

Voices of Experience

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Few people beyond his immediate associates may have known Peter Van Putten, the long-time ditch rider for the Water Supply and Storage Company on the Cache la Poudre River. But those who knew him certainly recognized his extensive knowledge of the ditch system and Colorado water rights as implemented by irrigators on the ground. His recent passing has removed his specialized knowledge from the world.

This is true for others in the Colorado water community who have also recently passed, including Jerry Kenny, the Executive Director of the Platte River Recovery Implementation Program, and Dr. Norm Evans, a retired CSU Professor and former Director of the Colorado Water Institute (CWI). The loss of life is inevitable, but the loss of knowledge, to some extent, need not be.

Fortunately, Dr. Evans sat down in 1988 for an oral history interview, which was recorded and transcribed. He spoke for more than two hours about his background and

work experiences, sharing his insights and opinions. When he talked about the Colorado General Assembly passing a bill that authorized the Water Institute as a state agency in 1981, he included the reason why the bill had no appropriation attached to it: the legislature was short on funds.

“The income to the state was inadequate to meet the needs, and there were high priorities everywhere, and so water research wasn’t considered a high priority and never has been, and I don’t know if it ever will be. I think the time it would be is whenever there is a severe drought. About the only time when people get serious about water is when there isn’t any” (Dr. Evans interview transcript p.25 <http://hdl.handle.net/10217/172799>).

Later in the interview, Dr. Evans turned to think about the future. “I don’t see how the state cannot put emphasis and funding in water research. But that’s been the case for about that many years, so I may be wrong in forecasting a change. But I do believe the state will begin to put more money into water research in the near future, maybe not immediately this year, but in the next few years” (Dr. Evans transcript p. 38-39).

“About the only time when people get serious about water is when there isn’t any.”
-Norman A. Evans

(Above) c. 1978, Norm Evans (middle) with two other members of the Water Quality Control Commission. From the Colorado Water Resources Research Institute Records.



Cache la Poudre River, 1903. Capturing images and stories of how things used to be help us to understand our present and future. From the Irrigation Research Papers, Water Resources Archive.

The Evans interview is part of the CSU Water Resources Archive's Water Oral Histories Collection. This collection, containing just ten interviews done between 1986 and 1996, is one of several in the Archive that contains oral histories. Two such collections relate to area ditch companies. These are the collections of the Water Supply and Storage Company, with interviews dating between 1973 and 1991, and the North Poudre Irrigation Company, with interviews dating from 1992 to 1994. Each set generally focuses on company leaders or employees.

We also have two collections of oral histories focused on floods. One of these, the David McComb Big Thompson Flood Collection, contains interviews done with survivors, first responders, and officials just months after the July 1976 event. The other, the Northern Colorado Flood Oral History Collection, holds interviews conducted primarily with water managers who had some role or responsibility for planning or recovery in the wake of the 2013 floods.

Two additional collections containing oral histories are based on different topics. The collection from the Colorado

Association of Soil Conservation Districts includes about twenty tapes and transcripts from interviews recorded in 1983 and 1984. This is a small subset of their overall collection, but the interviews share varying perspectives from people involved in the soil conservation movement. The Cache la Poudre Oral History Project Collection originated with a 2002-2004 project funded by the local office of the National Park Service (NPS). The area residents, professors, water organization administrators, policymakers, and lawyers interviewed discuss their views on and interactions with the river.

The Poudre project also interviewed Dr. Evans, focusing for an hour on his role on the Fort Collins Water Board and the Colorado Water Quality Control Commission, in the context of the Poudre River. Dr. Evans was an original appointee when the water board was formed in 1963, and he stayed on for 25 years. The board took important steps to secure a water supply for the city, and Dr. Evans was quite proud of how they accomplished that in cooperation with other cities. He stated, "So the idea of cooperation then in the '60s and '70s was not a common thing, but it was something that most who were

sensible would recognize as it's better to cooperate than it is to try to force through legal actions. And I'm delighted to say that the City of Fort Collins, through its water board, was a leader in advocating and moving in a cooperative way. (Dr. Norm Evans oral history interview transcript p. 4 <https://hdl.handle.net/10217/188061>).

Beyond the Water Resources Archive, two other groups have conducted substantial water-related oral history interview projects. In the mid- to late-1990s, the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's history program interviewed prominent people in the Bureau and has since distributed the transcripts to a handful of institutions across the country, including the Water Resources Archive. The digital versions can be found online (<https://www.usbr.gov/history/oralhist.html>). Also, the Colorado River Water Users Association conducted a number of oral histories with people across the basin between 2001 and 2009, and these are online as well (<http://www.crwua.org/about-us/oral-histories>).


This listing of water-related oral histories might make it seem like sufficient work has been done. But most of these interviews were recorded more than a decade ago, and the experiences, insights, and opinions of the current generation of retiring water leaders have largely not been captured. Many in the water community believe we should not let the present opportunity get away.

To that end, the Water Resources Archive is partnering with the Poudre Heritage Alliance in the interest of initiating an oral history project. We are aiming to record at least twenty interviews with Colorado water leaders across the state who have recently retired or who are nearing the completion of

their careers. We expect to have broad representation across the basins, water sectors, and professions.

All interviews will be transcribed, with the recordings and transcriptions made available through the Water Resources Archive. The Poudre Heritage Alliance will further utilize the recordings to make educational video clips available to the public. Other organizations, educators, the media, and any researchers will be able to similarly use the information to create presentations, films, articles, and books, or to simply listen and learn from those who have created our water future by their decades of work.

We have all lost someone in our lives whose voice we would like to hear again. If there is a person in the Colorado water community who should be recorded sharing their wisdom for posterity, please e-mail me with their name and contact information. While the project is aiming for twenty interviews, we can accomplish as many as funding allows. Donations to the Poudre Heritage Alliance, specifying the "Water Legacy Heritage Video Series," will be much appreciated. Donate through their website at <https://poudreheritage.org/donate/>.

For more information about the collections mentioned, visit the Water Resources Archive website (<https://lib.ColoState.edu/water>) or contact me (970)-491-1939; Patricia.Rettig@ColoState.edu) at any time. 

(Below) Car parked next to Jackson Ditch headgate and Bellvue Hydraulic Laboratory, 1919. Pete Van Putten lived near this location on the Poudre River and could explain the changes that happened over the years. From the Irrigation Research Papers, Water Resources Archive.

