

River of Lost Souls

by Michael Black

By 1899, the people of Durango knew they had a problem. This town, founded only 20 years before, had become the metropolis of southwest Colorado. Located along the banks of the Rio de Las Animas Perdidas, the River of Lost Souls, and in the center of vast coal deposits, Durango was ideally situated to prosper. But, the river that gave the town life was becoming polluted.

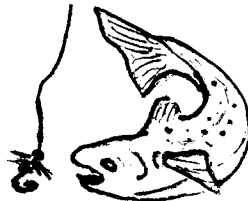
Durango could see the problem coming; in November, 1899, the Durango Democrat reported:

"The Animas is impregnated with deposits of mineral waste, sloughed from the San Juan Mills down to Rockwood. Every year the lie of concentrate deposits on the river comes a little nearer to Durango. We are not suggesting anything at this time, but the question of change in water supply must come up before long. The danger is not here yet but is getting closer every day." And in December: "The question that is crowding upon Durango thick and fast is one of water. The mill slime from Silverton are now reaching us."

There are many indications that the water quality in the Animas was very good prior to this time. In July of 1899, it was reported:

"It may be a source of comfort to those who have gone to distant streams to fish to know that 'Curly' Knight landed a 4 1/2 pound trout from a pool near the ice house yesterday noon and missed one equally large. The Democrat received the catch with the following attached:

Grasshoppers are roosting mightily low
Mosquitoes were flying high
But the nicest thing I found on the roost
Was this on my blue bottle fly



The trout was a native and it was most elegantly broiled and served."

The fact that the fish were identified as native trout is of great importance. Trout are very susceptible to contaminated water and native trout the least tolerant. The fact that native trout were living and reproducing in the Animas indicates that the water was of very high quality. As the Durango Democrat stated:

"We haven't noticed the trout abandoning the Animas River and a trout demands a pure article of water. If there was a particle of mineral or acid in solution we would not be hatching or fishing the Animas waters."

The problem with water quality was occurring because of the boom in mining upstream near the town of Silverton. Silverton, founded in 1875 in the center of Baker's Park, a vast mountain valley surrounded on all sides by highly mineralized mountains, served as the population and transportation center for the mining district.

The area was first explored by Americans in 1860 with an expedition led by Captain Baker. The inaccessible location, lack of easily mined placer gold, as well as the excitement of the up-coming Civil War, led to the abandonment of the district until the 1870s. Further

development was discouraged by the Ute Indians; who did not appreciate miners trespassing on their reservation. This problem was resolved by the Brunot Treaty of 1873, which ceded the high country to the federal government and the miners. This treaty and the Mining Act of 1872 allowed the miners to patent their claims and the boom was on.

The first successful mine in Baker's Park was the Little Giant located up Arrastra Gulch. Milling equipment was hauled in by wagons, in an arduous journey from the railroads, and up the Rio Grande. While the Little Giant soon played out, the mine was a clear example of the problems of the Silverton District: lack of transportation and the presence of low grade ore, which required extensive milling.

The transportation problems were partly solved by the arrival of the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad in 1882, which founded the town of Durango downstream in 1880.

The Silverton District, unlike many mining communities of Colorado, weathered the depression and silver collapse of 1893. While not as famous as the neighboring camps, Telluride and Creed, Silverton got by on its base metal production of lead, zinc, and copper; which supplemented the relatively less gold found in the ore. Increasing investment in a railroad system to service the far corners of Baker's Park, and the general reliance on a extensive system of tramways, allowed the mine to produce years-round. The low grade ores, as well as the high tariffs of the railroads, forced a great investment in mills to concentrate those ores to lower the cost of shipment. And those mills, with their inadequate disposal methods, created the problems for Durango's water supply.

By August 1900, the problem became critical enough that it came before the City Council:

"The council discussing at length new source of water supply. All members are alive to the situation and none dispute the fact that soon we must abandon the Animas River which mills above Silverton are polluting with dangerous health destroying mineral poisons."

A suggestion other than a change of water source was made by the Democrat that spring:

"The water question is the most serious problem the city has to face but the proposition must be met in some form. A strict enforcement of the law as to polluting streams will benefit conditions."

In a short time, the problem became more acute. Along with the mineral wastes, Durango had serious concerns about disease. It was a time before antibiotics were discovered, and infectious disease held a horror for everyone. Smallpox, diphtheria, and cholera could only be treated by confining patients in pest houses and hoping for the best. Durango was well aware of the effects Silverton's sewage were having on their health. From the Durango Wage Earner in April 1901:

"Silverton will soon have her exhaust sewage line belching into the Animas so that Durango will not have to wait for the old fashioned and slower process of pollution. Kind of wrap-up the chunks of bread and meat so the fish won't spoil them and put a string around them like a Christmas gift."

And a practical suggestion from 1902:

"If you contemplate suicide don't overlook the Animas as a means to the end. You won't have to drown yourself in it. You just drink some of it's water and you'll get there with both feet.

This comment is in contrast to: the "clear sparkling water" that the Animas was a few short years before.

By August, 1902, the problem had become acute enough for the city council to investigate the source of pollution around Silverton.

