They needed a system to transport water from the sites where nature had misplaced it” (A Ditch in Time, p. 28). Nothing could summarize more succinctly the challenges faced by the City of Denver, or other western cities, for that matter. This year, the Denver “system”—now known as Denver Water—turns 100 years old. For reasons that will unfold in this column, the American Water Works Association is one of the many who are thankful for Denver's century-old decision to buy the water system. (Many of the historical details I recount here are from Patty Limerick and Jason L. Hanson's A Ditch in Time: The City, the West and Water [Fulcrum Publishing, 2012].)

Denver is one of those western cities that many would say should not be here. Yet in 1859, with hopes of becoming rich, people descended on the area in search of gold. They settled at the confluence of the South Platte River and Cherry Creek. At the time, this area had little to offer except the combined trickles of this water; nonetheless, it is the spot where Denver started and today it remains a hub of commerce and activity.

In 1881, Denver—at just five years old—became the state capital of Colorado. Also of note, in that year, 850 miles away, 22 men met in Engineers Hall at Washington University in St. Louis, Mo., to share ideas on how to make water safe to drink. By the end of the meeting, those men had created the American Water Works Association (AWWA).

From 1881 to 1918, the water supply business in Denver was nothing short of an epic slug-fest (water in the West is, after all, worth fighting over). The battlefield was filled with gritty and powerful entrepreneurs who saw opportunities in a growing and thirsty city. Two of the more prominent competitors were the privately owned Denver City Water Company and Citizens’ Water Company.

Denver City Water Company gained an early advantage with one of the first franchise licenses from the city but struggled to meet the pace of the city’s growth. The struggle led two of its original founders—Walter Cheesman and David Moffat, now historical Colorado legends—to leave and create a competing company called Citizens’ Water.

Citizens’ Water quickly secured its own franchise with the city and started providing Denverites with better-quality water than its competitor. Denver City Water Company countered by dropping its water price. Citizens’ Water delivered the final blow by providing water for free. It then purchased Denver City Water Company, changed its name to the Denver Union Water Company, and became the city’s only water provider.

But the battle was not over. Denverites complained about the quality and price of Denver Union’s water, and the power the company wielded as a private monopoly. As the city government's authority grew, a multi-year battle took place over who should own the water system. Ultimately the city prevailed, and on Aug. 6, 1918, Denver’s citizens approved the purchase of the water system for $14 million.

For the past century, Denver Water has grown its influence and adjusted its strategy multiple times. Today it serves one out of four people living in Colorado. While perhaps not as “gritty” as their predecessors, the modern-day leadership and employees are equally visionary. They strive to collaborate with utilities throughout the state to create water solutions. For example, Denver Water is a regional partner in the WISE (Water, Infrastructure and Supply Efficiency) Partnership, which shares Denver Water and Aurora Water’s capacity to supply 10 entities south of Denver with much-needed water. Also, in 2013, Denver Water was one of 18 partners to sign the Colorado River Cooperative Agreement. This historic agreement signaled a new era of collaboration between Denver Water and Western Slope water providers to protect watersheds in the Colorado River Basin while allowing Denver Water to develop future water supplies.

In 1972 Denver Water was involved in another significant battle, this time with Washington, D.C.; Dallas-Fort Worth; and Atlanta, as the four fought to be the future home of AWWA headquarters. Maybe it was because we were already bound by the year 1881—when Denver became Colorado’s capital and AWWA was founded—that AWWA is now located on land once owned by Denver Water and overlooks one of its reservoirs. The legend that Denver Water sealed the deal by selling the land to AWWA for one dollar, while reminiscent of the free water strategy of Citizens’ Water, is not true. AWWA bought the land at fair market value—and we are happy we did.

AWWA congratulates Denver Water on reaching the century milestone and on multiple levels, we want to say that we (and everyone in Denver) would not be here without you—you are the system that transports water to where nature should have placed it. We raise a glass of your water in your honor.

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Improbable Denver

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