## Contents

**Author’s Note**  
ix

**Map of the Arkansas River**  
xii

Mile Zero  
1

A Certain Grit  
13

Finding the Line  
31

Your River Voice  
35

The Flume  
42

Inherent Risk  
60

The Highest Valley  
65

Thirteen Prisons  
76

The Place of Memory  
89

Buy and Dry  
115

Color  
123

Ghosts of Sand Creek  
132

The ABCs of Internment  
147

Child of Calamity  
157

The November Plot  
185

The Waterscrape  
201

The Gun Show  
210

River of Quivira  
230

Bread and Quicksilver  
250

Trespasses  
272

Swells from Ancient Oceans  
280

Coyote’s Song  
287

Acknowledgments  
305
Author’s Note

The following is a work of nonfiction and all events happened as described, although they are presented here in thematic, rather than strictly chronological, order. There are no invented or composite characters used, although in cases where I refer to an individual by a first name only, I use a pseudonym to spare embarrassment. In some cases, I have omitted people and events, but only when it had no substantial impact on the narrative.

All photos by Max McCoy, unless otherwise noted.
ELEVATIONS
Standing thigh-deep in the river, my paddle in one hand and the bow toggle of my kayak in the other, I cocked my arm and tossed the double-bladed stick in the direction of the gravel bar. It wasn’t a perfect throw, but it was good enough. The paddle skittered to a stop on the bar, with only a part of one blade in the water, in no danger of being swept downstream. With the 53-degree water gently piling beneath my left hip, I shivered and wished that I had pulled on a wetsuit instead of swim trunks. My chest was warm enough, even though the gray polyester shirts beneath my bulky life jacket were soaked, but my legs felt like they were in a freezer. I stepped toward the bank and the kayak followed, the stem bumping against my legs, the stern drawn downstream by the current.

Then my wedding ring slid from the finger of my left hand. It hit the hard plastic deck of the kayak and wobbled like a coin, quavering gold in the morning air. I swatted with my right hand, not in a smooth motion but in a heart-in-the-throat kind of jerk, trapping the ring beneath my palm against the swirled yellow and red plastic.

_Holy fuck!_

Did that just happen?

It’s an inauspicious beginning to my first day on the water during a long project that is intended to take me from the headwaters of the Arkansas River near the Continental Divide north of Leadville, Colorado, down the river to the plains. It’s more than 700 miles to my destination, the Oklahoma border. My goal is to write a story about the river’s journey through Colorado and Kansas, a sort of cultural and natural history of the river, and to weave into that tapestry a deeply personal narrative as well.

I had aimed to tackle the biography of the river, to follow the path from its birth among the highest peaks in Colorado all the rushing way
Headwaters of the Arkansas River near Fremont Pass.
down red canyons to the featureless plains—and beyond. I would pick through the remains of the human hopes and outrageous folly that litter its ancient banks, celebrate the rare sustainable success, and compare evidence of the river past, in the form of written accounts and historic photographs, with the river present. I would consult experts, from river guides to historians to as-yet-undiscovered authorities, who could explain to me why the otherworldly haunts us in the wild. My aim was also to chronicle my personal journey of discovery, noting my reaction to—and interaction with—the water wild.

Desperately, I wanted to avoid writing a travel book. There are many books about things to do and see in Kansas and Colorado, and a few of them are fine books. There is also an avalanche of magazine articles and newspaper features every year, tabloid-sized travel guides of all kinds, and brochures at every welcome center and chamber of commerce along the route. There’s plenty of information available, for example, if you’d like to know about the “thriving” arts scene at Salida (as airports sprawl, local arts scenes seem always to thrive in descriptive brochures). You can also find troves in print and on the Web about the Old West experience at Dodge City, or the museums and other civic triumphs along the river in downtown Wichita. Such boosterism is abundant. What I was after were the deeper and sometimes darker stories along the river, the stories that were sometimes harder to find, the stories that rang truer and left readers wiser.

My account would be one of journalism performed naked, rather than clutching at the emperor’s cloak of objectivity; I would acknowledge personal biases, share enthusiasms, and embrace advocacy when so moved. Perhaps this new frankness would help me discover what pathology drives me to sometimes leave a wealth of physical and emotional comforts and seek challenges that are physically demanding and often intellectually discomfiting. At least, that was the strategy when my search for the Arkansas began.

So far, I’d plunged my hands into the snow on a high pass from which the river is born, hiked the Arkansas where it was still narrow enough to hop across, and dragged my kayak over barbed wire to find access to bigger water.

