

INTRODUCTION

RECOVERING RALSTON CREEK

The essays in this collection were written and compiled by the undergraduate American Cultural Studies seminar in the American Studies Department at the University of Iowa. They were presented at the Iowa State Historical Society on April 27 and 29, 2010, in order to call public attention to Ralston Creek, Iowa City's neglected urban watershed. There are many creeks in Johnson County, Iowa -- Clear Creek, Muddy Creek, and Old Man's Creek, to name a few -- but Ralston Creek is the only creek that flows directly through Iowa City from sources at Interstate 80 (north branch) and Scott Boulevard (south branch), along numerous historic neighborhoods and downtown commercial blocks, to its juncture with the Iowa River south of Highway 6. By comparison with other County creeks, however, Ralston Creek has been surprisingly neglected by city researchers and students, environmental planners and DNR water quality volunteers. One reason for this is public ignorance of the creek's long history. Because of their training in American Studies, the students who authored the following essays are uniquely positioned to help remedy this situation by, in effect, telling the story of Iowa City from the point of view of Ralston Creek, whose water once powered industry, supported fish, game, timber, and livestock, and met the daily human needs of cleaning, drinking, refuge, recreation, inspiration, and waste disposal.

Environmental scientists have demonstrated that the way people treat the water and soil in their own backyards can have a powerful impact on distant waterways and ecosystems. Urban creeks are a case in point. The use and abuse of small local watersheds, such as Iowa City's Ralston Creek, affects not only regional and continental, but hemispheric water quality and hydrologic cycles. Ralston Creek is Iowa City's only significant natural waterway (apart from the Iowa River, which divides the city into its east and west sides). However, it is all but invisible to most Iowa City residents, who typically view it as a drainage ditch. Even longtime residents are surprisingly unaware

that the “many creeks” snaking through the city’s east side are, in fact, one creek. And few University students living in apartments along its banks recognize that Ralston Creek connects Iowa City not only to the Iowa River (at Highway 6), but to the Mississippi River (at Wapello), draining ultimately into the Gulf of Mexico, where it has a direct impact on ocean eco-systems. Animal waste, septic leakage, lawn chemicals, and pavement run-off from the Ralston Creek watershed contribute directly to the 7000-square mile hypoxic, or “dead zone” in the Gulf of Mexico where the Mississippi River meets the sea.¹

At present, apart from the University’s Hydrosience Engineering archive (1920-1988) and several, short-lived water quality studies (2002-4) there are almost no data on Ralston Creek.² There is no watershed management plan, and no central office responsible for Ralston Creek as a whole – for its geology and archaeology, its springs and sources, its plant and animal communities, and its central role in the social and cultural history of Iowa City. The research in this collection suggests that the act of forgetting Ralston Creek’s history is precisely what allows the creek to be used as a ditch,

¹ Estimated to be the size of New Jersey, the hypoxic (or, low-oxygen) zone in the Gulf of Mexico is created by the bacteria and other contaminants that pour into the Gulf from the entire Mississippi River watershed. As one of the two largest “dead zones” in the world, this hypoxic zone is “dead” because oxygen levels are too low to support most aquatic life. Many urban creeks in Iowa have been described as “dead” by environmental scientists for the same reason. (Brenda Nations, City of Iowa City Environmental Coordinator, personal communication.) Unofficially, many Iowa City residents and University students view Ralston Creek as “dead.” Surprisingly, there is no official census of its wildlife (apart from records of recent fish kills) but the creek is unmistakably, visibly, a remnant habitat for beavers, snapping turtles, fish, and owls, among other natural communities.

²In the field of hydrosience, Ralston Creek is, in fact, the most continuously studied small waterway in the United States. Data on Ralston Creek abound in the archives of the University of Iowa’s famous Hydrosience and Engineering Department. Collected between 1922 and 1988, these studies focus primarily on the mathematical measurement of stream flow, rainwater, and ground water under various conditions affecting infiltration. Today, the data set [in six archival boxes at the IIHR archive] is “heralded as the longest highly detailed record of a small U.S. watershed in existence.” IIHR Archive Hydrosience and Engineering, College of Engineering, University of Iowa. www.iihr.uiowa.edu/focusareas/history/archives/iihrralstoncreek.html. Another Ralston Creek archive emerged in the late 1970s when the city solved the problem of the creek’s frequent floods by investing 2.5 million dollars in small dams and containment devices. The maps and engineering data generated in 1979 by the firm of Shoemaker & Haaland, addressed the increasingly acute problem of spring floods in a paved and growing town. But, with dam construction complete in 1983, flooding became less of a problem and, for better or worse, Ralston Creek faded further into the background of the City’s concerns. Larry E. Padgett and Edward H. Brinton et al for Shoemaker and Haaland, Professional Engineers, *Storm Water Management Ralston Creek Watershed: Iowa City, Iowa* (March 1979).

carrying pavement run-off, silt, and contaminated water far away into someone else's neighborhood and eco-system. Where Ralston Creek's water quality has been ignored, so has its history. If its eco-systems are neglected, so are its social and cultural meanings. These kinds of neglect are connected. The following essays call attention to the creek's historical centrality to the development of Iowa City from (before) its founding in the late- 1830s, to the present. In doing so, they look forward to practical outcomes, including the creation of a coherent watershed plan for the creek and its city.

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