

Watershed Land

For over eleven decades Salt Lake City has acquired watershed property for the purpose of protecting the quality of its drinking water supply.

May 3, 2001

On July 26, 1940, Salt Lake City Claim Agent, F. S. Fernstrom, made a report to the City Commission entitled, "When and How Watershed Land in the Various Canyons was Acquired by the City." The report gives insight into the origins of Salt Lake City's one hundred and ten year policy of acquiring watershed property as a means of protecting its drinking water supply.



Since 1891 Salt Lake City has been purchasing watershed land to protect its drinking water supply from pollution.

The following was taken from Mr. Fernstrom's report:

Land was bought in City Creek by a private party as early as 1887. In 1890 there was a real estate boom and a plat was made and filed on the 80 acres in Section 16, Township 1 N. Range 1 E containing 24 blocks, 760 lots and known as Manitou Springs, and the owners commenced to sell the same when the City Administration stepped in and bought them out. This was done in 1891, but the balance of the Section was not obtained until 1917. Two other sections, 14 and 20, were bought by private parties and the City gradually bought these people out at a cost of something like \$60,000.

There were settlements made in Dry Canyon, which also were bought out by the City.

In Emigration Canyon the City bought out about a half dozen families that had established themselves and taken control of the water in the canyon.

In 1885, the City entered into a contract with the Union Pacific and bought their land grant which was every other Section from City Creek to Mill Creek, about 30,000 acres all in all. The cost, with interest, was \$50,648.

In 1898, I was elected to the City Council and the problem then was the settlement established in Mountain Dell in Parleys Canyon. There were about 40 families, most of whom had lived there almost from the beginning of the settling of Utah. There was one large cattle ranch established there, the rest were ordinary families who cultivated the ground and had built their homes. A question arose over the ownership or the right to irrigation water. They claimed that their

water right was equal to or better than those the City had entered into in an agreement to exchange the water from Parleys Canyon. Another matter that arose at the same time was the sanitary conditions that existed there. Nearly all of them had their cattle, sheep and pigs and the Health Department declared that it greatly affected the purity of the water. Complaints were issued and a few convictions were made for befouling the water and it became apparent that something had to be done to change the conditions. Finally an agreement was made with the settlers that the City would buy them out provided they would sell at reasonable prices, and this was agreed to. It cost the City \$110,869.

Over the years Salt Lake City continued to acquire watershed property; however this effort was bolstered after the City adopted a 1988 Watershed Management Plan, which established a new program for watershed land purchases with a dedicated revenue source. In 1991, the City Council approved a "Water Rights and Watershed Purchase Fund," financed by a \$0.25 surcharge on each water bill. This was increased to \$0.50 on July 1, 2000. Over 1,000 acres of watershed property and approximately 10,000 acre-feet of primary water rights have been purchased by the fund. Today Salt Lake City owns 18.6 percent of the watershed lands in the seven-canyon watershed. Most of this is in City Creek, Emigration, Red Butte and Parleys Canyons.

As the population along the Wasatch Front continues to grow, and drinking water standards become ever more stringent, the century plus practice of acquiring watershed land to protect drinking water quality seems as prudent as ever.