



UP THE CREEK
September 1, 2012



Meter Mysteries

This summer has produced a few explosions of incredulity from people who have just opened their USCDWUA water bill. At ground zero is the water meter, which is instantly vaporized. Shrapnel strikes the meter reader, and the shock wave flattens the hairdo of the lady who enters the reading into the computer. The computer itself suffers smoke damage – not fatal, more's the pity.

We really don't blame you. If you get a bill the size of a small town budget, you probably would want to confirm that it's not an imaginary number. Imaginary numbers were first conceived by the Greek engineer Hero of Alexandria, who may or may not have worked for the water department. Herewith is a guide to help muffle some of these explosions, and maybe save a lady's coiffure, the hide of a meter reader, and prevent the meltdown of any more expensive meter brass.

1. The meter can be inaccurate. In fact, it always is. Brand new, a meter is good to measure within 2% of the actual water flow. With use, they become slower and slower. Ancient meters can let many gallons flow through without taking any notice at all. *But none speed up.* The point of this paragraph is, count yourself lucky the meter actually gives you a break.
2. The meter reader can goof. While experienced readers develop considerable skill at generating plausible readings while sitting in the shade of a cottonwood, beginners usually have to actually read the meters, which works for about the first 100 or so, then problems set in, such as dyslexic number placement and tired fingers. Tired fingers means that instead of a number, something like a doctor's signature is written (see Paragraph 3). Seriously, misreads are often caught quickly and corrected before the bill is processed. In any case, our first action to settle a disputed bill is to go re-read the meter to determine if the recorded reading made any sense.
3. The person who enters handwritten readings into the computer can goof. That is pretty rare, as this person is almost always the one who catches mistakes by the meter reader, and sends him back out to verify. This person has superb skill at interpreting a meter reader's handwriting. An entry like a doctor's signature  – is interpreted as 223,650 gallons of water used in the month. It gradually becomes visible if you stare hard at it.
4. Your water system might have a leak. To check this, turn off all water inside and outside your home – don't forget swamp coolers and ice makers. Go watch your water meter. If it is moving, you have water escaping from your plumbing somewhere. If you have a sprinkler system, run your zones one at a time, watch the water meter and see if they are using the amount of water they should be. You might have a broken pipe in your sprinkler system.
5. Your yard might be an expensive color – green. Whoever decided green should be the color of money was probably watering Kentucky Bluegrass in August in western Colorado. There has not been a summer so hard on green (grass or paper) in some years. Trees, shrubs, flowers, and veggie gardens want water too, but nothing comes close to lush turf in water demand.
6. Too long between meter readings. Many people fear that a period of 32-34 days between meter readings unfairly penalizes them. Not so. Our billing software adjusts the water use down to what it would have been if the month was 30 ½ days long (our definition of the “average month”). This is *not* done for short months – your water use is never adjusted upward.

These facts don't put money in your bank account, it's true. But hopefully they will foster a little understanding, peace, and...quiet.