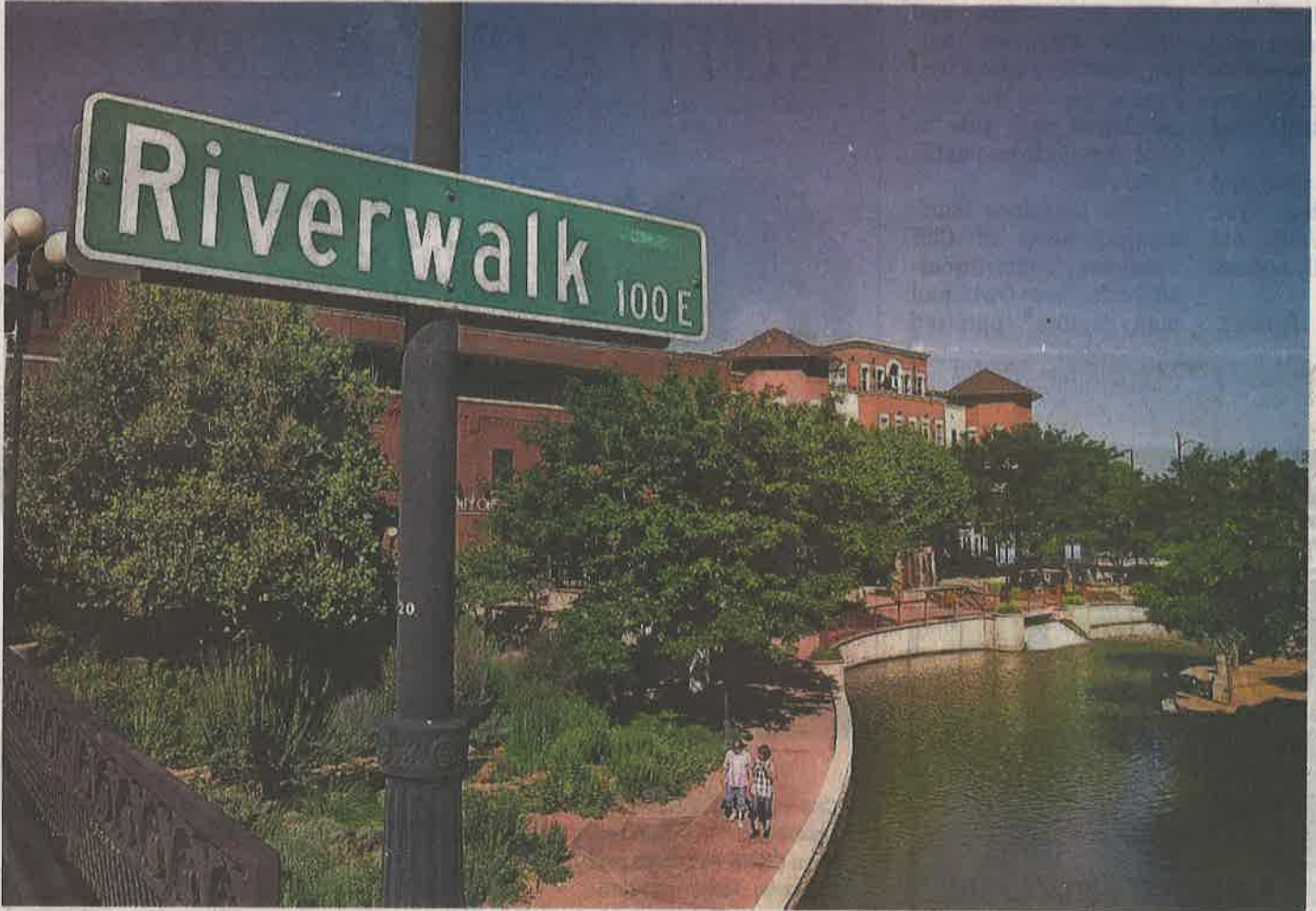


Colorado river towns: Pueblo



People take a morning stroll along the Historic Riverwalk on July 8 in Pueblo. COURTESY/KATIE KERNS THE GAZETTE

Marianne Goodland
Denver Gazette

The Arkansas River has given Pueblo its all since the earliest settlers fished its waters, and the Front Range river town has been trying to take more and more ever since.

