

Notes on Home: A Villain in a Hero

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On Main Street in Bishop, California, listen to the clatter of two lanes of traffic busy with horse trailers, RVs, biker gangs, and highway patrol racing after sports cars from the city. A clutch of teenagers saunters, Wrangler-ed and Stetson-ed, in town for the rodeo state finals. Tourists eat enchiladas and gaze through restaurant windows at the town going by.

One hundred years ago, the Inyo County Bank stood on this street, a two story building with white siding and rows of windows. Inside, antlers adorned the walls. A bare bulb hung from the ceiling. Wooden cabinets gleamed.

The bank belonged to brothers Mark and Wilfred Watterson, whose parents brought them to Bishop as boys from the San Joaquin Valley. By 1922 the brothers owned the only banks in Inyo County and had a reputation for leniency towards debtors. History books call them the “financial kings of the Eastern Sierra.”

On May 23rd, 1923, Mark and Wilfred Watterson lead a group of ranchers to an irrigation ditch in Big Pine. Los Angeles workers were busy filling the intake of the ditch, rerouting water away from irrigated fields and into the aqueduct. The Watterson band dumped city workers’ tools into the canal. “Los Angeles,” declared the headline of the *Big Pine Citizen* the following day: “It’s your move now.”

The Watterson brothers were the valley’s beloved, defenders of a pillaged place until the last. In portraits they are handsome, hair neatly parted. Wilfred took his neighbors on Sunday rides over dirt roads in the first automobile in the valley: a fifteen-horsepower White Steamer, a boat of a car with a hatch roof and tires that looked like they came off a wagon. It’s likely the brothers were among the men and women

who blasted a crucial junction of the aqueduct one midnight in May of 1927, and they were leaders in the four-day occupation of the Alabama Gates in 1924, turning water back into barren Owens Lake.

On August 4 of 1927, a crowd gathered outside the locked doors of the Inyo County Bank. It was a Thursday, maybe hot and bright, maybe cool and steamy after a thunderstorm. The Wattersons had pinned a notice on the bank's door.

“We find it necessary to close our banks in the Owens Valley. This result has been brought about by the past four years of destructive work carried on by the city of Los Angeles.”

Mark and Wilfred Watterson were arrested, not for their resistance to Los Angeles, but for embezzlement and fraud. By the early 1920s, many farmers who held out while Los Angeles pursued water rights in Owens Valley were forced by the slumping economy to mortgage their farms to the Wattersons' bank. In the summer of 1927, an audit revealed that Mark and Wilfred had made generous loans with money they did not have.

The brothers allegedly invested their neighbors' money in industries like mining and tourism, endeavors they believed could save the valley's economy. But the industries did not succeed soon enough for Mark and Wilfred to return the investments. The life savings of their oldest friends and neighbors disappeared.

The brothers were tried and convicted by local people in the Independence courthouse. I don't know what it felt like to sit in that court house, no doubt sticky with August heat. But I have read that the prosecutor cried, the judge and jury cried as they handed down the verdict. Mark and Wilfred went to prison for a decade. Soon after, the bank's windows were broken, and tattered curtains blew into the street.

Good slides into evil and back again. The more I learn about this place, the less I understand, and the more I want to learn still. The picture of home gets at once bigger and harder to see. I haven't come up with answers. I've only found stories that lead to more questions.