

# Yampa River Botanic Park the first 32 years

by Bob Enever, its Co-Founder

This is the story of how tiny Steamboat Springs, Colorado came to have beautiful botanic gardens at nearly 7,000 ft in the Rocky Mountains of Western Colorado.

I, Bob Enever, am a 96-year-old man who earned my own living at age 14, and ended up as an MBA/CPA entrepreneur, builder, and investor, in Steamboat Springs, Colorado for the last 53 years.

As a 12 year old boy, living through 2 years of nightly bombing near London in wartime England, I made gardens for my mother, with an idea of a plan in my head, a shovel, and a wheelbarrow.

Audrey and I were married for 68 years. One of our unspoken sharings was that Audrey, a mathematician, loved flower gardens, and I would make gardens for her at the houses we lived in; in British Columbia, Canada, in Ann Arbor MI, in Cologne, Germany and in Steamboat Springs, where I built a raised flower bed around our house. Never a gardener myself, I enjoyed designing and building gardens for Audrey. Audrey was more interested in what goes in the garden than its shape.

In 1992, the City was planning the Core Trail along the Yampa River, said it would not condemn land, but we could see that to avoid spoiling the trail and to avoid the very heavy cost of crossing the railroad twice, the trail needed to go through Fish Creek Mobile Home Park that Audrey and I owned. We supported the Trail, so without any negotiations with the City or its attorneys we made an offer that the City immediately accepted. As a result the City bought the private land that is now Emerald Park and the Botanic Park, and made the south 6 acres a separate City Park they initially named 'Enever Park'. In this win win transaction, the City gained Land for Emerald Park and for the Trail along the riverbank through the Mobile Home Park, and avoided perhaps \$1m of cost, crossing the railroad twice. We gained a Park the City could take over if a future Board should fail.

The mountains around the City are covered in summer wildflowers but there were very few flower gardens in the Valley even in 1995, even at the expensive homes; landscapers only cut grass then. Audrey and I dreamed of creating a park with interesting botanic gardens to introduce high altitude gardens to the people of Steamboat Springs. I spent the winter of 1994-5 with landscape architect Michael Campbell and some ideas; 3-dimensional gardens, Nature being our guide, and "doing things differently"; revising plans daily until Audrey and I settled on the final design.

As soon as we had a plan, Audrey and I started to think about how to fund the construction of the Park. Just then a personal tragedy befell us when our 31-year-old son Peter, star athlete and computer guru, died of a midnight heart attack in Oregon. To get the construction of the Park started that summer, Audrey and I decided that we would donate investments we had given Peter. City Council's concern was that we would build something, then leave the City responsible for its maintenance, so we made a second donation to create a \$1m Endowment for the Park, to calm the City's anxiety and provide financial stability for the Park's future.

We then buried ourselves in this project to take the sting out of our grief. The ground was a flat horse-pasture but I could "see" the finished Park before I started building it. I wanted to do the construction work myself so I could incorporate possibilities I could see on the ground but were not in the drawings, like adding the Reflecting Pond, the waterfall and "framing" the gardens with trees.

I worked on the site every available day for the next two years, using a transit to shape the ground, and with help from a contractor-friend who told every trucker in town to bring us the free fill-dirt they were carrying. We shaped the berms, dug the ponds, lined them with clay, and built the circular road with the pit-run gravel we excavated. We brought in large landscape rocks from Haymaker Golf Course, then under construction. I had super-duty, 50-year fences built so wildlife could not eat the future flowers. I have always been a loner so it was no hardship for me to be out in the field alone for 2 summers of long hot days.

By the second year, Peter's money had been used up, but the Park had become so important to Audrey and me by then that we decided to continue funding the construction ourselves, with a third donation. We planted 500 trees and shrubs, started building trails, footpaths and gardens. I contracted out the irrigation system and filed on a private 1893 Water Right in Fish Creek for surface water to fill the ponds and the wetlands, then flow out to the Yampa River. The third year, 1997, we had grass on The Green and the President of the City Council opened the Park to the public and presented the Park with a bronze plaque set in a rock near the Trail Entrance.

The City helped by taking the payroll and accounts payable functions off our hands, so the new gardener/board members could concentrate on raising flowers and raising funds. The Park paid, and still pays, the City for those payrolls and accounts payable. Audrey and I put a fourth donation into operating the Park for the first 10 years of its life until the new Association was collecting enough money in membership fees and donations for the Park to become financially independent. We, the Park have never asked for taxpayer money.

In those first 10 years Audrey and I spent a lot of time at the Park, managing it as members of the Board. I continued building out the infrastructure. I supervised the design and construction of Trillium House and personally built the concrete stage, the Children's Garden, the waterfall, more gardens. Audrey and the Park Supervisor, planned the plantings, selected the plants, bought and planted them, for the first 10 years. Emily Seaver carried on this work, later became President and is Chair of the Horticulture Committee to this day. A constant during all this time was a team of dedicated gardeners led by Gayle Lehman, the Park Supervisor, who did everything required to run these public gardens for the first 24 years, (she said the happiest years of her life). The whole team learned a lot about plants that thrive, and fail, at this altitude with its alpine winters, 20 feet of snow, and dry summers; this gardening experience is passed along as folklore to successors.

Audrey and I wanted the Park management to continue to be strong after we were gone so we deliberately left things for the rest of the board to deal with; the Board took on that responsibility so Audrey and I, still working on the Board, were no longer the prime movers. Under this "working board" the Park grew so much by 2019, 24 years after construction started, that the Board decided the Park needed to do things more professionally, so we hired an Executive Director, in the person of Jennifer MacNeil. In 5 years the team of Jennifer, Kathy Connell our Board Chair, Evelyn Cole our Treasurer, and a strengthened Board, has changed the Park from being a good amateur-run organization .....to being a great, professionally-managed Park with Botanic Gardens that local people are proud of, and visitors from far and wide love to visit.

Co-Founder Bob Enever  
Steamboat Springs, Colorado, August, 2024

In memory of Co-Founder Audrey Enever