But now, things aren’t going as planned. My ambitious and high-minded project has been slammed hard against the reality of rocks,
water, and talent—physical and otherwise. There is a story here, a story that connects human and wild, past and present, the personal and the transcendent, but standing shivering in the river, I am not convinced that I’m the one to tell it.

Had my wedding ring rolled into the cold, swift water and settled among the jagged rocks below, it would have been gone. Oh, I would have looked for hours, but without being able to mark the exact spot and with no help because I was alone, finding it would have been a long shot. How could I have been so stupid? I had lost some weight, and I knew the ring was loose on my finger, but in the rush to find a place to launch and get on the river, I had forgotten to secure it. How would I have explained the loss to Kim, the woman I had married—and who, more importantly, had married me—less than two years before?

Trying not to think about the symbolism inherent in such a catastrophe, I carefully placed the ring in the front pocket of my life jacket and zipped it up.

Then I waded over to the gravel bar, guiding the sluggish kayak across the river, feeling the rocks through the thin rubber soles of my river shoes. I stepped up onto the bar, water streaming from my clothes, and hauled the kayak up, its bottom grumbling and scraping and leaving a V-shaped furrow behind. There was a bathtub full of water in the boat. I leveraged the boat over and let as much water as I could drain from the cockpit—and spilled a Nalgene bottle of drinking water, a plastic baggie of snacks, and a little plastic box with an amber lid that held a collection of spinners and other lures. The waterproof case that held my iPhone and my wallet dangled from the safety cord clipped to an eyelet on the deck. Thankfully, the hatch was still secure over the aft compartment, so at least I didn’t have to chase my stowed belongings down the river. Then, I tilted the kayak up onto its nose, letting the boat rest against my shoulder as it drained.

When I had gotten as much water out of the boat as I reckoned was possible, I eased it down and slid the bow a foot or two into the water. Then I began to gather up the small items that had spilled, and when I reached for the fishing tackle I realized my right hand was shaking. In fact, both of my hands were shaking. Tremors rippled through both hands and my fingertips danced. Then I realized I was short of breath and quite cold, and the moment of realization made me fight even harder for air, and made me colder. My vision blurred. I was exhausted and my mind was
more than a bit dull. It seemed to me there was a dome of light encircling me, and at the center of the dome was a bright, floating point of light. It was there even when I closed my eyes.

_Brilliant,_ I told myself. _You’re going to die here on this gravel bar after having swamped your new boat in Class Zero water, and when people say your name, they’re going to laugh._

But then I tasted blood in the back of my throat, and realized I wasn’t having a heart attack. It was a panic attack. I’d had them frequently in the past, mostly years ago, during a previous marriage. The attack was probably made worse by a mild case of altitude sickness. Every trip I made at 10,000 feet or above was accompanied the first couple of days by some sinus bleeding, fatigue, and a bit of depression. Also, I was still recovering from a stomach parasite that I had picked up during my return to Kansas from a writers convention in Las Vegas, an illness that required a trip to the emergency room and IV fluids, and put me in bed for three weeks. I probably hadn’t recovered enough for this trip, but the passage of time and the threat of lost opportunity had made me incautious.

I sat down on the deck of the kayak, just behind the seat, holding the little amber plastic fishing tackle case in my lap. Fishing tackle. _What was I thinking?_ But I’d had the little box for, what—twenty years? More?—and every time I had fished with my father, usually for trout, I’d had the little box with me. I turned the box over in my hands and the contents shifted and skittered. Inside were even some lures, some small spinners for ultralight rods that I had probably used while fishing with him. There were also little sinkers, like bits of lead shot, and toothpicks and bright bits of felt and a pair of nail clippers to snip line. Of course, _now_ I know what I was thinking. My father had died in 1997 and subconsciously I wanted something on this journey that was a direct connection to him. It wasn’t about fishing at all.

I slowed my breathing and tried to concentrate on my surroundings. The weird sensation of the dome of light over me began to ease. Trees leaned over the river from high-cut banks and the sky was a deep blue, so deep that I thought it might not be just an optical illusion, that there must be some natural explanation. I felt alone and the immense sky made me feel even more so, as did the far blue peaks of the mountains on the horizon around me. It wasn’t more than three or four river miles to the take-out, where my friend Butch would be waiting, and I could manage
that. The whole thing had been a stupid idea, anyway. Once I got the kayak on the trailer behind the Jeep, then I could call it quits. Nobody would have to know that I had swamped the kayak in easy water, that I had nearly lost my wedding ring, that I had lost my nerve.

But for now, the only way out was down the river.

