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## Dedication William Daven Farr: Student of Water and Life

Jim Witwer

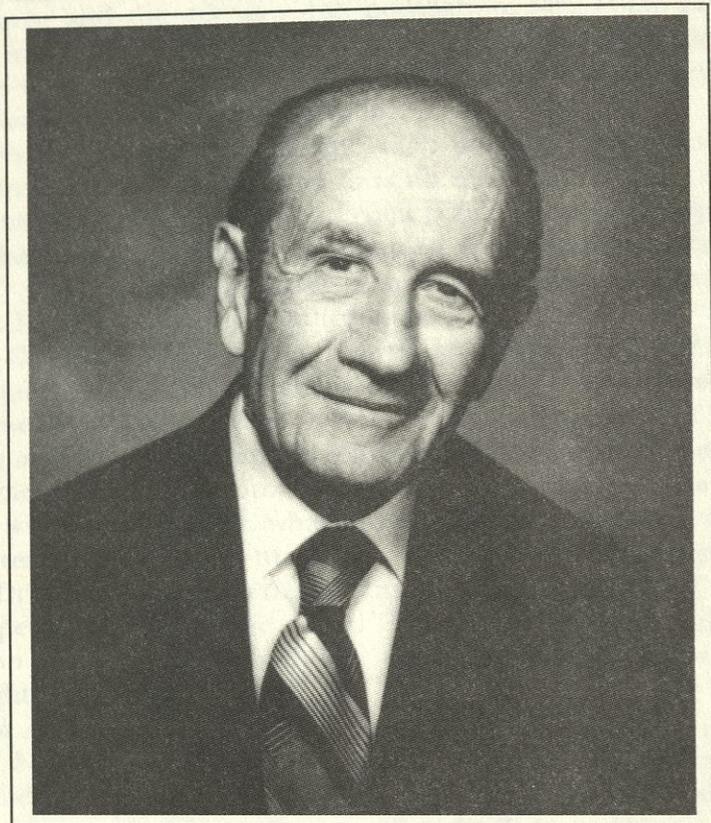
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**WILLIAM DAVEN FARR**

# WILLIAM DAVEN FARR: STUDENT OF WATER AND LIFE\*

DEDICATION BY JIM WITWER

*Flyfisherman, water visionary, banker, lamb and cattle feeder, farmer, rancher, dad, grandfather, great grandfather, friend and mentor to many, WD Farr, 97, died Aug. 14 in his native Greeley.*

After failing to deflect this request to remember W.D. Farr by nominating more qualified candidates, I opened the file in my office bearing his name. It is embarrassingly thin. Nearly two generations separated us during his life.

Perhaps, then, the best perspective I can provide begins as a common, ignorant one. How easy it is to take for granted all but his reputation as a leader in water, banking, and agriculture. I played in Greeley's Farr Park as a boy, but did not then know that the park had been part of his farm near the end of the Greeley and Loveland Irrigation Company ditch (or even that there was such a ditch). I worked briefly one summer at Farr Feedlots, but did not learn of the work he did nationally to improve the quality of U.S. beef until much later.

Only during a working relationship with him late in his life did I begin to see the contours of what he was still busy building: A life filled with optimism and effort to improve the communities in which he lived.

My first letter from Mr. Farr contained the following passages:

I believe that Greeley is in a unique position to plan a perfect city that will continue to be very attractive to new people and new industry. . . . I have seen Greeley grow from a population of 5,000 to the present 75,000. If we had ever dreamed that we would grow this much and this fast we could have prevented many costly problems.

Who else writes, or thinks, like this? Few in modern times. An exhortation to strive for the perfect city, a blunt acknowledgment of current imperfection, and a second implied demand—to dream big dreams and then put on your overalls, as the saying goes.

In an 1887 speech to Fort Collins farmers that Mr. Farr's son, Bill, sent me later, Professor Elwood Mead noted:

On your shoulders rests a greater responsibility than devolves on your brothers in regions of more abundant rainfall. You must not only attend

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\* The following tribute to W.D. Farr is reprinted with permission from the Colorado Foundation for Water Education's Fall 2007 edition of *Headwaters Magazine*. Information on the Foundation can be found at [www.cfwe.org](http://www.cfwe.org).

to your individual affairs but assist in the control and management of their common interest, on the wise management of which the prosperity of the State so largely depends.

This may as well have been Mr. Farr's credo. He acted so often out of a sense of duty to improve the community—and so often focused on projects to benefit future generations of that community.

We still play in the parks that Mr. Farr worked to build. The Colorado-Big Thompson and Windy Gap projects and Greeley's water system may be best known to Coloradans. Service in the nascent Environmental Protection Agency, and long involvement with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, count among his accomplishments. He also played a pivotal role in negotiations that led to federal designation of parts of the Cache la Poudre River as wild and scenic. In a 2000 newspaper clipping, he wondered aloud if he was an environmentalist, but then added, "You have to take care of the environment. We hope the world will be here in hundreds of years."

What Mr. Farr accomplished, and why he did it, make up only part of his story. How he worked—his thirst to find information and trends in that information, his uncanny ability to adapt and surmount failure, and his compassion for others engaged in the same effort—distinguishes him as much or more.

His interest in one topic—the weather—illustrates the first of these traits. Most of us are used to discussing the weather for five or ten seconds. With Mr. Farr, those conversations easily could exceed five minutes. He ravenously reviewed the work of local, regional, and international climatologists, and constantly checked predictions against outcomes.

A copy of the program from the 1999 National Western Stock Show dinner, which named Mr. Farr a "Citizen of the West," reminds me that, while he was a compendium of historical information, he preferred to recount the past with an eye to the future. He did not view the past as the good old days.

"The next 50 years," he told those assembled at the dinner, "will be the best we have ever experienced. I'm only sorry that I won't be there with you to enjoy them."

He knew, as Twain noted, that history does not repeat itself—at best it sometimes rhymes. What he tried to teach us was less specific knowledge than how to think, to plan and execute based upon the best information we have, and to learn from the experience and move further ahead. He did not hold grudges or nurse old injuries. There was no use, or time, for that. His view of water policy, and life, combined enthusiasm and the scientific method. He was a great teacher precisely because he was a great student.

His approach required enough humility to acknowledge and learn from failure. In the 1980s, when his proposal to sell some of Greeley's reservoirs and use the proceeds to acquire other water supplies met

opposition from the Greeley City Council, he instead ensured that the city spent adequate funds to rehabilitate those reservoirs. When the Windy Gap Project water rights were thrown out of court for failure to provide Western Slope water interests with additional compensatory storage beyond that of the original C-BT Project, he was instrumental in directing additional payments (part of the money for Wolford Mountain Reservoir).

The final ingredient to Mr. Farr's work style was his care for those working with him. Even as his voice grew faint late in life, he never sought to end your conversation without asking after you and your family. Though a man of boundless passion and drive, he always remembered that people matter.

It is tempting to conclude this remembrance with a lament that we may have seen the last of people with such a remarkable communitarian spirit. Then we in the water community could more comfortably complain that the world is so much more complex now, and the water supply challenges we face nearly insurmountable—the low-hanging fruit are gone.

Such responses would, of course, miss the point of Mr. Farr's life. "If you get busy planning and working hard," he would tell us, "things will work out well."

Can't you hear him still?

