

TRAGEDY STALKS VALLEY OF BROKEN HEARTS, SAYS WRITER OF CALL STAFF

Here is the third of a series of dramatic fact stories of the tragedy that has overtaken the Owens River Valley in Inyo County, where almost the entire population is facing an enforced migration due to the loss of its irrigating water, without which the valley must again become a desert:

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The fate which has befallen the town of Big Pine may be taken as a warning of the impending tragedy which overhangs the entire Owens River Valley and may at any moment swoop down with devastating force.

Big Pine, taking its name from the creek that cascades from the great palisade glacier, 8000 feet above the town, sits upon a sparsely wooded bench of land at the base of the gigantic Sierra range fifteen miles south of Bishop.

To the north and east and south lie ranch lands, some 5000 or 6000 acres, all highly improved, extremely fertile, watered from the creek and a canal, and devoted to the production of alfalfa, fine stock, orchards, grain and small garden and vegetable truck.

VALLEY IS OASIS

The town has only two or three hundred people in it, but the surrounding farming population helps to form a self-supporting community of perhaps a thousand people.

It is a beautiful town and a beautiful country, overlooking the valley which sweeps for endless miles to the north and to the south, faced on the east by the White Mountains, and to the west the granite crags of the Palisades, glacier-bound and close to 13,000 feet high.

Until a few months ago the people of Big Pine seemed as securely placed as the great mountain range at their backs, with a future before them as cloudless as an Inyo sky on a summer's day. The conflict for water which had already swept away portions of two other towns, Lone Pine at the extreme southern end of the valley, and Independence, the county seat, some thirty miles to the south, had been to them only the rumble of distant thunder.

BASK IN "SAFETY"

They felt so immune, so safe and so prosperous that they had no hesitation to lay out some heavy investments in private and public improvements. A legion hall was built by subscription, and a new school, large enough to serve for all the grades and as a high school, was constructed at a cost of \$100,000. For this building a bond issue was voted.

Then came the sale of the lands under the McNally ditch to the north of them. Under the pressure of its need for more water, and the goading of the farmers in the San Fernando Valley, whose irrigation water had been shut off, the city of Los Angeles laid out \$1,500,000 in the purchase of the McNally ditch farms. There were between 8000 and 9000 acres of land under this ditch, every acre entitled to an inch of water from the Owens River, and the city purchased 80 percent of this land.

WATER IS DIVERTED

The headgate of the McNally ditch was closed and the water which would have gone on these ranches came down the river – and into the Big Pine ditch.

Not a drop of it passed the headgate of the Big Pine canal. Not a drop of it reached the aqueduct of the city of Los Angeles. The investment of \$1,500,000 had been a futile gesture, so far as it went toward relieving the situation in the San Fernando Valley. There was a shortage in the Owens River and every farmer both above and below the McNally canal had rights to more water than he was getting. The elimination of the McNally intake merely meant that there would be more for the farmers on the Big Pine canal, and they accepted the boon which this windfall had brought them.

The shotgun episode already mentioned then took place. But cutting a new channel in the river, where it makes a horseshoe bend, the city engineers, led by George Shuey, hoped to get their McNally water past the Big Pine canal without losing it in the canal. The Big Pine farmers standing on their well tested water rights, but not having any too great faith in the speed of the courts resorted to the more primitive methods of adjusting such disputes. They drove off the city workers, and thus brought on the next chapter of the story.

COMPACT IS SIGNED

The city began negotiations to buy them out. The farmers, fearing treachery among their own, as they had seen such treachery take place in other districts of the valley, signed a compact to stand together. In December, with another dry year in prospect, the city carried this citadel of opposition and took over all the lands in the Big Pine district for the sum of \$1,100,000.

This spring not an acre of the 4500 acres under the Big Pine Canal is being planted. The orchards are not being irrigated. The headgate of a canal that has been doing duty for forty years or more is closed, and that belt of fine farms around the town of Big Pine is lying fallow. There will be no crops this year to gladden the hearts of the farmers, or the townsfolk. There will be this autumn, as there has generally been, no harvest festival in celebration of the bringing in of the bounty of the soil.

TOWN HARD HIT

Big Pine has received the full blow of the devastation program. Deprived of the support of the ranches, the town is left literally with no visible means of support. It has a debt up its properties of \$100,000 for the new school, which the people must pay, somehow. In the town are property values of probably near a quarter million dollars. There is a bank, a newspaper, a hotel, garages, a dozen stores – the usual equipment of a community of half a thousand people. What is to become of all this?

When the city of Los Angeles purchased the surrounding farms and the water rights that went with them it made no provision for the town of Big Pine, for which these farms and this water made the economic foundation. With one blow the city destroyed the foundation and thereby left hundreds of people – all of them innocent victims of a program in the making of which they were not consulted – stranded as on a desert isle.

VALUES ARE NIL

Today, unquestionably, one could buy up the entire town of Big Pine for less than half what its price would have been the day before the big land deal was consummated. More than \$100,000 of property values were wiped out, and the other \$100,000 will mostly evaporate as the summer makes plain what it is that has really happened. For these people this tragedy is as terrible and destructive to all they possess as though an earthquake, a fire or some other calamity had swept over the town. It is as terrible and far more cruel, for the catastrophe is handmade. It is a link in a chain of circumstances the forging of which began in the year 1905, when the first emissary of the city came to the valley and began, unannounced and unidentified, to make his filings along the river from Independence north.