

Let's face it. Most people would no more pick up a book about such enticing subjects as "ditches" and "water appropriation" than they'd spend an afternoon at the beach reading an auto manual in Esperanto.

Colorado's Landscape, Ditches, and Water Institutions"

When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday, Feb. 9

Where: Boulder Book Store, 1107 Pearl St., Boulder

Tickets: Vouchers to attend are \$5 and are good for \$5 off the author's featured book or a purchase the day of the event

Info: 303-447-2074 or boulderbookstore.net (<http://boulderbookstore.net>)

But with his first book, "A Land Made from Water: Appropriation and the Evolution of Colorado's Landscape, Ditches, and Water Institutions," Robert R. Crifasi, former water resources administrator for the city of Boulder's open space program, has written a deeply researched, deftly written guide that is both informative and entertaining, even for lay readers.

Widely regarded as one of the area's bona fide water experts, Crifasi sat on the boards of 11 private Boulder ditch companies and managed all of the city's ditches. He also has shoveled countless tons of wet leaves, silt and the occasional dead skunk as a ditch rider.

He begins with a concise history of water development in the West, noting that the Anasazi people who inhabited Mesa Verde were building ditches and reservoirs for irrigation as early as 900 BCE. The Spanish took some of those ideas and blended them with a cultural and political system of "acequias," a word adapted from the Arabic "al saqiya," meaning "water conduit."

The Boulder and St. Vrain valleys were dry indeed before pioneers dug the first ditch in 1859, using shovels and horse-drawn "Fresno scraper" plows. Based on historical documents and photos, he concludes, "I think we can safely state that east of the foothills from approximately Coal Creek on the south to St. Vrain on the north there were virtually no lakes present prior to active settlement."

Few area residents might know that a famous 1882 Boulder County case, Coffin v. Left Hand Ditch Company, led to a Colorado Supreme Court decision that established the most basic (and still standing) principle of Western water law: first in time, first in right. Essentially, the ruling meant that simply owning land did not automatically give one rights to water passing through.

That might sound a little, well, dry. But Crifasi injects the history of this mini-water war with real-life drama, personalities and the occasional pointed observation.

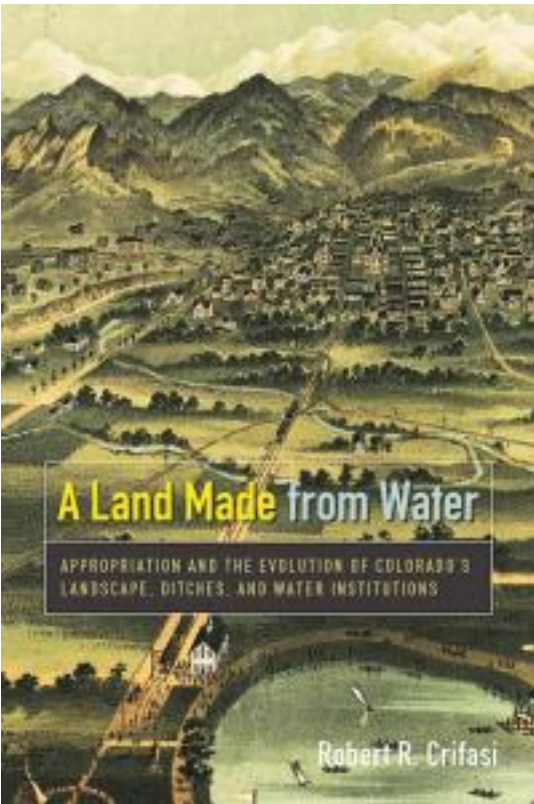
"Today, Colorado's Prior Appropriation system has become a symbol for the preference of private property over common property, the privatization of public resources, and the rule of markets to distribute natural resources," he writes. But, he notes, the Left Hand Ditch Company resulted from the kind of cooperative that many would revile as "socialist" today, and prior appropriation was widely understood at the time as a victory against control of water by wealthy capitalists who could afford to buy land.

Crifasi relates the history of how modern Front Range residents came to enjoy a wealth of water through such public projects as the Moffat Tunnel and the Colorado-Big Thompson Project. He also is refreshingly frank about conflicts between some environmentalists and the reality of water in the dry West.

While wearing his ditch rider's hat, Crifasi ran into a young biologist who found leopard frogs, a federal species of concern, in one of his ditches and thought it should not be disturbed.

"I wholeheartedly shared his desire to protect the species. But the problem was that these frogs migrated into and now occupy habitat that was created by people," Crifasi writes. " ... Never mind that if someone like me didn't get the laterals cleaned, there would be no point for the rancher to turn water into the laterals so he might irrigate his hay meadow. The laterals would simply dry out and cease providing tadpole habitat or a source of water for the hay meadow. ... It felt like to me that he wanted ... some kind of frog Valhalla. Our conversation made me feel like a callous frog killer for even suggesting it might be necessary to occasionally disturb the habitat ... so that we might perpetuate it."

He dispels the common romantic notion that "Indians roamed the plains as if it were an ecological utopia" and that settlement was "a fall from Eden that happened with the discovery of gold."



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"A Land Made from Water: Appropriation and the Evolution of Colorado's Landscape, Ditches, and Water Institutions" by Robert R. Crifasi. University Press of Colorado, 424 pages with black and white photos and illustrations. \$50 print, \$40 Kindle.

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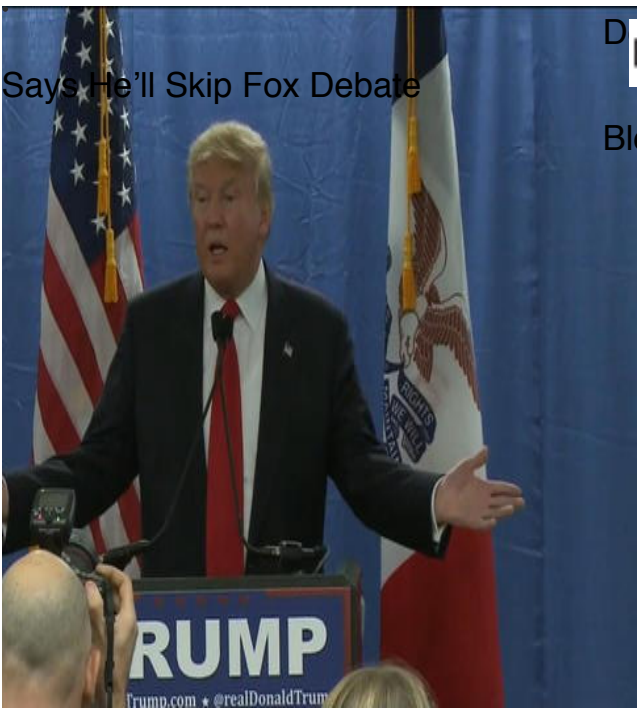
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