

By MARY JEAN PORTER

The Pueblo Chieftain

As it flows from Colorado's high mountains to the eastern plains, the Arkansas River is increased by many creeks and smaller rivers flowing into it and — early in its run — by water brought via tunnels from the Western Slope.

And it is decreased by the cities, the industries and the agriculture along its banks, though much of the water used by cities and some used by farms eventually is returned to the river.

Just as water is brought into the Arkansas River Basin, it is taken out.



The Arkansas
OUR LIFEBLOOD

Sales of former agricultural water rights have sent water north to Aurora, which lies in the basin of the South Platte River.

Man-made diversions in and out of the basin illustrate one of the basic rules of water: Left to its own devices, it flows downhill.

The river also is caught behind dams like Pueblo's and its water stored in blue reservoirs until needed by the entities holding rights to its beneficial use. In the process, its flood potential is tamed and recreation — and accompanying economic — opportunities are created.

In its trip across more than half the state, the river flows through canyons it has carved and across the high plains of Eastern Colorado. In a grand cycle, the sand and gravel it has scraped and carried and deposited along its channel now is being mined to support a flourishing construction industry, while limestone laid down eons ago beneath a great inland sea and now rising in sculptured bluffs above the Arkansas is mined at Portland for the manufacture of cement.

In another of the river's many cycles, the toxic remnants of yesterday's mining now are being cleaned from the Arkansas. Mining affects water quality from Leadville all the way to Lake Pueblo, according to the state health department.

Tons of sediment flowing into the river from Fountain Creek and naturally occurring salts leached from the soil also add to the river's burden.

State wildlife areas scattered along the river's length maintain habitat for animals and provide recreation for humans. The wildlife area west of Pueblo reservoir also is home to the ghostly community of Swallows — once a small but thriving stop on the railroad, now a haven for great blue herons, occasional

Please see Arkansas, Page 2A

Arkansas

Continued from Page 1A
osprey and many water birds.

And, in the long stretches of riverfront not covered by formal designation, wildlife still is plentiful. Mountain sheep, deer, elk and all manner of smaller animals come to drink at its banks or from its tributaries. Fish, of course, swim in it and eat the insect life it supports. One such insect, the caddis fly, is at the heart of an innovative festival in Salida that celebrates fly fishing and the river.

Man, as well, comes to the river to enjoy its beauty and to play, creating parks like the Arkansas River Headwaters Recreation Area, the Canon City Riverwalk, Lake Pueblo State Park, the Historic Arkansas Riverwalk of Pueblo.

A tourist train now running through the Royal Gorge capitalizes on the river's and the gorge's majesty in addition to railroad history.

Boaters flock to the reservoirs, and fisherman and rafters by the thousands, to the river's upper reaches. The Arkansas is first among the country's rivers for white-water boating.

It also has been called the most over-appropriated river in Colorado — a testament to its importance and its relatively small size. A monster by comparison, the Colorado River carries nearly 5 million acre feet of water annually across the state line, while the Arkansas' state-line flow is approximately 142,000 acre feet annually.

Each of the entities for whom this water is appropriated no doubt regards the Arkansas River in a slightly different way. So do the many other people living in its drainage. A shop owner or a river guide in Buena Vista needs the river for different reasons than a homeowner in Pueblo or Colorado Springs or a farmer in Bent or Prowers County.

And a North La Junta resident, still reeling from the effects of last spring's river rampage, certainly feels less kindly toward the Arkansas than a leisurely visitor

to Greenway and Nature Center of Pueblo.

An Aurora resident, sustained at least in part by the Arkansas, regards the river — if he even thinks about it at all — quite differently from an irrigator in Western Kansas. Yet each figures in another aspect of the river — contention — and their representatives have gone to water court on their behalf, seeking the most precious resource in an arid clime. These water wars stretch back more than a century.

The river's history is fraught with change. A physical force, it has shaped the landscape since it first began to flow.

It fostered change by serving as a transportation corridor into the basin from the east; today, a major highway follows it for many miles. Plains Indians camped along it; trappers depended on it for their livelihood of fur-bearing animals, especially beaver; traders built their outposts on it, most notably Bent's fort; travelers on the mountain branch of the Santa Fe Trail watered their stock in it and washed the dust of their journey from their bodies with it. When settlers came, they adapted farming to their new, dry home and began to irrigate, using the river and its tributaries to water their crops.

The Arkansas at one time was the boundary between the United States and Mexico; it also divided the territories of the Cheyenne and the Comanche. It witnessed the railroad "war" between the Denver & Rio Grande and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe fought to secure a route through the Royal Gorge.

The river still flows with change and contention. One of the factors in the decline of Eastern Colorado agriculture — some people say THE factor; others say only a symptom of the decline — is the sale of water rights. These sales dry up the land, lower the tax base, feed population growth in other areas and create dissension.

They also leave the selling communities struggling for a new identity and, some people suggest, shift the balance of power and influence even further away from rural Colorado and toward the cities.