

Colorado's Life Written In Water

Guest Commentary

Christiane H. Citron and Greg Hobbs

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In tense days of dry heat and red-hot fire, when our air is gray and heavy with airborne ash, as we see apocalyptic images of Colorado's scenic landscape burning, we are caught up in anxieties about drought and what the future holds for our children.

We hear the incessant drone of "this is the worst wildfire in Colorado's history." We crave solace in the sound of rivers running.

Decades ago, Colorado's late Poet Laureate, Thomas Hornsby Ferril, wrote his poem "Here is a land where life is written in water." The state chose these words to adorn the rotunda of our state capitol building, accompanied by murals of Allen True full of Colorado's glorious landscape and its peoples. The last of the eight panels depicts the future in the red glow of the sun. Ferril's concluding lines read, "Beyond the sundown is tomorrow's wisdom / Today is going to be long long ago."

Wisdom is the work of today extending into the future. In time of trial lies the opportunity for community. Always, in this state of the Great Divide, Colorado's greatest treasure--working and singing rivers--unites the people with the land. Through drought and fire, we find comfort and solace in the waters and in our children writing and singing of them.

During the past several years, Colorado school children have participated in "River of Words," a nationwide poetry contest sponsored by the Library of Congress. United States Poet Laureate Robert Hass started this program to help children learn to respect nature and how to write poetry. The Colorado Center for the Book (the state affiliate of the Library of Congress) conducts this contest for Colorado entrants. Colorado poets judge the entries, a number of which may be selected for national publication.

This year, Katie Post and Megan MacGregor, sixth graders at the Logan School, shared first place honors for the state. MacGregor describes how the waters dance:

"Water, light dancing

*Forever duet
Remember the time
Long ago
When they met.*

Post speaks of the power of rivers:

*I am the headwaters plunging,
and racing down rocky walls
I am the river foaming, rushing
over rocks worn smooth at my
touch.*

And third place winner Carlo Davis, also a sixth grader at the Logan School, wrote:

*I am a tarnished, veteran flood
plain
So remember my tale
Of clean water and sky
For it disintegrates as time goes
by.*

Honorable Mention winner Helen Carpenter, a third grader in Saguache, wrote of how the shining water perseveres.

*When I hear the shining water
splash
When I hear it soar
I wonder how it will end?
How does it go through the dark
and cold night?*

In "Rivers," Nick Moon, a Littleton eighth grader, wrote:

*Flowing in mystical
paths of azure
They carve patterns
into our world
They spit-shine the*

World.

Will Colorado's children take responsibility for the care of the water, this state's most precious resource? The states young poets answer "Yes!" They point out that the waters care for us and we must for them. Last year, 14-year-old Christie Swanson of Littleton wrote:

*The river stretches
her arms
around the earth embracing
it with care.*

In the last two years, the nationwide River of Words contest has honored five young Colorado poets.

Two favorite Ferril themes were time and water. Ferril wrote in "Time of Mountains":

*When you've walked a
long time on the floor
of a river
And up the steps and into
the different rooms
You know where the hills are going,
you can feel them
The far blue hills dissolving in
luminous water.*

In a convergence both of time and of rivers, Ferril's landmark home in Denver, owned by the Colorado Center for the Book, is now headquarters for "River of Words" in Colorado. Another of Ferril's poems focusing on rivers has become the unofficial emblem of Denver:

*Two rivers that were
here before there was
A city here still come together
If you will stay we will not go
away.*

This year's first-place winners couldn't attend the April award ceremony at the Governor's Mansion. Why? Because they were away on a school river trip on the Colorado River with their teacher!

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Information about the "River of Words" program, including entry forms and copies of the winning poems, is available from the Colorado Center for the Book, 2123 Downing Street, Denver CO 80205 (tel. 303 839 8320). The Ferril House is open to the public Monday through Friday, or by special appointment. The Colorado Center for the Book owns and operates Ferril's landmark home in north Capitol Hill of Denver as a literary center. The "River of Words" poetry contest is open to all Colorado school children.