

Walking on water

The famous Sandon flume and the "flood" of '55

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A "flume" is actually a four-sided structure, similar to an elongated box without ends. It is used to re-channel water for a specific purpose - for instance, to supply water for a mining operation. In Sandon's case, the flume was constructed as a means of containing Carpenter and Sandon Creeks where they passed through the centre of the community, and to provide a solution to the city's growing sanitation problems.

Because Carpenter Creek valley is so narrow, the expanding city soon found the lack of building space to be a serious problem, and real estate values soared as available land became scarce. At that point, the two creeks meandered through the city in a haphazard fashion. Following incorporation of the city in 1898, the new council decided to contain the creeks on a route directly through the city, above ground, and on a path they had never been before. This allowed the former creekbeds to be filled in, and the land used for building lots.

It also provided the city with a simple means of disposing of garbage and sewage from the downtown core and the Miner's Union hospital, and ended the growing threat of an epidemic. The Denver Hotel in the upper gulch, which actually spanned Carpenter Creek, even had a trap door in the middle of the bar room, where all the trash was swept at the end of a busy night. Although it was a simple solution by 1890s standards, no one bothered to consult with the people downstream, such as the citizens of New Denver, who now had to contend with all of Sandon's effluent washing down Carpenter Creek through the middle of town. Needless to say, such a solution would not be acceptable by today's standards!

At 14 feet wide and eight feet deep (4.26 by 2.43 metres), the final cost of the flume was \$15,000. The inlet was located beside the K&S trestle; downstream, just below the present Silversmith Powerhouse, the flume took a 90 degree turn, and was joined by the Sandon Creek flume at a point near the CPR station house. Below this point, the main flume took a 45 degree turn and followed a straight line through the city, passing directly in front of the current Sandon Historical Society Museum and continuing as far as the present bridge over Carpenter Creek.

From the CPR station house to the outlet point, the flume was then planked over and became a third street on the bottom of the valley floor. On each side of the street there was also a wide boardwalk. It was after the fire of 1900 that the decision was made to relocate the city's main street from Reco Avenue to the planked-over flume, which was renamed Main Street. Indeed, in pictures following the fire, the scorched top of the flume can clearly be seen. For 55 years the strange construction served its dual purpose as a flume and a street, and it became famous far and wide. Problems were soon to develop, however.



From an engineer's perspective, the flume was a disaster waiting to happen. It was far too narrow to handle the volume of water that passed through it, particularly during the spring thaw. At the points where it made a sharp bend, or where the Sandon Creek flume joined it, the main flume was subject to tremendous strain from the rushing water, as well as providing the perfect "trap" for logs and debris which washed downstream during periods of high water. In the straight section of the flume, the rushing water reached speeds of up to 60 miles an hour (96.54 km per hour), with the result that a loose plank could cause a major catastrophe within minutes. In constant need of maintenance, the flume soon became an ongoing headache. In 1928, the 30-year-old flume underwent extensive repairs, at a cost of \$15,000 - the same as the original cost of construction.

These repairs proved to be a stop-gap measure, however, and did nothing to solve the chief problems with the flume itself. In 1933 a large landslide upstream washed tons of rock and debris into Sandon Creek, which quickly plugged the flume. Unable to follow its man-made path, the water simply ran around the flume and down through the city streets, washing out large gullies and depositing boulders and debris throughout the city. Repairs were made, but again no serious effort was made to solve the flume's basic engineering problems.

By June of 1955, with the population of the community down to only about 30 people, the stage was once again set for disaster. Heavy rains on a melting snowpack in the mountains high above were bringing an increasing torrent of water down through the dilapidated flume, which was coming apart at the seams. Soon, logs jammed in the first bend of the flume, and before anyone could act, the flume was plugged with debris. In a repeat of the 1933 wash-out, water rushed uncontrolled through the streets of Sandon, gouging out gullies, undermining aging buildings, depositing debris throughout the town and tearing the aging flume to shreds. Parts of the flume were washed away down Carpenter Creek, where they caused repeated blockages and wash-outs. This caused another disaster, as the CPR rail line was undermined and washed out in no fewer than 29 places between Sandon and New Denver. This was to be the end of 60 years of rail service to Sandon, as the line was abandoned and the CPR's stranded boxcars were later removed by truck.

