

# Letter from Colorado: On the Dirty, Deep-seated Origins of the Animas River Spill

by JEFF SNOWBARGER



*In early August, the EPA accidentally released three million gallons of contaminated water from the Gold King mine into Cement Creek, a tributary of Colorado's Animas River. Jeff Snowbarger, who's at work on a novel about the development of the region, spent time on the banks of the Animas, where he's discovered connections between the river's past and present.*

“Mustard-colored”: that’s the hue various commentators used to describe the shocking plume of thick orange mine waste that snaked across the Colorado Plateau earlier this month. But to anyone who saw the sickening photos, much less saw the color in person, this description is unappetizing at best, at worst almost offensive. To me, the color looked more like liquid Hell.

I’ve spent the best part of my last three summers jeeping around the rugged mining district that encompasses the headwaters of the Animas River while researching a novel in progress. Three weeks before the horrendous ooze was tickled to a gush by EPA contractors, my five-year-old son and I drove right past the offending mine adit. Even then, large swaths of the old Gladstone mining district were scabbed the color of Lucifer’s tears.

In mining country this color is common, from retention ponds to the waste rock piles that pock the Rocky Mountains, marking the test adits early prospectors blasted into the slopes with burro-loads of TNT. But this more recent disaster is a dramatic finale of

sorts. It's like the raucous Fourth of July display that follows an evening of kids waving sparklers, scribbling their names upon the dusk. This bold stain fouling the Animas River had a quiet lead up, and to better understand this odd color, one needs to know its origin.

The San Juan mining boom took off in the early 1870s. Before the Brunot Treaty of 1873, this wilderness was home to the Utes, who hunted the high country and used it to hide stolen horses. But the Utes were only part-timers here. Winter made the region uninhabitable. Some sources suggest that this pocket of Colorado was the last permanently settled region in the lower forty-eight. Fifteen-foot snowfalls, negative-sixty-degree temperatures, avalanches, and the constant threat of Ute justice leveled against trespassers gave even the most leather-skinned pioneers reason to steer clear. Did I mention this place is rugged? The earliest footpaths into the mining district were so steep in sections that prospectors, miners, and teamsters had to raise and lower their usually sure-footed burros over the passes with ropes wound around snubbing posts to slow the pack animals' descent. Bones blanketed many of the ravines, and not just from burros and mules.

Despite these formidable obstacles, the region boomed. There was gold in the hills, at least a little, and silver, mountains of the stuff. Riches were there for the picking, shoveling, sorting, milling, transporting, smelting, and stamping into lots of pocket change. Back then, if Americans were good at anything it was resource extraction. Just ask the North Woods timber barons, the prairie buffalo hunters, market duck hunters, egret feather milliners, and the generation who rendered billions of passenger pigeons extinct. In a similar manner, the San Juans went boom and did what booms do. The bust in these parts was largely due to the 1893 Silver Purchase Act repeal. Another factor was logistical. After much of the easy silver had been gobbled up, what deposits remained were deeper and more difficult to extract.

Water, tons of it, posed one of the biggest hurdles to the San Juan miners. Many of the active mines in the 1890s and onward regularly flooded, and by regularly, I mean always. But it wasn't so much the amount of water, but the *kind* of water—seepage so corrosive it destroyed iron pipes and pumps and drill bits in a matter of weeks, if not days. The water drowning these ore-rich shafts was so toxin-laced it snacked on metal. Imported wooden pipes, fashioned from western redwood wired together, remedied the plague somewhat. The pipes looked like peeled logs with long, skinny snakes coiled

around their girth. Despite the rugged, nearly unscalable terrain, and despite the bitter, burying snows and avalanches, and despite market crashes and the economic toll associated with extracting these excellent mineral formations, it was toxic water that eventually broke the region's ore fever.