In the scheme of things, the Arkan-

sas River is massive, stretching 1,443 miles from Leadville, at 10,151 feet above sea level, to the mighty Mississippi at 180 feet above sea level. It's America's sixth-longest river, 7 miles shorter than the Colorado.

The 9 miles of the Arkansas that flow through Pueblo mean the world in these parts.

The river provides this town a raft of disparate uses: drinking water, recreation, agricultural irrigation, industrial, economic development and a deep sense of place and abiding history tied to the water that passes through.

Pueblo is the river town that turns

the Arkansas from a mountain runnel to a critical source of irrigation for the city and the plains to the east that stretch across Colorado and Kansas. Once water flows out of Pueblo, it doesn't hit another significantly populated river town until it reaches Garden City, Kan., population 26,000, four hours by automobile, and Wichita is downriver another 3½ hours from there.

That puts the river's glory and challenges in the West squarely on Pueblo to cash in or pay out, before the farmlands and cattle ranches get their turn for hundreds of miles.

"It's what's allowed Pueblo to thrive in its early years and is its opportunity for the future," said Sal Pace, the former county commissioner and state representative who is leading a statewide effort to bring Front Range passenger rail to town.

When Gov. Jared Polis signed a bill to authorize the Front Range Rail Commission on June 30, he did so at Pueblo Union Depot, next door to the Pueblo Railroad Museum across the tracks from the river.

Mayor Nick Gradisar, a lawyer born and raised here, served 15 years on the board of Pueblo Water Works before he was elected mayor in 2019.

Last year, when indoor meetings were a bad idea because of COVID-19, he moved his town hall meeting to the Riverwalk.

Forged by a flood

Gradisar did the honors last October when the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk of Pueblo Foundation celebrated the 20th anniversary of a revital-

ization project by unveiling a rendering of this river town's next big improvements: The Gateway Center Boathouse with offices, conference rooms and a rooftop deck to be available for catered events with a river view.

Voters gave the work their financial blessing in 2016 when they passed Ballot Issue 1A, which allocated \$8.7 million from a windfall of deferred taxes from electric utilities and a local cement company.

Pace led the campaign to pass it.

This river town's present and future, however, is the product of its disastrous past.

On June 3 this year Pueblans gathered by the river for Flood Remembrance Day, marking a century since a devastating flood that moved the channel a quarter of a mile south to where it is today.

The U.S. Geological Survey estimated the property damage at more than \$19 million when the town's assessed property value was \$33 million. At least 78 people died, though unaccounted-for bodies could have driven the toll much higher.

After the city rebuilt and in the decades after, downtown flourished as handsome brick buildings sprang up like cat-tails, and the city's steel mill blossomed as the dominant employer. By the 1980s, the downtown streets had grown seedy and unsightly as steel prices tumbled and the market for tubing manufactured at the mill bot-tomed out.

"Some wondered if Pueblo would become a ghost town," notes the city's official Riverwalk history.

That's when modern leaders turned to what had made it successful before: a revitalized, scenic gem to enamor new businesses, residents and visitors back with the river town's heart and soul.

It took some time, and they're not done yet. Work started in 1996, and the park officially opened in 2000.

On Flood Remembrance Day last year, the mayor said Pueblans shared the backbone it took to bounce back.

"The state of our city today is testament to the resiliency of our ancestors who built Pueblo back better and stronger," he said.

A home to roost

A big challenge today is people taking out too much water. The dilemma is called overappropriation, and it's a common problem for many of Colorado's 158 named rivers.

The impact is felt more sharply in this diverse urban ecosystem.

Arkansas River bald eagle

Photo by Marianne Goodland, Colorado Politics A bald eagle keeps an eye on the Arkansas River as human visitors pass beneath in tubes on July 1, 2021.

Home to nearly two dozen species of birds, the Arkansas River at Pueblo is a place where bald eagles fly. Colorado Politics was able to drift by our national feathered symbol keeping sentry on the river from the highest branch of the tallest pine near the Nature and

Wildlife Discovery Center, near City Park and the Pueblo Zoo on the less-developed east side of town not far from Pueblo Reservoir.

