

## A Summary: The Last Water Hole In The West; The Colorado-Big Thompson Project and the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District. Daniel Tyler, 1992. Matt Zoccali. December 27, 2017

The Last Water Hole in the West is a dense, technical book, written by Daniel Tyler, emeritus professor of history at Colorado State University. If you are looking for rollicking turns-of-phrase that capture your imagination, like an Edward Abbey novel, this is not a book for you! However, if you seek detailed information and anecdotes on the Colorado-Big Thompson (C-BT) project, Mr. Tyler's book is perfect. Clocking in at nearly 500 pages, with an additional 100 pages of footnotes and glossary, this book reads more like a reference, with detailed accounts leading to other sourced materials and documents such as meeting minutes, excerpts from letters written between politicians, and newspaper clippings. In my estimation, if you have a deep interest in water development and water history in Northern Colorado, "The Last Water Hole" is a must-have for any Water Literate Leader's bookshelf.

Obviously, I cannot compare to Mr. Brian Werner's recent presentation to the Water Literate Leaders group regarding the history of the Northern Colorado Water Conservancy District, and so I will not try. As a supplement to his presentation though, I would like to share a few of the items that interested me, including the political and social climate that influenced and shaped the C-BT project; How the seeds of West Slope-East Slope relations were sown; and, later, the legislation and environmental activism that informed negotiation for and construction of the Windy Gap project.

The book opens in 1933, the Franklin Delano Roosevelt New Deal-era. With economic depression weighing heavy on the country and with drought hammering the west, Federal actions were actually welcomed. Some important legislation that came from FDR at the time included the Emergency Banking Relief Act (March of 1933) and the Public Works Act (June of 1933). Mr. Tyler quickly shifts perspectives from the Federal to Local levels, spending considerable time exploring the on-going discussions between Northern Colorado agricultural and water leaders' and representatives of Wyoming and Nebraska regarding North Platte River water rights; In Larimer, Weld, Sedgwick, Morgan, and Logan Counties, economic growth that had been hampered by the Depression relied on agricultural production to get moving again...and, of course they needed water. The South Platte simply could not be relied upon to support desired economic development. Keep in mind that the Great Western Sugar Company had invested in seventeen sugar beet processing factories in Northern Colorado (They ended up being a heavy hitter (politically and financially) in the early stages of C-BT negotiations).

Through all of this New Deal-era political wrangling, Wyoming finally attains federal funding and approval for the Casper-Alcova Project. A seminal moment for Wyoming...and for Colorado. North Platte water was no longer an option. There are a few important characters to mention at this point in the book, including Greeley Attorney William Kelly, who recognized that Federal approval of Casper-Alcova meant that Northern Colorado needed to look elsewhere for water, and Charles Hanson, the editor of the Greeley Tribune, who had the vision to bring Colorado River water to Northern Colorado farmers. (The seeds of Northern Water are planted, an outgrowth of the Greeley Chamber of Commerce.)

It is at this point in the book that Mr. Tyler begins to go into greater detail regarding the relationships of West Slope and East Slope water users. The West Slope Protective Association (WSPA) formed and met with Northern Colorado Water Users Association (NCWUA) in April of 1934. It is in these discussions that the first idea of "an acre foot for acre foot" notion begins to form. An entire class session could likely be

spent exploring the political negotiations regarding compensatory reservoirs; for the purposes of this report I will simply summarize by saying that, eventually, the sides worked out an agreement. A key item that was recorded from these negotiations was the statement that *"...all transmountain diversion projects include a plan...for replacement reservoir capacity...the same quantity of water stored for and/or diverted to the Eastern Slope."* This agreement ultimately led to the construction of the Green Mountain Reservoir- providing water compensation for C-BT water moved to the East Slope.

Multiple chapters are spent exploring the fine details and political squabbles that happened along the way to getting the C-BT project approved, including battles related to opening up Park Service Land as well as the struggles of figuring out funding to fulfill the Repayment Contract. If you will allow a quick divergence: Trying to think as a Water Leader, something that struck me was the ability of those early leaders to read the political tea leaves, so to speak. Depending on the mood locally, regionally, and even internationally, they shifted the vision, mission, and focus of the C-BT project from agricultural water and recovery from the Depression, to power production, national security, and war-support efforts. I believe this same type of vision and flexibility will be required by present-day water leaders to move through complex challenges ahead. Many hours could be taken up by this class, simply reviewing and learning from all the different steps that were negotiated by the NCWUA and their allies. The efforts bore fruit: By 1936 the "Grand Lake Project" becomes known as the C-BT.

Skipping over volumes of information and jumping ahead to Chapter 21, Mr. Tyler explores the management of the District in an "era of environmental activism". Between 1968-1974, significant environmental statutes came about- the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1968), Federal Water Pollution Control Act amended to CWA (1972), Endangered Species Act (1973), the Safe Drinking Water Act (1974), and the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act (1976), which was designed to significantly expand recreational opportunities and wildlife sanctuaries; National focus is shifting to recreation and environmental activism. Couple this with the Teton Dam Failure in 1976 and you have the Carter Administration calling for a major review of all federally funded water projects, aka "Carter's Hit List"- a review for uneconomical and unsafe water projects. A few months into Carter's presidency, the Water Resources Council recommends using the Clean Water Act to impose instream flow requirements in States that were using the prior appropriation doctrine. Needless to say, Colorado water officials were not pleased. Ultimately, while only 19 of 320 approved water projects had actually been recommended by Carter for cancellation, the message was clear: more Federal involvement in Colorado water issues could be expected. This is the political and social climate that local water leaders were faced with in gaining approval for the construction of Windy Gap.

These final five or six chapters of the book cover the negotiations for the Windy Gap project, including the continuing West versus East battles (salinity issues in the Colorado River are a hot button), management of Northern Water under the leadership of Earl Phipps and Larry Simpson, and on-going operation of the project into the future. One key item that I think would be an oversight if not mentioned was a 1979 Water Decree decision that the "6 Cities" involved in the Windy Gap project and Northern's Municipal Subdistrict (MSD) had failed to demonstrate that taking Windy Gap water would not adversely impact "present or future uses" in the Colorado Basin- this changed the way the East Slope had previously viewed its West Slope water obligations. Too much work and negotiation had gone into Windy Gap to turn back, so this led to further commitments - including construction of the Azure Reservoir and Hydroelectric plant (later abandoned), an instream flow agreement (Trout Unlimited involved) to protect fish flows for twenty-four miles of the Colorado River between Windy Gap and the mouth of the Blue River, and the east slope concession that the MSD would "subordinate all its Windy Gap decrees to all present and future in-basin irrigation, domestic and municipal uses..."

This book was at times laborious, but never uninteresting. The historical details are staggering. To close, I want to share a quote from Mr. Tyler himself, one of the few times where he interjects his own perspective. It is presented in reference to the Windy Gap project, but seems to me to be applicable elsewhere: *"Litigating complicated water conflicts sets a potential trap for both public and private water entities. Old animosities die particularly slowly with out-of-basin water projects. Although the West Slope forced the Subdistrict to obtain its compensatory storage guaranteed by Colorado Statutes, both the Subdistrict and the River District recognized the debilitating nature of long and costly courtroom litigation. Ultimately, negotiation produced benefits for both sides."*