

Reflections: The mystery of Lake San Cristobal: A natural lake no more? By: Lyn Lampert and Camille Richard, Chair and Coordinator, respectively, of the Lake Fork Watershed Stakeholders, Lake City, CO, July, 2008.

Like a captivating Agatha Christie novel, Lake San Cristobal is a beautiful mystery. The more one learns about this centerpiece of Hinsdale County, the more unanswered questions one finds. Somehow, it is uniquely refreshing, though, in this age of quantification and precise explanation, to find something that defies complete understanding and description. Lake San Cristobal is one such place, whose manifold mysteries only add to its enchanting allure.

The first written record of the glories of this body of water was compiled by a small Army expedition doing the "Reconnaissance of the Ute Country" in 1873. This expedition, led by Lt. E. H. Ruffner, produced the first accurate descriptions of many parts of the San Juan for the outside world. The expedition approached the lake from upstream after doing work in the Baker's Park (now Silverton) district. As beautiful as the lake is today, it must have been an incredible gem in 1873, without roads, power lines or habitation. Indeed, Ruffner's description speaks in glowing terms, praising its islands and coves and abundance of ducks and coots.

The origin of its name remains a mystery. "San Cristobal" is obviously Spanish in derivation, and many Latin American places are named for Saint Christopher. Saint Christopher was a semi-mythical character from the 3rd century, and today is popularly known as the Patron Saint of Travelers. Frank Hall in his authoritative 1895 "History of Colorado" claims the name of 'Lake Chrystobal' was given by US engineer corps staff encamped at the lake during the Ute Country reconnaissance, inspired by a poem of Tennyson. This account would gain considerable merit if someone could actually produce the Tennyson poem containing the name 'Chrystobal', but even Lake City's intrepid historian Grant Houston has been unable to find such evidence. Thus, the mystery remains, and whether the inspiration for Lake San Cristobal was a Catholic saint or a Tennyson poem still remains very much an open question.

There is little mystery, however, in how this unique body of water was formed. Had it not been for the famous Slumgullion Slide, the valley of the lake would probably be traversed today by a gentle river in a shallow canyon. About 700 years ago, however, geologists surmise that a massive movement of water saturated earth and rock changed the destiny of the quiet valley forever. The earthflow, originating near the top of Mesa Seco, near Slumgullion Pass, tore a path in the forest several miles long, and came to an oozing halt when it reached the Lake Fork valley. Thus, a natural dam was created, backing up the river for approximately two miles. The slide has caused some problems for lake recreationists in recent years, mainly from silting, but the fact remains that the lake owes its existence to the yellow gumbo surrounding its outlet.

Ranked as Colorado's second largest natural body of water, after Grand Lake on the western border of Rocky Mountain National Park, the lake is much loved by both visitors and locals. In the 1980's, the electorate of Hinsdale County decided to place a conservation covenant on the surrounding county land so that it could remain as undeveloped and pristine as possible. However, debate is sometimes rancorous regarding size and actual "natural" lake level with some folks believing that the lake is currently losing acreage due to infilling and a lowering water level, while other old timers insist that the lake has never been higher. The debate continues to the present day, given its checkered history of outlet manipulation by miners of old and current day county officials. Throughout the past century, several structures of various design have been placed in the outlet, ranging from a wooden weir in the early 1950's (which blew out with heavy flooding) to the current practice of placing rocks in the outlet to maintain an artificially high lake level. This has been done to counter rising sedimentation at the marina near the delta of Slumgullion creek, the conduit for the arsenic laden yellow muck of the slide.

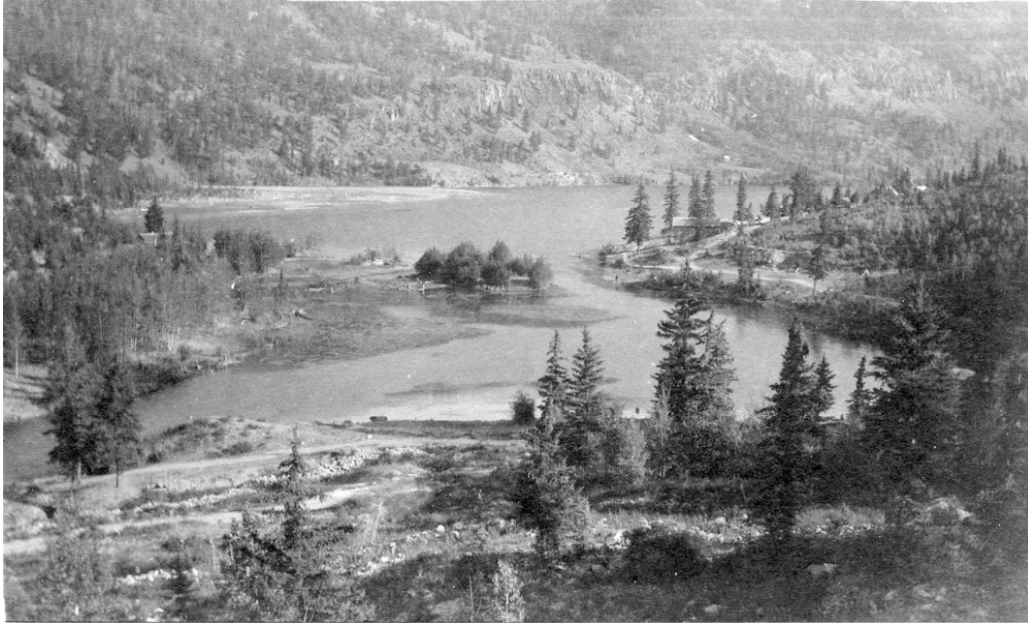
Much of this sedimentation is a recent phenomenon, as the creek had been diverted in the 1950's from its original path to the Lake Fork below, into the lake itself.

