

## So How and Why Do You Write a Book?

By Harley Shaw

I was honored when Elizabeth and Rebecca Ruffner requested a copy of our recent book, *River of Spirits—a natural history of New Mexico’s Las Animas Creek*. I say “our” book, because, although I’m shown on the cover as the editor, the book is an anthology made up of chapters written by thirteen authors. It is illustrated primarily by one photographer, who also helped edit the book. It was a group undertaking. You might think that this would be the easy way to write a book. After this effort, I’d say, “not necessarily so.”

I felt honored again, when Becky asked if I might write the story of how the book developed. Often, the story behind the book, written in detail, would create another book longer than the original, but I’ll try to keep this short. To begin with, *River of Spirits* isn’t what I’d planned to spend my 70s writing. I had, for several years, been compiling information on the Canadian River, which heads in southern Colorado and crosses portions of New Mexico, Texas, and Oklahoma. My interest in that river developed as a convergence of three earlier elements of my life: I was born on the banks of the Canadian in my maternal grandfather’s house near Geary, Oklahoma; my studies of Merriam’s turkey habitat for Arizona Game and Fish Department had led me to eye the Canadian as a potential connective corridor between western and eastern wild turkey projects<sup>1</sup>; and my later studies of historic vegetation change in the upper Verde River watershed caused me to realize that the Canadian had, for our portion of the West, perhaps been more important historically than the famous and highly documented Santa Fe Trail.<sup>2</sup> I had piles of notes, some initial chapters, and I had traveled most of the length of the Canadian twice.

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<sup>1</sup> Shaw, H. G. 2002. Merriam’s Turkey Prehistory. Pp. 69-78 In Phillips, D. A. and J. A. Ware. 2002. Culture and Environment in the American SW: Essays in honor of Robert C. Euler. SWCA Anthropological Paper no. 8. Flagstaff.

<sup>2</sup> Shaw, H. G. 2006. *Wood Plenty, Grass Good, Water None—vegetation changes in Arizona’s upper Verde River watershed from 1870 to 1997*. USDA Forest Service Rocky Mountain Research Station. General Technical Report RMRS-GTR-177. 50 PP.

Truth is, I was eventually overwhelmed by the magnitude of the project, and discouraged by the fact that, as a septuagenarian, I was unlikely to ever reside anywhere along the Canadian long enough to get to know it. I didn't want to write about it as an outsider.

So, some five years ago, I was discussing the Canadian River project with Steve Dobrott, who, for some 20 years, had been managing Ted Turner's Ladder Ranch in southwestern New Mexico. By this time, Patty and I were living in Hillsboro, only a half-hour's drive from the Ladder Ranch headquarters. We had known Steve long before we moved to Hillsboro, and, once in the area, I had helped initiate a puma study and carried out several training sessions for biologists interested in the big cats. As a result, I had become moderately acquainted with the biology and history of the creeks that drain the steep eastern slopes of the Black Range. These creeks are known for their rugged beauty and their tendency to become violent when it rains. Of them, Animas remained the most remote and least explored. It was known, especially, for its ghost-like sycamores that grew over two thirds of its length—the only natural stand of Arizona sycamores known to exist in the entire Rio Grand River watershed. Their giant, contorted trunks added an element of mystery to the creek that seemed to be felt by everyone who walked along its banks. They may have been the source of its name. But it was also known for an ill-fated battle between the US Cavalry and Apache warriors led by Victorio. By the time I was discussing my uncertainties about the Canadian River project with Steve, I had already begun to fall under the spell of the Animas.

“I'd like to have a book about the Animas.” Steve's response to my musings hit me as an epiphany. I was wanting to write about a watershed, and here was one close to home. It was of a manageable size, and I had access to its entire length. I didn't hesitate before I said, “let's do it.” And the project was underway. . . kinda.

As it turned out, the idea for a book on the Animas wasn't new. In fact Steve and another old friend, Joe Truet, had made a scant beginning about three years earlier. Joe already had written three very elegant books about growing up in east Texas and about grasslands. He worked as an endangered species biologist for Turner, and he knew Las Animas as well as anyone. The project would have been a natural for him, and he would have undoubtedly written the book stem to stern in his own words. But Joe died after writing only one chapter. A rapid onset cancer took him, leaving all of us who enjoyed his quiet philosophizing stunned. Until the day of our conversation, Steve had put the book on a back burner, with its completion uncertain.