"The limestone bluffs support nests of Cliff Swallows, White-throated Swifts, Barn Owls, and many raptors," appraised

The Audubon Society about the area. "The reservoir is a major stopping area for waterbirds (including grebes and loons) and American White Pelicans, and a major wintering area for gulls, Bald Eagles, and waterfowl. Osprey have nested there since 1990, and are increasing in population. The riparian area below the dam supports numerous migrants, wintering, and nesting birds."

The boats on the river, tamarisk and other non-native species, as well as the encroachment of development are threats to a popular area Bird Watcher's Digest classifies as a "hot spot" for spotting rare fowl.

For fly fishing, the Arkansas has a "Gold Medal" rating because of the size and quantity of brown and rainbow trout, saugeye and walleye, catfish and bass year-round.

Locals say the fishing is especially good in the winter.

Pace showed off a picture of 14-year-old son, Wyatt, proudly clutching a recent catch near the Pueblo levee, another consequence of the 1921 flood.

Pueblo Levee

Photo courtesy of the Gates Frontiers Fund Colorado Collection within the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, Photo courtesy of the Gates Frontiers Fund Colorado Collection within the Carol M. Highsmith Archive, Library of Congress, The long and eclectic mural on the levee

walls first appeared as whimsical graffiti in the 1970s and was certified as the longest mural in the world by the Guinness Book of World Records.

Besides hiking trails and flood control, the levee is an object of art. The concrete embankment had long been a target for graffiti, until city leaders decided if they couldn't beat the taggers, they'd join them, creating a mural that stretched 3 miles, the longest anywhere, as certified by the Guinness Book of World Records.

Local artists started filling in Pueblo's Historic Levee in the 1970s and work continued until about 2014.

In 2017, however, the Federal Emergency Management Agency called for a recertification of the levee, which meant repairs, including new concrete. Some of that art appears now lost to history.

Farm-to-market flow

East of Pueblo, the river's water quality deteriorates, a huge problem for southeastern Colorado residents who rely on wells for drinking water.

That's about to change. Last October, federal officials were on hand in Pueblo to break ground on the Arkansas Valley Conduit, which was first authorized by President John F. Kenne-

dy in 1962. Ultimately, it will bring 7,500 acre-feet of water from Pueblo reservoir to 50,000 people in 40 communities in eastern Pueblo, Bent, Crowley, Kiowa, Otero and Prowers counties by way of a \$610 million pipeline 130 miles to Lamar.

As Pueblo prepares to send its good water east, it has had its share of beefs sending it north.

The Southern Delivery System allowed Colorado Springs to pump water from Lake Pueblo and return water via Fountain Creek, which joins the Arkansas on the east side of Pueblo. The water coming back isn't nearly as good as the water leaving, Pace said.

"It feeds into the community's 'us versus them' mentality," that Pueblo is being picked on by the rest of the state, he said. "It's everything in Pueblo to protect the water."

Put the town's agricultural identity on that list.

Around this river town, the spice of life is the local chile pepper, a far better choice than its New Mexico cousin, which most anybody

with Pueblo roots seems ready to argue.

Sept. 24-26 this year, the Pueblo Chile and Frijoles Festival will happen — where else? At the Riverwalk and Union Avenue.

Water for peppers, however, has to compete for Arkansas River water with pinto beans, corn, hay and the newest local crop: cannabis for marijuana or hemp. Farther east, the Rocky Ford mel-

ons have a right to a big share each year.

"When you look at the importance of water and how it's played a role in the development of this community, it isn't just the Riverwalk," said Colorado Senate President Leroy Garcia, a Pueblo native and a former City Council member. "It's agriculture, promotion of the chiles and other aspects that highlights the benefits of southern Col-

orado and its historic water rights."

Connected fortunes

As certainly as the river ties this town to so much — history, commerce, flora, fauna and real estate values — the fortunes of the town are tied to those of the river, same as it ever was.

Some Pueblans have forgotten local people's history, and they con-

tinue to pay a steep price when the channel divides, such as it did during the 1921 flood.

Roxanne Pignanelli hasn't forgotten what her ancestors believed.

The coordinator of government and community affairs at Pueblo County School District 70 was appointed to the Colorado Child Support Commission by the governor in May.

Her heritage is Span-

ish and native, the first people of this region. Pignanelli shared the story about a curse placed by the Utes that promised turmoil and trouble for the settlers if they did not work together.

"When we work together well in Pueblo, we prosper," she said. "When we don't treat each other with dignity and kindness, we suffer."