The actual lake level continues to be a mystery and a controversy. In the early 1990's, the Colorado Water Conservancy Board (CWCB) designated a "natural" lake level at 8995 ft and hold the water rights of the lake as part of their in stream flow and natural lake level program. The level was determined during recent history during which time the county has maintained an artificially high water level. As a result of this uncertainty, a new and more permanent threat to the "naturalness" of the lake looms on the horizon. A water release structure to be placed at the outlet is being proposed so that the top three feet of the lake can be reserved as augmentation water, with rights held by Hinsdale County, the Town of Lake City and the Upper Gunnison River Water Conservancy District. This would require that CWCB relinquish their rights of the top three feet of water and designate the natural level at 8992 ft. Emotions run high regarding this proposal, and the county electorate will again come to the voting booths in the fall to determine the fate of our beloved lake.

Perhaps Lake San Cristobal's greatest mystery of all is its allure that is ever new, no matter how many times you gaze upon its sapphire gleam. Lake San Cristobal is more pronouncedly a different place every season of the year than anywhere else in the valley. In the winter, the lake sleeps. San Cristobal hides its mysteries under a vast sheet of white, speckled only here and there by ice fishermen probing its depths with invisible lines. At rare times of little snow, a thick layer of bare ice covers the lake, creating a gargantuan, glistening skating rink. In the winter, the frozen willow-marsh of its southern shore is home for placid elk, calmly awaiting spring's thaw. Chickadees and gray jays add life to the otherwise-quiet of the spruce forests of along the border. In the spring, the lake awakens. Its frozen surface becomes a massive jigsaw puzzle as its icy coat weakens. Then, in a day the lake overthrows winter and enthrones glorious spring. The ice is gone, dimples of rising trout appear all over the surface, and huge, monster-like Mackinaw cruise the shallows. Things are changing rapidly, and Lt. Ruffner's mallards and coots return once again to their mountain home. In the summer, the lake lives. Boats of all varieties cruise its shores, picnickers enliven Red Mountain Gulch picnic area, fishermen jockey for position at the outlet. At the other end, tiny yellow warblers build their nests and bluebirds dart for mayflies. And in the fall, the lake relaxes. Its surface of blue is now tinged with gold, and nothing seems in a hurry. The crowds have gone; it is a time for the lake and its inhabitants to savor life. Even migrating grebes and geese descend for a few days' relaxation before continuing their travel southward.

Season after season, the true mystery of Lake San Cristobal remains. What will become of its allure when its natural ebb and flow is permanently altered by human tinkering?

Photos (all photos by Camille Richard except no.1):



1. “natural lake level” - Black and white photo of the lake under past “natural” lake levels. The Slumgullion earth flow forms the natural dam which is under the wetland area and small forested island. This island does not exist today, except for a small rock jutting above the water level (photo credit: Silver World Newspaper Archives).



2. “outlet” – This photo shows the site of the proposed water release structure at the outlet. This is at high water level and the rocks have not been placed back in the outlet area (the rocks are piled to the side).



3. "siltation" – This photo shows the delta of Slumgullion creek where heavy siltation occurs and there is also heavy development pressure (on slide material!)



4. "fall colors" – just a nice shot of the lake in autumn from the pinnacle above the lake.



5. “inundated wetlands” – this photo shows the inlet where the Lake Fork of the Gunnison flows into the lake. Wetlands here have been flooded with loss of significant willow areas due to the county maintaining an artificial lake level. One can see where the boundary of wetlands was prior to flooding, with standing dead willow twigs still evident.



6. “Lake and Mesa Seco” – a view of the lake with the source of the slide, Mesa Seco, in the distance, upper left corner of the photo.



7. “slumgullion flow” – this photo shows the path of the earthflow and where it dammed the lake.