Anyway, I left Steve's office that day with copies of an introductory chapter he had written and a chapter on archaeology written by Joe. I immediately began to review available historical and scientific literature about the Animas. The more I looked, the more I realized how little research—geological, archaeological, historical, or biological—had been done within the watershed. With very few exceptions, we'd be starting from scratch. Where I had been overwhelmed with the volume of information on the Canadian; for the Animas, I found few facts in writing, and I felt inadequate to provide the specialized on the ground research we'd need. You can only emote so much on the grandeur of a place. I decided that my best approach would be to pull together whatever information I could find, connect it up as best I could, and note that lack of facts added to the canyon's mystery. I also began to holler for help.

One of the few advantages of living and working in a region for 70-odd years is that you develop a bank of acquaintances who represent a host of specialties. While library work and on the ground observation remain primary research tools, strategic use of the telephone and email can often accelerate your work. If you are lucky, you might even get friends to take on part of the work and lighten your load.

Fortunately, my emails and phone calls paid off, and I soon had commitments from people who knew more than I did about almost everything. The incentive for them was a chance to see the Animas for themselves. Using what Steve and Joe had already written and what I found in early literature and diaries, I began to fill in the gaps. In addition to Joe and Steve, I would eventually draw from at least 10 other authors, some long deceased.<sup>3</sup>

This was not my first compilation of information on a watershed. During the early 1990s, I had compiled a book-length report about Garden Canyon Watershed for Fort Huachuca<sup>4</sup>, and I mentioned above my post-retirement study of vegetation change on the upper Verde River watershed. About the time we moved to Hillsboro, Patty and I had collaborated with Bill Zeedyk on report about Pueblo Colorado Wash at Hubble Trading Post.<sup>5</sup> Watershed books pretty much organize themselves. Geology archaeology, and history provide the chronological gradients; biology follows the water downhill. But for the Animas, the knowledge gaps in these gradients were large.

The actual field work was pure pleasure. I spent fascinating days afield with the other authors, and enjoyed the quiet presence of Matilde Holzwarth, who remained almost invisible as

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<sup>3</sup> Here's the list in alphabetical order:

Charles Britton. Dean emeritus. College of Engineering. Colorado State University. Ranch history.  
David Coblentz. Group leader in geophysics. Los Alamos. Geology.  
Steve Dobrott. Ranch Manager. Ladder Ranch. Introduction, history, conservation.  
Ken Dusenberry. Retired Albuquerque Policeman. Battle of Massacre Canyon.  
Art Evans. Retired Ladder Ranch Manager. Ranch history.  
James Ferris. Amateur conchologist. Shell collecting in the Black Range.  
Margie Gibson. Writer and photographer. Homestead histories.  
Dr. Matilde Holzwarth. Retired professor of physiology, University of Illinois. Photography.  
Gretchen Kerr. Geologist. Director of Strategic Planning and Sustainability. Fort Huachuca. Geology.  
William Pinkney Lawson. Author. Early forest survey.  
Matthew McCollister. Wildlife Biologist. Puma hunt in Animas Canyon.  
Travis Perry. Professor of Biology. Furmann University. Tracking pumas in Animas Canyon.  
Harley Shaw. Retired Wildlife Research Biologist. Arizona Game and Fish Dept. Editing and various chapters.  
Joe C. Truett. Endangered species biologist. Turner Enterprises. Mimbres culture archaeology.

<sup>4</sup> Shaw, H. G. 1999. *Garden Canyon Watershed—a vision and a mission*. Dept. of the Army, Ft. Huachuca contract no. DABT63-95-T-2252. 176 pp.