I fished the ring from the pocket of my life jacket and, with a waterproof Band-Aid from my first aid kit, taped it onto my finger. Then I gathered my gear into the boat, walked it out to where the water was just over my ankles but the stern was on the bar, and sat down in the cockpit. In a moment I was again in the current.

There’s no good metaphor for a river. The river is the thing itself, the thing that other things are compared to. Time, or more properly change, comes first to mind. “No man ever stepped into the same river twice,” said Heraclitus, the weeping Greek philosopher. In Abrahamic tradition, John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River, and the Jordan plays a part in assorted miracles and other stories in the Bible, including a crossing that was the final step in a journey from slavery to freedom. Take a look at American literature, from Mark Twain to Thomas Wolfe, and you’ll see that rivers are reliable symbols for journeys, for change, for the nostalgia of our youth and the yearning for the transcendent.

For everything, really.

When one does use a metaphor for a river, it is sort of like putting a battery in backward; there’s no power. It diminishes that which you are attempting to amplify. I’ve heard rivers variously described as arteries, pathways, and highways, but those reflect how we have used rivers rather than what rivers are. In their essence, rivers defy description. Even the word river is imprecise, at least when you look at the etymology, because it comes from the French for the bank and not the water itself.

It’s appropriate that the word river comes from the edge where most of our interactions with rivers stops and the wildness begins. Rivers represent the banks of our experience, and the desire to go beyond them. Take even the tamest of rivers, and just a few yards out—say, past the point where you can bend over and touch the bottom while wading—there’s a world unknown to anyone without the proper gear. I’ve seen plenty of river bottoms through a scuba mask, and it is always surprising.
There are plenty of ways to describe how things appear in relation to a river: a ribbon of glittering steel can appear when the sun is low, or mist is a shroud in the early morning, or a boater thrown from her raft becomes a cork bobbing in a rapid. The only time a metaphor works is when a river is damaged or threatened in some way. When the Environmental Protection Agency accidentally released three million gallons of toxic yellow-brown sludge from the Gold King Mine near Silverton, Colorado, into the Animas River in August 2015, it could reasonably be described as having turned the river to shit.

The Arkansas River, the subject of our meditation here, was spared the desecration of the EPA-released (irony noted) heavy metals and other toxic wastewater, because the Animas is a tributary of the San Juan, which is part of the Colorado River System. The Colorado and Arkansas headwaters are only forty or so miles apart, in the high mountains, but are separated by the Continental Divide; while the Colorado flows southwest, through the Grand Canyon and eventually to California and the Pacific Ocean, the Arkansas runs to the southeast—eventually to join in the Arkansas delta with the Mississippi. The Arkansas begins as a brook formed from snowmelt a few miles above Leadville, Colorado, and it was there—near Fremont Pass, where the Continental Divide skews to an east-west orientation, and Highway 91 hosts legions of tourists in their Escalades and Explorers, and squadrons of bikers straddle their Harley-Davidson Road Kings—I began my journey.

Call it Mile Zero.

At least that’s what I’ve named it in one of my dirt- and water-stained notebooks. This location, hard beside (or possibly on) property owned by the Climax mine, is a swamp in summer. It was difficult for me, hiking and attempting to avoid the company’s NO TRESPASSING signs, to tell exactly where the Arkansas begins, because the rivulets that combine to form the nascent river are a web running through the soggy land beneath the crooked top of Bartlett Mountain.

The peak of Bartlett Mountain was once 13,555 feet, but the top 150 feet or so have been lopped off during the last seventy years by open-pit molybdenum mining. The Climax mine has produced about three-quarters of the world’s supply of moly, an uncommon element used chiefly to produce steel alloys. At the height of production, during World War II, when moly was needed for the production of armaments
and radio tubes, the highest human settlement (and US Post Office and railway station) in the United States was located here, at the foot of the mountain near Fremont Pass, at an elevation of 11,320 feet.

The unincorporated town was home to 600 people, notes the Works Progress Administration guide to Colorado, published in 1941. Climax was Colorado’s most prosperous mining town, and the company provided dormitories for its single miners that included such comforts as a commissary and a library. “Mining is done by the caving system,” the entry for Climax notes, “which has eaten away a large gash in the face of the mountain. Ore bodies are undercut horizontally and broken down with dynamite.”

