

The Man Who Thought He Owned Water: On the Brink with American Farms, Cities, and Food

Tershia d'Elgin

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San Diego journalist Tershia d'Elgin became keenly aware of her family's water footprint on her father Bill's Colorado farm. William Eaton Phelps had to grow up quickly: his parents left him in Denver while his father was stationed in DC during World War II. Bill eloped young and worked as a milkman and real estate salesman before buying land beside the South Platte River in the 1960s. There at Big Bend Station, he grew sugar beets and corn and kept cattle and turkeys.

All is not smooth sailing on a farm, d'Elgin learned. Buying water rights is not the straightforward affair Bill expected. Neighbors' squabbles over claims require rulings from special water judges, and, after a drought, wells can be shut down with little notice. At the other extreme is the region's occasional flooding. "The farm is to my mind a heaven," she writes, but the reality "out the window is a hell."

Through her experience, especially as the farm's caretaker after her father's death, d'Elgin explores the ever-changing world of water regulations and the impact of industrial agriculture, offering helpful definitions and statistics in inset boxes. Growing alfalfa, building an artificial recharge pond, and reinforcing a cottonwood bank were small steps that helped her farm bounce back. In one standout chapter, she investigates the disappearance of local frogs and asks what can be done to restore their wetland habitat.

"Each of us mistakenly thinks ours is a world apart," d'Elgin notes, but the truth is that water is a shared resource rather than private property. *The Man Who Thought He Owned Water*, an unusual family memoir cum ecological treatise, brings home the complications of water scarcity.

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