

A STREAM-DITCH RUNS THROUGH IT

Eugene's Amazon Creek flows on,
for better or worse.

By Kera Abraham

A Meandering History

Amazon Creek originates in the foothills of Spencer Butte and flows south and west. At Meadowlark Prairie, the creek splits into two waterways. The original channel flows to the Long Tom River, and the wider diversion channel flows to Fern Ridge Reservoir. Historically, the creek meandered crookedly through the west Eugene wetlands, but in the 1950s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers realigned it into a straight, trapezoid-shaped channel to control flooding.

After the city of Eugene took over the responsibility for the creek's maintenance in the 1960s, officials tried a hands-off approach. The channel grew thick with vegetation. In 1981, the Upper Amazon flooded out onto the streets.

"It fully charged the wastewater system, and then it started backing into people's homes," says Trevor Taylor, natural resources operations coordinator for the city of Eugene's Parks and Open Space Division. "Toilets were backing up in all of the neighborhoods. Showers. People had sewage flowing through their homes."

In response to the crisis, the city dredged out the vegetation clogging the creek. "We removed it all," says Taylor. "It was back to bare soil."

But in the '90s, community members started pressuring city officials to go easier on the creek. The city decided to strike a compromise between flood control and natural resource value by allowing vegetation to grow on the creek's banks while keeping the channel clear. City officials developed what Taylor calls "the green pipe method," in which people walk down the channel with loppers and saws, pruning back vegetation by hand. Taylor hopes that the remaining vegetation will help to stabilize the banks and provide a long corridor of vegetation for wildlife to migrate up and down the creek.

What's good for wildlife is not necessarily good for flood control, and vice versa. Amazon Creek is a constructed stormwater channel, but the city of Eugene — unlike most municipalities — is attempting to restore its additional value as a natural feature. The city's three primary goals for maintaining the creek are flood control, water quality, and natural resource value. "Right off the bat, you can see that there's a bit of a conflict between those," says Taylor.

"People have streams and they have

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A capricious creek runs through this town. In the summer it moves timidly, shrinking beneath blooms of algae that spread across its surface. In the winter it's bolder, surging against concrete walls that keep it from flooding the streets of Eugene.

Still, it's easy to think of Amazon Creek as a ditch. A far cry from the historic stream that wove curly braids of water across the land, today's creek is symmetrical and confined. More than 21 square miles of the city drain into it. As it flows northwest across the Willamette Valley, it carries insects, sediment, fish, oil, ducks, tires and pesticides with it.

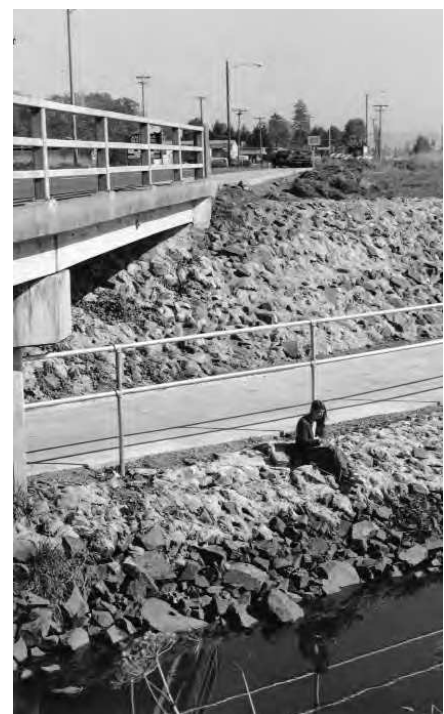
The city of Eugene treats Amazon Creek like a paradox. From an engineering perspective, the waterway is for flood control. From a natural resources perspective, it has habitat and aesthetic value. Whether it's seen as a dirty ditch or as a beneficial local stream, Amazon Creek's evolving form signals changes of season and social values in the Willamette Valley.

Andy Gilmore took his first critical look at Amazon Creek on the first Earth Day in 1970 when he was a senior at Churchill High School. Back then, the creek was more overgrown, and roads like City View dead-ended rather than bridging over the creek to West 11th. Gilmore remembers that businesses dumped their waste on one side of the creek and households dumped their waste on the other.

"You'd find sofas, and washing machines, and just about everything," says Gilmore. "There were certain sections where, against a willow tree, you might find 10 tires. It was just unbelievable, the stuff."

Although he was born and raised in Eugene, Gilmore doesn't recall exploring the creek with his friends as a child. "I didn't really come down here and play that often," he said. "It was so dirty that we would dare each other to go into it."

A lot has changed since the 1970s, both for Gilmore and for the creek. Gilmore, now fifty-two years old, is willing to spend more time by the waterway. And the creek, though still polluted, is cleaner now than it was 30 years ago.



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