

# The Watson Island Story



## *The island's beginnings, restoration, and future*



**The Ute's utilized the rich riverfront for hunting and seasonal farming**  
*Colorado Historical Society photo*

### *Ancient History*

Fremont Indians occupied the land around Watson Island from about 250 AD to 1300 AD. After the Fremont Indians mysteriously disappeared the nomadic Ute Indians migrated into the Grand Valley sometime between 1300 AD and 1500 AD. The Ute's used the land along the Colorado for hunting and seasonal farming. During the late 1800s the pioneers began to settle and dramatically alter the landscape.

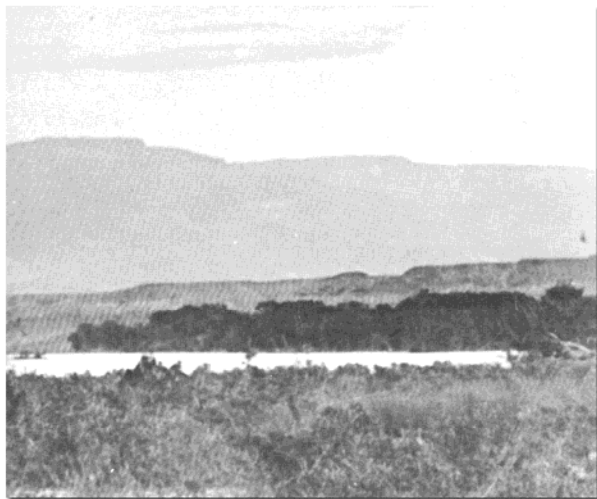
### *The Birth of an Island*

"Posey" Watson, like the native seasonal farmers before him, recognized the potential of the fertile soil along the river banks. He developed a flower and garden farm on a low lying river bend in the 1920s. He opened Watson Floral on Main Street in the 1930s when the farm became productive. In the 1940s a channel was constructed to help prevent flooding on the farming grounds, thus creating Watson Island.

Watson was very active and invested in the Grand Junction community. He served on the City Council and was a member of the local Lions Club. He donated potted and cut flowers to the Lions Club's annual fundraising carnival every February. Watson was unaware that his generosity would eventually help secure the beauty of his land nearly a century later.



**Recreation on river has a long heritage. Community members skating on the Grand (Colorado) River in 1892.**  
*Museum of Western Colorado Photo*



**The riverside in the early 1880s before development**  
*Museum of Western Colorado photo*

## Changing Times

The Watson family sold the farm to Tom Lewis in the 1950s. Lewis envisioned a vastly different economic potential in the land and turned it into a salvage yard. Over the years, cars, mobile homes, tires, and a variety of other refuse began to cover the island. For over thirty years refuse was continually dumped and piled on the island.

During the economic struggle of the early 1980s the Grand Junction Lions Club looked for a way to instill pride back into the community. The beautification of the en-

try into the city along the 5<sup>th</sup> street bridge became their focal point. They entered into negotiations with Lewis to purchase Watson Island, but quickly realized they needed more help. The Lions Club envisioned a partnership between the state, city, and county to help raise funds and provide assistance for the purchase and clean-up of the



**The Lions Club was instrumental in protecting Watson Island**

island. They approached the city of Grand Junction with a unique proposal.

## Restoration

The Lions Club proposed to give the city \$100,000 to purchase Watson Island if the city agreed to match it. However, there was a catch. The Lions club wanted to see Watson Island cleaned-up and protected as a public park. In order to ensure this long-term vision was realized, the Lions agreed to give the city the money in three phases.



**Areal view of the Watson Island area taken in the early 1950s**  
*Museum of the West photo*

The first phase provided money to help city purchase the land. The next phase provided funds for to initiate an effort to clean-up the island. The remaining funds would be used for the dedication of the island as a public park. Not wanting to miss out on a great opportunity, the State of Colorado contrib-

uted \$50,000 to the effort. With the city and the state on board, the Lions Club approached Mesa County for help.



**Old cars filled Watson Island prior to the clean-up.**  
*Western Colorado Botanical Gardens photo*

### **Changing Minds**

The abrupt loss of revenue from the oil shale industry in 1982 had left the county with little reserve in its coffers. All efforts to persuade Mesa County to contribute to the clean-up effort came to naught.

That was until Tom Holmes, a county commissioner, along with other county officials took a float trip to see the island. As they toured Watson Island, Holmes noticed something familiar. Posted on the bumper of a permanently parked, junked car was a campaign sticker, proudly supporting John Holmes for Country Commissioner. Soon after, Mesa County began to contribute what they could to the effort.

### **Creation of the Riverfront Commission**

The Lions Club wanted the city to create a commission to oversee the purchase and clean-up of Watson Island. The Riverfront Commission was created in 1987 to fill this need. In 1988 the Riverfront Commission bought Watson's Island for \$302,000. They saw it as an opportunity to help the community rebound from hard economic times and bring people together for the public benefit.



**Pat Gormley and Governor Roy Romer show off the plans the Riverfront Commission has for the riverfront. 1987.**  
*Museum of Western Colorado photo*



**Volunteers plant native species after removing tamarisk**  
*Tamarisk Coalition photo*

### *Future Restoration*

The Tamarisk Coalition in partnership with Chevron, the Riverfront Commission and the City of Grand Junction will be undertaking a \$240,000, two-year restoration project on the Watson Island Complex. The project aims to restore 70 acres of land on the Colorado River to its native state by removing invasive tamarisk and Russian olive from the riparian zone. Planting native vegetation will help restore the riverfront to the beauty experienced by Posey Watson back in the early 1900s.



**Volunteers work to remove tamarisk**  
*Tamarisk Coalition photo*

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Compiled by the Tamarisk Coalition with invaluable assistance from Brian Mahoney, Judge William Ela, the Botanical Gardens, and the Museum of Western Colorado.

#### Supporting Partners:

- City of Grand Junction
- Tamarisk Coalition
- Colorado Riverfront Foundation and Commission
- Chevron
- Western Colorado Botanic Gardens

- Audubon Society
- Mesa State College
- Colorado Division of Wildlife
- US Fish & Wildlife Service
- NRCS
- Palisades Insectary
- Mesa Country School District

