

The Bottoms

Lisa Wright

Standing at the foot of the old 19th Street Bridge – the air filled with the ca-chunk ca-chunk ca-chunk of the Denver Skatepark, the rhythm of joggers on the tediously manicured South Platte River Trail, and the sun reflecting off a smattering of new condos – you’ll find a historical marker for *The Bottoms*. This notorious stretch of the South Platte has had many lives.

Before American expansion, it was used as a seasonal camp by native peoples of the Arapaho and Cheyenne tribes. But they knew not to stay too long. They warned white settlers of the floods that had come before. Particularly alarming was a great flood in 1844, when the river rose 20 feet. But the new arrivals did not listen.

By the 1870s The Bottoms was born as a shanty town built by immigrants flocking to Denver, lured by the hope of mining and railroad jobs. Some of these folks – poor in wealth, but industrious in spirit – began building homes using scrap materials along the banks of the river. They lived in poverty, struggling for even the most basic needs. And, like the people who knew this land best predicted, the Platte would flood its banks again and again, destroying homes, businesses, and livelihoods.

During the Great Depression, The Bottoms became a refuge for those who had no work and nowhere to go. They struggled, but banded together, creating communities that supported each other. It’s reported The Bottoms had a volunteer doctor and nurse and the residents did what they could to make the best of a bad situation. Other parts of the South Platte had been fortified during this time, but the north section had been neglected. This culminated in the deadly flood of 1965. Twenty one people died and the Denver Urban Renewal Authority deemed the area too dangerous, forcing out its residents. This was the end of The Bottoms as Denver knew it.

Today, The Bottoms is experiencing a different kind of boom. An explosion of luxury housing that has been steadily pushing out those who have called this area home for generations. Affordable housing has been a historic problem for Denver residents and is an ever-present issue still. Look at The Bottoms today and you’ll see gleaming new condos framed by the bleak reality of tent towns.

This flag calls this gross juxtaposition to attention.

The name, *The Bottoms*, is a satirical answer to the current laundry list of newly-branded neighborhoods; LoDo, LoHi, RiNo, etc. Neighborhoods once deemed undesirable are now unaffordable and unachievable for most. But beneath their glossy veneer lies the reality of the city’s inequity. The housed and the unhoused rub elbows here and throughout the city. According to The Denver Business Journal “In Denver, where the median income is just shy of \$39,000, residents need to make about \$110,000 to comfortably own a home or a little over \$100,000 to rent.”

Which makes one wonder: Who is our city for? Is this the city we want to live in? Is the return of The Bottoms inevitable? How can we work together to make it better?

From this stretch of the Platte, one can see how much Denver is changing. The random tent cities that spring up along the river remind us that, while The Bottoms were devoured by the powerful floods of the Platte, the forces that made The Bottoms necessary in the first place have yet to be washed away.

Sources:

[Robert Davis. "A People's History of Homelessness in Denver: The Early Years." Denver Voice, October, 2021, 10-11.](#)

[The Bottoms Wayfinding plaque: 19th Street Bridge and the South Platte River](#)

[Alejandro Hernández. "Homeless In Denver." history.denverlibrary.org, March 11, 2021.](#)

[Alan Prendergast. "South Platte Flood of 1965." https://coloradoencyclopedia.org.](#)

[Alan Prendergast. "The 1965 Flood: How Denver's Greatest Disaster Changed the City." Westword, April 29, 2015.](#)

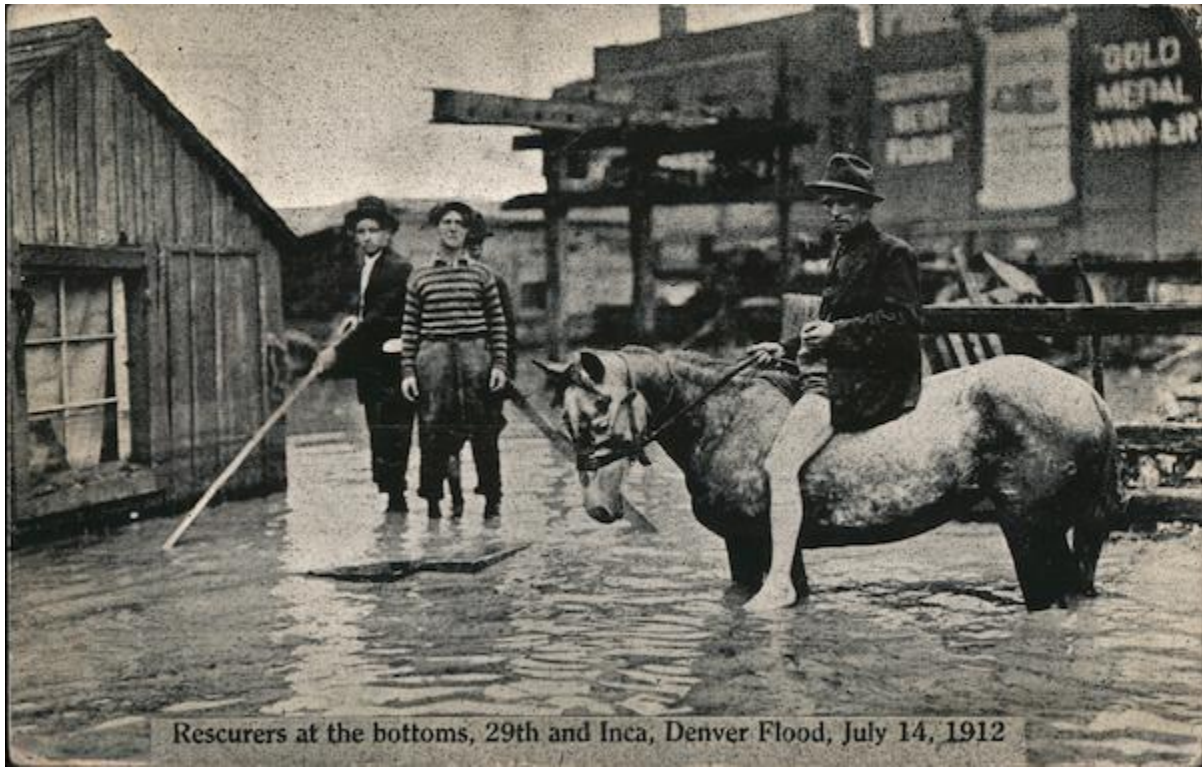
Goodstein, Phil. *Denver from the Bottom Up: From Sand Creek to Ludlow*. Denver, New Social Publications, 2003.

[Ethan Nelson. "Here's how much you need to earn to live comfortably in Denver and other major cities." Denver Business Journal, Oct 14, 2021](#)

Images on following page from the Colorado Historical Society and [cardcow.com](#)



Section of Flooded District, North Bottoms, Denver Flood, July 14, 1912



Rescuers at the bottoms, 29th and Inca, Denver Flood, July 14, 1912