"CITY COUNCIL PROCEEDINGS ... VISITING COMMITTEE OF ALDERMEN FIND DEPLORABLE CONDITIONS IN SILVERTON AND SURROUNDINGS ... Mr. Darlington was asked for a report...He said in part: 'We went to the Silverton mills and were permitted to go up Cement Creek to the Gold King. We found that the tailings were run into the creek which empties into the Animas. All the water closets [toilets] stand over the stream and the cook house refuse is dumped into the stream. I talked with Mr. Kinney (the Gold King manager) and he said that the tailings did not injure the water and gave me to understand that if it wasn't for the San Juan mills there would be no Durango, which at present times owes its existence to the mills. If they were made to impound the tailings there would be no ore from that section shipped to Durango as it would be cheaper to build a [rail] road to Lake City than to impound the tailings and that is what they would do.'

They investigated other mines and mills, Silver Lake, Eureka, the Iowa, and the Little Dora, and found similar situations.

"But the worst sight that met our gaze was the Silverton dump. There we found a dead horse, a dead cow, and manure galore, some of the refuse lies in the water at its present low stage. If the river was to raise two feet the whole dumping ground refuse would come our way.

Darlington made a motion the when city attorney Miller returns that he start an injunction suit against all the mills in San Juan County that pollute the waters of the Animas River and adjacent streams and including the City of Silverton."

The editor of the Democrat did not think much of Mr. Kinney's threat to build a railroad to Lake City. He questioned:

"The propriety of soliciting Silverton's permit to remain on the earth, at least until Bill Z. Kinney gets his aerial route ballasted with hot air." And: "Bill Kinney was down from Silverton yesterday to see about ties for his Lake City road but he couldn't exactly figure out what he wanted with the ties and finally decided to price a pile driver and get estimates for his aerial route. Bill has all the requirements essential to success in the newspaper business - and then some."

Apparently the city attorney disappeared, and since the council could not find him, they could not to file for an injunction. The district attorney claimed it was a civil rather than a criminal affair, and therefore outside of his jurisdiction, but went on to say that an injunction would only cause strife between the two communities and would do no good as the river would continued to be polluted from other sources.

In the meantime, chemical tests were done on the water, and "a considerable quantity of lead and arsenic had been found." It was clear to everyone that something needed to be done but just exactly what was hard to tell.

The editor of the Democrat favored pursuing the injunction: "We are against any and all pollution of streams and dead

against a reckless and premeditated practice that is ruining human health and damaging the property of the hundreds of residents who reside along the Animas River. It is clearly criminal and under the law cannot be tolerated by the people." As well as: "Every hour that injunction proceedings is delayed is an hour devoted to a compromise with crime."

"Cooler heads" at another Durango paper suggested caution. From a Silverton newspaper: "But in striking contrast to the agitation of the Democrat the (Durango) Herald shows the futility of attempting to purify the waters of the Animas without shutting down the mills. The alleged wanton pollution of the waters of the Animas by the mill owners of San Juan County and the people of Silverton is only in the jaundiced vision of the editor of the Durango Democrat. [...] Local physicians who have given thought to sanitary engineering inform us that even if the mill tailings were impounded, the waters ... would still carry objectionable impurities to the main stream and pollute it practically as much as the tailings do."

A more chilling analysis was also made by the Herald: "If the real question to be discussed and settled is, which is of more importance to this western section of the state, the mills which form the industry of the little northern towns of the acres of land under cultivation for miles down the Animas Valley."

The Wage Earner was not impressed with the Silverton arguments: "Wonder how the Silverton people took to the Silverton sewage during the (county) fair? Bet they turned up their noses at it and never touched a drop. It is pretty hard sometimes to take your own medicine."

In 1903, giving in to economic pressure from the north, Durango moved its water supply to the nearby Florida River. This system had much to recommend it; the Florida was at a higher elevation than Durango and the water could be obtained by gravity flow. Also, very little mining or any other human activity had occurred in its headwaters. Today, the area is in the Weminuche Wilderness.

Of course, the movement of the city water supply did nothing about the pollution of the Animas River. It is clear from the old accounts, that while contamination of the water was the main problem, the people of that time were concerned about the health of the river.

From the Durango Wage Earner, October 1903, after the bond issue passed: "Only a few years ago and those who had occasion to cross the Animas River over the bridge separating North and South Durango will recall what a clear stream it was. One could stand on the bridge and gazing down into the pellucid waters watch the innumerable fishes on the bottom. Go now and see what a change has been wrought by the mills above. Sluggish and thick impurities - no fish of decent habits can exist in it. The Wage Earner believes that the mills should be compelled to stop their pollution of the grand old Animas and that its waters should be restored to their original beauty and purity."

Now, 92 years later, while the river has been cleaned up to a considerable degree, we still have much that needs to be done to restore the "grand old Animas".

As the editor of the Democrat put it: "The Almighty never intended that mankind should destroy so beautiful a stream, willfully and recklessly destroy it. It is an outrage upon the residents of Durango and the valley to permit it." And one might add, an outrage to future generations.

