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By Charles Sigman and Lori Saine

The West was won with water, settled by distribution



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Colorado history is an ongoing story about a certain paradox in values. Particularly germane is a small slice of time between the years 1861-62. It is constantly referenced as of late, for it is the story of a fascinating train wreck, a romance derailed by an immutable reality.

William Gilpin was the first governor of the Colorado Territory. A venerable explorer, Gilpin joined the search for a useable route over the Continental Divide with Kit Carson on the 1843 Fremont expedition. Gilpin knew something of the wildness and roughness of this country before he called settlers to frame in a Manifest Destiny.

This tide of popular optimism brought waves of settlers who poured into a promise of paradise where families needed only a pioneer work ethic to command the plains to fruition under purple mountains majesty.

More importantly, Gov. Gilpin painted a picture of artisan wells that would gladly trill forth and water the Eastern Plains nearly for the privilege of being asked.

Although this last advert certainly proved disastrous, perhaps even more so was a current line of reasoning that “rains would follow the plow.” This was a popular notion that water on agricultural lands evaporate with return interest; that by virtue of plowing prairie into farmland, farmers could harness the power of the hydrologic cycle itself to return rains to the same land earnestly worked, answering the “prayer of labor.”

Valuable lessons afforded by history are soon forgotten when eclipsed by the great American romance with the West. Gilpin was nearly 70 years ahead of his time with his magnanimous vision of a fruitful Colorado, one in which millions would inhabit and thrive.

But in the 1860s, prosperity was a dream cordoned off for a select few. For many families, their dreams and meager means bust against rocks uncovered by a diminishing mirage: water, or the lack thereof.

Landowners with prior appropriation (“first in time, first in right”) to a stream could charge exorbitant prices for water — much more than most settlers could afford, effectively rendering surrounding lands without access unusable. And if water could be bought, individuals or small groups could often not afford the complicated systems of canals needed to bring the water to their lands.

The West wasn’t won by guns, grit, or a grand over-arching vision; it was won by water and settled by the distribution of that water. Today, 15 Front Range communities and special districts have come together to invest in the Northern Integrated Supply Project for the purposes of water distribution for future generations.

In today’s chapter of history, another illusion is being shattered. Although environmentalism on the whole is good, sometimes folks can get caught up, worship the beauty of a snapshot. There are those who say that the Poudre River would be harmed by the harvesting of water during wet years, yet this flow through the Poudre is already augmented by water storage flows from Horsetooth Reservoir and trans-basin diversions from the Michigan and Laramie rivers.

Water would be diverted for NISP during wet years, not dry years; and in the building of reservoirs, we build more of a continuous transmission that banks water in wet years, a savings account for the future, as well as a mechanism to aid against flooding. Currently, excess waters in these wet years are leaving Colorado for our neighboring states.

Water conservation has long been a way of life on the Front Range and NISP partner communities have reduced water use by 15 percent per person between 1999 and 2009. Simply working harder will not be enough. The most advanced conservation techniques will not be enough to meet demand. Water remains the lifeblood of this state. NISP would help ensure prosperity flows all the way downstream, including to our city of Dacono.

The city of Dacono urges fellow citizens on the Front Range to support NISP.

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