Climax is a ghost town: the post office closed in the early 1960s, and the railway line from Leadville now operates as a tourist attraction. The title of highest community in the United States has been surrendered from the company town of Climax to three nearby contenders, depending on how you define community. Leadville is the highest incorporated city, at 10,152 feet; Alma is the highest incorporated municipality, at 10,578 feet; and Winter Park became the highest incorporated town when it annexed part of a ski resort, although the center of town is only at 9,000 feet. The distinctions are largely statutory, although Leadville has by far the most permanent residents, at 2,580. Living at altitudes above 10,000 feet offers some special challenges, thanks to a winter that lasts for six months. The record low temperature at Leadville is 38 degrees below zero, Fahrenheit. The snow comes by the end of October and typically lasts until May, with an average accumulated snowfall of 10.6 feet. Air pressure, which is 14.7 pounds per square inch (psi) at sea level, is just 10 psi here. Water boils at 193 degrees Fahrenheit and it takes about twice as long to cook anything as it does at sea level.

I’ve ridden that tourist train that goes north out of Leadville, in an open-air car pulled by a humming diesel, with Kim sitting beside me, for the cost of a pair of twenty-dollar tickets. The depot for the Leadville, Colorado, & Southern Railroad is easy to find because it’s on East Seventh, just three blocks east of the town’s main drag; if you miss it—as I did, the first time—it’s easy to follow the tracks back to where you should be. That was three years ago, during research for another writing project, before embarking on the river journey. Then, it was possible for me to happily climb down from the observation car and stretch my legs with
the other passengers when the train reached its northern terminus at a rustic water tank at French Gulch, elevation 10,840 feet, before backing down all eleven miles of tracks to the depot in Leadville. That was before I decided to visit the places beyond the Climax fences where the Arkansas is born—and reborn—every spring.

And even though the river project started in earnest less than two years ago, the idea for it began nearly two decades ago. In the 1990s, I was asked to participate for a few years in a summer writing workshop sponsored by Western State College in Gunnison, Colorado, and during the first of those ten-hour drives from Kansas, while following US 50 as it winds ever steeper along the Arkansas River from Cañon City on the approach to Monarch Pass, I was astonished by the sprinkling of snow. I was also fascinated by the river, which seemed as wild as any I had seen, and by the boaters in their yellow or blue commercial rafts and the single paddlers in their neon kayaks. I stopped at the Five Points access, where a wooden observation deck juts out over the water, and from the rail watched as several kayaks slid and bucked and pivoted past the massive red boulders below. I wanted to be in the water with them, for in the water they were, not unlike surfboarders, as much water and spray above them as below, their boats sometimes submerged beneath them, but following an invisible line that would lead them to safety at the bottom of the rapids.

It became a routine, every time I made the trip, to stop and watch the boaters. While the rafts of the commercial outfitters looked like fun, I didn’t want to be in a boat with six other tourists and a guide steering in the back. No, I wanted to be inside a kayak, to be as deep in the water as I could, to still be in control—but to test that edge between control and surrender.

Growing up in southeast Kansas, I had run miles and miles of Spring River above Baxter Springs in an aluminum boat with an outboard. I had also been with my father on rivers and lakes from Toledo Bend on the Texas-Louisiana line to Lesser Slave Lake in central Alberta, and I knew how to handle a boat before I could legally drive. But those waters, all of them, were calm, save for the occasional chop on a windy day.

Whitewater represented something alien.

My first time in a decked boat came in the mid-1990s, when a friend of mine, Texas writer and treasure hunter W. C. Jameson, invited me on a kayak trip when the Little Red River in Arkansas was at flood stage. He’d bought a pair of touring kayaks, and a rack to carry them on the
roof of his black van he called *El Zopilote*, “the vulture.” We zipped down the river and never once came close to swimming, even though I juggled the double-bladed paddle to do a little fly-fishing from the cockpit. This was a different kind of boating than I had known before, and the river thrumming past where my thighs and knees were braced against the hull gave me the impression that I was a part of the river, instead of just riding on top of it.

After my research for the Arkansas River project began in earnest, but before my initial hike in the swamp below Bartlett Mountain, I began to think of those places beyond the no trespassing signs of the Climax company as Minus Mile Zero. The top of the mountain may have been blown to hell long ago, but I wanted to see firsthand what was left. Some of it, I knew from my research, would be artificial; the original stream bed had been buried decades ago by the overburden removed from the mountain in the scramble for molybdenum, and drainage from the mountain was forced into a seven-foot-diameter culvert somewhere above the swampland. That overburden clogging the natural stream bed, as well as acres of other tailings, had been removed under a government-sponsored reclamation project. The brook that flowed through the swamp was a re-creation of what the ancestral headwaters must have looked like. I wanted to see how things looked on the other side of the fence.

