

Colorado, a Flowing Fountain

By Dennis Payton Knight

The destination of a single droplet may be decided by the orientation of a pebble at the crest of the Continental Divide, determining whether it will descend east to the Atlantic Ocean, or west to the Pacific.

My sister and I had the pleasure last week of a drive enjoying Colorado's mountains and rivers, two collaborating forces of nature. Mountains gather and shed snow to create rivers, rivers move earth to shape mountains. It is an enduring dynamic that makes Colorado a flowing fountain from which much of America drinks.

Headwaters in drainage basins direct melting snow by rivulets to form rivers like the North and South Platte, the Arkansas, the Rio Grande. There are the Dolores, San Juan, Animas, Gunnison, Yampa, and White Rivers, and, of course, the Colorado.

We watched the Dolores roar south from its origin in a meadow at Lizard Pass. At Durango, we drove along the Animas cascading south from Silverton to create the spectacular route of the Durango and Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad.

We drove upriver along the Gunnison as it cuts the long, deep, narrow gorge of its Black Canyon. We saw it swell into the thirty-six miles of Blue Mesa Reservoir. If we had driven downstream, we would have seen it join the Colorado at Grand Junction.

We crossed the Continental Divide at Monarch Pass where the South Arkansas gathers. We watched it meet the main flow at Salida to begin the journey down canyon to Pueblo and the Rocky Ford melon country to the east. It will proceed to the Mississippi by way of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas.

We headed north upstream along the Arkansas flowing rapidly from its origins near Leadville. At Buena Vista we headed east and soon we were in the high, grassy basin of South Park where the South Platte becomes a river. It will meander down the Front Range, through Denver, Greeley, and Julesburg, and on to Nebraska to meet its sister, the North Platte, and continue to join the Missouri at Omaha.

Earlier in the week I crossed the Rio Grande at Del Norte in the San Luis Valley. It is alone among Colorado's Atlantic-bound rivers in that it does not join the Mississippi. Instead, it drifts south through New Mexico and into Texas to form much of the boundary with Mexico before it empties into the Gulf of Mexico.

The Colorado River, which we missed on this trip, begins as a trickle at La Poudre Pass near Rocky Mountain National Park. It rambles down the Western Slope, gaining strength from small and large tributaries, incising scenic Glenwood Canyon, streaming to Grand Junction where the Gunnison joins. The Colorado flows into Utah where the Green River from Wyoming connects after first taking on our state's White and Yampa Rivers. Downstream, the Colorado carves the Grand Canyon in Arizona and fills Lake Mead for human use before diminishing back to a trickle striving for the Gulf of California.

Your mountains make rivers, your rivers shape mountains. You are a flowing fountain,
Colorado.