Slowly but surely, mining corporations and magnates ceased production and abandoned the wealthy shafts and adits. One drive down The Million Dollar Highway, the gut-wrining stretch between the mining-towns-turned-tourist-havens of Ouray and Silverton, reveals everything else the miners abandoned: ghost towns, bunkhouses, rusted steam boilers, powderhouses, the skeletons of rotting churches, one-room cabins, and towering mine headframes. The sites are still littered with busted whiskey bottles (now legally protected from pillagers and plunderers), shattered tea saucers from Japan, twisted ore rails, toppled ore carts, rusted hinges, spikes, brackets, and tons and tons of sulfur-tinged waste rock, once hauled cart by cart from the earth's gaseous bowels. These piles of rock are the discarded tailings that buried the ore from which some magnates made a killing and the miners themselves earned three dollars a day, true riches for an 1890s working man. Also abandoned in the mining exodus were mountains full of the foul water that helped drive the operations to their knees.

Back then it was a collective, generational decision to leave the water—to let it pool, fester, and build—just as it was a collective decision to “reserve” land for the Utes, slick the North Woods from Maine to Minnesota, and feast on delicacies like buffalo tongue, wild duck liver pate, and baby pigeons. This was how a free people behaved. And this is what seems buried in our current disaster, the notion that decisions collectively made in the name of freedom almost always have detrimental consequences for those who follow.

Today we're stuck in the same pattern America found itself in following Appomattox. A hundred-and-fifty-years ago, feeling like the Civil War had decided its most pressing generational issue, our post-war nation staked its claim on the short term, come hell or high water. Our history has come full circle. Ever since the Cold War warmed and Afghanistan moved to page two, it seems we've tired of our generational responsibilities and collectively buried our focus in other distractions. I'm an offender, I admit it. I've scrambled up and down these slopes, where men once wielded picks and blasting caps to bore through quartz veins and pre-Cambrian granite, my eyes glued to my smartphone. It's a wonderful research tool. Strangely enough, maybe perfectly enough,

my smartphone requires just what the Old Timers flocking to the San Juans hoped to find: rare, precious metals. Today, instead of blasting holes in the Animas valleys or the Klondike, I give my cash to the Bolivians and Chinese to holler *Fire in the hole!* on my behalf.

In situations like the one we're currently facing the hard truth of things is a precious commodity, and often the thing most hid. While this most recent display of our material lust actually occurred on Cement Creek, it's the Animas River—The River of Souls—that's been commanding headlines. This makes sense enough. Cement Creek tumbles down a sparsely settled valley north of Silverton, while the Animas parts the pasturelands of Hermosa and cuts through the heart of Durango, both more densely populated.

If my research and time spent bumbling around these hills and derelict camps—where a generation of men once wagered everything and won or lost, or just earned enough to pay the Chinese launderers and painted ladies on Blair Street—has taught me one thing, it's that the San Juans are a far more complex place than meets the vacationing eye, however visually dramatic and stunning it might be. Where most eyes today see splendid massive peaks, long gone prospectors saw a packed treasure chest. Where the Utes once saw a sacred realm, jeeps and four-wheelers now see a wild playground. Where once-pristine streams babbled, now flows a big orange slug.

Even a closer look at the river's name reveals something deeper and perhaps more meaningful. It's thought the first Spaniards to ford the Animas actually dubbed it *Rio de las Animas Perdidas*, The River of Lost Souls. Truth be told, this early nomenclature is historically speculative, and today we just call it the Animas. But, it seems to me, this river of goo had finally lived up to its fuller appellation. Why? Because the raw color we saw last month wasn't simply "mustard-colored." The River of Lost Souls flowed like liquid Hell. Its color reflected a nation's worth of short-sighted missteps. The hue was so riveting and sulfuric you could almost picture the Devil himself, dropping his towel and giddily flapping his arms, before landing one wicked bellyflop after another.

*Jeff Snowbarger was featured in Tin House as their New Voice in Fiction, and Best American Short Stories 2010 declared his story "Bitter Fruit" one of the year's notable publications. He is an Assistant Professor of fiction at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. His novel in progress about the San Juan region is tentatively titled The Continental Spine.*