Also, I worried that my designation of Mile Zero would prove inaccurate, because it was simply a spot I picked near Fremont Pass where one could identify a rivulet that would become the Arkansas, even if it were narrow enough to easily step across. But there’s no topographic or other map that I can refer to that says yes, this is Mile Zero of the Arkansas. There are a handful of boating guides to the Arkansas River, but these generally use the mileposts along Highway 24, above Salida, or Highway 50 below, to provide directions to river access. The best of these boating guides is a self-published book of eighty-eight pages by veteran river runner Thomas G. Rampton, last updated in 2006, that quite sensibly designates mile zero on the river as the Granite Access, below the bridge near milepost 194. This is generally regarded as the uppermost section of the river that is suitable for boating.

You’re through Granite in the blink of an eye as you drive Highway 24, a twisting two-lane that serpentines along the river between Leadville and Salida. Here the first gold strikes were made, in 1859. If you’re
adventurous enough, you can ascend a narrow county road overlooking the west bank of the river and eventually come to Cache Creek, where you can still pan for—and have a reasonable expectation of finding—gold. It’s also the point on the river where the Arkansas goes from being a relatively tame river meandering through alpine meadows to a wild one. The hazards include Pine Creek Rapid, which may be the most dangerous stretch of water on the river.

Rampton, in his *Arkansas River Guide*, offers this advice about the river miles below Granite: “A suggestion, if you’re going to boat this part of the river but aren’t familiar: take a commercial ride with one of the outfitters. And before you launch, make sure you’re very good.”

Let me state here that I’m not very good.

I won’t challenge Rampton’s wisdom in designating Granite as his mile zero for boaters. But I decided to keep the spot below the Climax mine, twenty-two miles to the north, as my Mile Zero.

Below would be 120 miles of whitewater, until the river meets the plains.

In 2014, eight whitewater boaters died on the Arkansas River in Colorado, including a fifty-seven-year-old Texas woman who was thrown from an outfitter’s raft into the Pine Creek Rapid. The guide had fallen from the boat, according to the sheriff’s report, and the raft and its occupants were swept downstream and became trapped in a circulating hydraulic, which spun the boat and threw two of its three remaining occupants into the water. The Texas woman, Mary Johnson, was unable to swim to shore because of the force of the recirculating water in the hole. A safety kayaker—a scout who paddles below the commercial raft to tow clients to safety in the event of such a spill—was unable to reach her before she lost the ability to grab hold, according to a witness.

Pine Creek is a Class V rapid, a violent and challenging stretch of water recommended for expert boat-drivers only. The whitewater classification system goes from Class I, which is moving water with riffles or small waves, suitable for near-complete novices and with little or no risk to swimmers (i.e., those being dumped from the boat) and presenting easy self-rescue, to Class VI, a rapid so treacherous that it is beyond the skills of even expert paddlers and has been rarely, if ever, successfully run.

“Surely this is the most difficult rapid on the entire river,” Rampton says of Pine Creek in his *Guide*, “and it is probably the most dangerous water in Colorado after Gore Canyon on the Colorado.”
Still, it’s important not to overstate the general risk for boaters—while keeping in mind the warnings about places like Pine Creek and, farther down, Frog Rock and Seidel’s Suckhole. Deaths among commercial outfitters are rare, and the average whitewater boater has a greater chance of being killed or seriously injured in the drive to the launch point than while in the water, according to American Whitewater, a nonprofit advocate affiliated with more than 100 paddling clubs. The average rapids-running kayaker takes a risk that is somewhat above bicycling but below that of rock climbing and scuba diving. The kayak fatality rate, American Whitewater reports, was approximately 3 in 100,000 participants, according to a 1998 study.

Before we get too comfortable with the idea of relative risk, however, I should note something these numbers don’t reflect: that risk increases exponentially at the edges of the spectrum for all three of these highly technical sports. Those most likely to die are novices with little experience who take on too much too soon, or world-class experts who challenge extreme conditions so often that the odds finally catch up.

Two years ago I set out to find the Arkansas River.

What I found was the ghost of a river.

From the headwaters to the plains, we have blasted and choked and diverted and irrigated away the river until those who gave the first accounts of the river would hardly recognize it. Beyond those wildest of places where water and rock collide, only the ghosts of rivers past remain.

The true Arkansas remains in those places where you’re most likely to kill yourself, places where if you’re foolhardy or just plain unlucky you’re at some risk of pinning your kayak against a great red rock or being dragged to the bottom by the unsentimental hydraulics of a legendary suck hole. If you do, of course, it will be your own fault, and don’t say that Thomas G. Rampton didn’t warn you. As he notes in the introduction to Arkansas River Guide, he can only give so much advice, and even though he’s seen much of the water as a professional boater, the nature of the river is change. Each water level creates a new river, with its own joys and challenges.

Ultimately, as Rampton notes: “You’re operating your boat—not me.”