

THE ENGLISH DITCH

It was in 1874 that ranchers and land owners from the area east of Littleton first petitioned the mayor of Denver about the possibility of building an irrigation ditch to bring Platte River water to the fertile highlands which over-surrounded Denver on the south and east. Not much was done until five years later when the Northern Colorado Irrigation Company, which had been formed by a group of English capitalists, announced plans to build a high line canal. It would begin with a 700 foot tunnel to draw water out of the Platte Canyon and over the plains ending at Box Elder Creek east of Aurora. It would have capacity of 8,887 gallons per second and an average fall of 21 inches per mile.

In July of 1881, the Rocky Mountain News reported that 160 teams were at work on the canal, the cost of which would run to three-quarters of a million dollars. The English company sold water rights and predicted that this engineering marvel would turn the entire area into a virtual Garden of Eden.

Garden subdivisions were platted along the canal, and lots sold to farmers eager to start small orchards and commercial vegetable gardens. Three of these land promotions were located in what is now Greenwood Village—they were: South Denver Gardens between University Boulevard and South Colorado; Rosamond Park just west of University; and Garden Meadows between South Franklin and South Clarkson.

Disillusionment— The High Line Canal opened in 1883, and it wasn't long before the purchasers of land and water rights along its course discovered that the English Company's glowing prophecies of well watered abundance were not going to come true. The problem was that most of the rights to the Platte River water had already been appropriated by other downstream users before the High Line Canal was ever built. As a result, the some 400 subscribers to High Line found that during dry years (about one out of every three) there just wasn't enough water in the canal to meet their needs. This made farming, gardening and fruit-raising uncertain at best.

Among farmers faced with years of crop failures, there was naturally much unhappiness along the "English Ditch" as it came to be called with some derision, unhappiness which resulted in angry charges and countercharges, repeated law suits and several "water wars."

One leader of the disgruntled farmers was a man named Cyrus G. Richardson, a New Englander who had come to Colorado in 1869, as did so many settlers, to recover his health. Richardson owned a large farm in the area where the High Line crosses Bellevue Road. Interestingly enough, he called his place Greenwood Ranch.

Richardson proposed the construction of two mountain storage reservoirs to ensure a dependable supply of water to the High Line, and he sold shares for \$10 each in the Lost Park Reservoir Company and the Antero Reservoir Company. His untimely death in 1894 delayed his plans for some years, but the two reservoirs eventually were built. However, due to engineering and design problems Antero Reservoir had an average water depth of only five feet, and Lost Park would not hold water at all.

Water problems continued to plague farmers along the High Line, and many abandoned their attempts at irrigated agriculture. Several farmers in the Greenwood area garden subdivisions rented their small places in the 20's and 30's to well-to-do Denver folks looking for a rural escape from the city heat. Some of these summer visitors liked the country area so much that they became permanent residents and formed the nucleus of one of Denver's first suburban communities. In 1924 the Denver Water Board finally bought out the floundering English Company for \$1,050,000.00, a price that was considered by the critics at the time to be outrageously high.

Today, according to the Water Board, although many land owners along The Canal still own water rights not much High Line water is used for agricultural irrigation. Most goes to water suburban parks, golf courses, cemeteries and for other municipal purposes.

The English Ditch may not have been a great commercial success, but its value today as a recreational amenity and an asset to the landscape of the entire western half of Greenwood Village is beyond measure. We are fortunate indeed to have it.