communities. All with their specific and extremely valued need for water.

This need for a sustainable, timely and legally defined water source necessitated an effective and measured method of delivering water. A need so common throughout Colorado it eventually led to our modern era wherein, according to a 2000 census of the Colorado Division of Water Resources, we now have 22,800 active ditches and canals in the State.

Crifasi is very effective in describing the change, over time, in management and administration of ditches and canals. For example, in the past one farm ditch company knew a meeting was over when the freshly baked, still hot apple pie was brought out to the table, whereas in one case today a ditch company board has quorum when three board officers, all employed by the City of Boulder, are in attendance.

The author does not shy away from sharing his opinion regarding ecologic impacts of water transport and management. The landscape of Colorado today has been affected and altered because of our need to move water from point A to point B. Ultimately, it has evolved into our "New Nature" and leads him to share a thought.

"The choice is not between two landscapes, one with and one without a human influence; it is between two human ways of living, two ways of belonging to an ecosystem." —William Cronon