<sup>5</sup> Shaw, H. G., P M. Woodruff, and William Zeedyk, 2005. *Natural History of a Small Place—an ecological history of Pueblo Colorado Wash at Hubble Trading Post National Historic Site, Ganado, Arizona*. US National Park Service. Pueblo Colorado Wash Restoration Project NPS Contract no: P7420030026. 89 PP.

she shot hundreds of photos. We worked in a 5-day pack trip into the headwaters of Las Animas with Mike Root and his string of mules. Matilde, always a trooper, had virtually never been on an equid, but hung on through some of the roughest country in the Black Range. Every time Patty or I held back to check on her, she would say, “I’m having the time of my life.” Only on the last day, when a massive boulder blocking the trail across an otherwise impassable talus slope threatened to send us back through the roughest part of the ride and add a day to the trip did she whisper to Patty, “I really didn’t sign up for a merit badge.” Ultimately, Mike managed to jump the mules across the boulder without mishap, and we finished the trip on schedule.

I won’t go into the mechanics of compiling and editing. That is just plain hard work. I’d say we revised the manuscript fully at least five times before we thought it was fit to be published. On the whole, this process was tiring but otherwise familiar and painless. Matilde spent a lot of hours sitting at my side, seeing to placement of pictures. The living authors were kind and cooperative, and any editorial disagreements we had ironed out fairly easily. We shared a mutual goal of seeing the thing in print. And, as so often is the case, this became the hardest part.

My initial vision had been a high-quality “coffee table” book with color photographs. I had hoped that we would generate enough money to cover the cost of self-publishing the book, thereby retaining control over design and distribution. That vision didn’t hold. For one thing, the money wasn’t forthcoming; for another, several of the authors wanted the prestige of an established publisher behind the book. I was outvoted.

Looking at potential publishers, the book seemed to be a fit for University of New Mexico Press, known for doing high quality photo books. I submitted it and soon got two reviews back, both favorable, although one wanted considerable revision. The editor asked me to get a third

reviewer, and at this point the book bogged down. Initially we found a member of the University of Arizona faculty who was willing to comment, but just when he was ready to start, his health failed. The book languished for a year with him, and he finally had to beg off of the effort. After nearly another year of juggling with the press, we failed to come up with another reviewer acceptable to all concerned. About this time, I discovered that The History Press, a section of Arcadia Books had begun to publish natural history. I had worked with them on a book about Hillsboro History and decided to give them a try. A call to an editor provided entrée, and I emailed the manuscript to them. Within a scant week came a call saying, "How can we make this happen." I can only say that the company worked well with us and was flexible when Steve Dobrott clung tenaciously to our chosen title and Matilde doggedly held to her preferred photo placement. The result is a soft-cover trade book, but I think an attractive one.

As we neared publication date, Matilde and her husband, Lloyd Barr, quietly made a trip to Mayo Clinic. When they returned, Matilde told me that she had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The day the prepublication allotment of books arrived, I drove one down to Matilde. I then dispersed the others to authors. A week later, Matilde held a show of some of her photographs at a gallery in Las Cruces. She was there for the opening. A week later, she died.

The Black Range Vinyards wine bar in Hillsboro held a party that was a joint book signing and a celebration of my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday the week the book was officially released. It was a wonderful bash and we sold 50 books--not bad for a town of 100 citizens. I was the center of attention, drank a little too much wine, signed lots of books, and Patty suggested that I might have overly prolonged the hugs from certain females in the crowd. But one turns 80 only once.

So, we did the book on Animas, and I'm happy with it. But every time I sign a copy, I see the picture of Joe on the dedication page and Matilde's fine photographs throughout, and am

reminded that the book was bracketed by the passing of two very special people. So far it seems to be selling well. Of course, it won't make anyone rich. Individual authors might make a buck on books they sell personally, but we all agreed to assign royalties to the Hillsboro Historical Society. And, should I have another incarnation, maybe I can start on a book about the Canadian at an early age.

**Bio Harley Shaw:**

Harley Shaw has served as a wildlife research biologist with the Arizona Game and Fish Department from 1963 to 1990. Since retiring, he has published three books: *Soul Among Lions*, *Stalking the Big Bird* and *1200 Miles by Horse and Burro*. He is the managing editor of the *Wild Felid Monitor* and edits *Guajalotes, Zopilotes, y Paisanos*—the newsletter of Hillsboro Historical Society. He lives in Hillsboro, New Mexico, within an easy drive of Las Animas Creek and Ladder Ranch.