WINDSOR GARDENS AND THE HIGH LINE

By Dennis Knight

 The High Line Canal on the southern edge of Windsor Gardens is one of our most attractive amenities. It’s a product of Colorado’s unusual water laws that came about because water in our state is a precious commodity. In the first major water law decision by our territorial supreme court, it was held that water could be diverted from the stream, and ditches built across public and private land to bring the water to its beneficial use. In other states, under the Riparian Doctrine, those with land next to the stream have a water right for that stream, but under the Colorado Doctrine, owning land along a stream does not mean you own its water. Owners may build reservoirs and facilities on the lands of others to move water. In other words, a seventy mile canal could be dug almost without hindrance.

 The High Line, conceived in 1870, would be the first large canal built for the purpose of transporting and selling water to landowners. After attracting the necessary investors, construction started in 1880. Beginning at a diversion point on the South Platte River above the mouth of Waterton Canyon, it now meanders through Denver and adjoining counties, finally trickling onto the prairie of Rocky Mountain Arsenal at milepost 66.3, only thirty miles as the crow flies.

Remarkably, the High Line drops only 132 feet, two feet per mile from origin to terminus. By comparison, the South Platte River drops about 500 feet from that same point to the point down river closest to the end of the High Line. This surveying feat meant any land situated between the canal and the river could be irrigated by gravitational flow. The canal was, however, remarkably inefficient, losing about eighty percent of its cargo by virtue of seepage and evaporation. Further, the developers’ water rights were junior and they had problems getting sufficient water. The dream of irrigating some fifty thousand acres never materialized and it was frequently dry but it did operate. Denver Water took over the canal in 1924. Under its management and the help of municipal parks departments, trails were built along the length of the canal.

One of the first and most important original customers of the High Line Canal was Windsor Farm. The history of Windsor Farm involves the Tabors, the Brown Palace and other Denver names and institutions. The farm was sold in 1960 to the developers of Windsor Gardens, now Denver’s grand community of senior residents. Windsor Gardens’ needs are still served by Denver Water, but not from the canal. Windsor Lake south of the channel stores canal water still purchased by Fairmont Cemetery.

The High Line has become an amenity enjoyed by walkers, joggers, bikers, and wildlife, from bunnies to coyotes. It is shaded in a canopy of mostly cottonwood. Denver Water continues to send water downstream intermittently to serve the remaining customers and nurture the canopy.

The residents of Windsor Gardens prize the canal and use it as a recreational treasure. Several residents have created floral gardens on the edge of the trail. The trail managers tacitly cooperate by sparing the beds from mowers and equipment, and the stretch that passes by beautiful Windsor Gardens is the crowning glory of the historic High Line Canal.