

BIG PINE'S FATE HOVERS OVER TOWN OF BISHOP, CALL WRITER LEARN'S

Here is the fourth 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:

By C. E. Kunze
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The fate which has befallen the people of Big Pine now hovers over the town of Bishop, fifteen miles to the north.

Bishop, though not the county seat, is the metropolis of the Owens River Valley. It is the hub of Inyo, the trading center for a region as large as some European kingdoms. The southern half of Mono, to the north, and portions of Nevada, including such mining centers as Tonopah and Goldfield, find in Bishop their most convenient supply depot.

The town is incorporated and has a population of 1500, but its business houses are many of them of a type and size one expects to find only in cities three or four times its size. One hardware store, for instance, carries a stock of goods invoiced at \$100,000 – a stock which for quality and variety can hardly be duplicated by any store in San Francisco.

PROSPERITY EVIDENT

There are two hardware stores, several garages, two newspapers, two banks, whose combined assets are \$3,000,000, two drug stores, markets, clothing emporiums, a new moving picture theater – the usual business development of a very thriving and prosperous California community.

Legion hall, built of concrete, costing, it seems to me, \$40,000 or \$50,000, is nearing completion. There is a new grammar school that stands the district \$100,000, and a brand new high school which represents an investment of \$250,000. All together, the property values within the town of Bishop will probably aggregate \$2,000,000, and if by any act of man or upheaval of nature the town were wiped out, it would mean the ruination of all the people that live there.

IN FERTILE AREA

Unlike Big Pine, Bishop has about it a vast expanse of valley lands. It lies in the extreme northern end of the valley, which has here from east to west a spread of nearly thirty miles. On the north the farms make only a fringe of four or five miles, but to the south they follow the fertile river alluviums for ten or fifteen miles to line of the Big Pine district.

Toward the Sierras, southwest, west and northwest, there is a fan-like spread of valley, irregular in shape and depth, that is from six to twenty miles across. It is broken into a number of distinct depressions by fingerlike ridges which the mountains have run out toward the river, but every acre of these depressions and most of the higher lands are taken up by farms, and have been cultivated for the last fifty years.

Here, then, is the main theater of the Owens Valley water battle.

SMALL FARMS

Immediately adjacent to the town of Bishop lie 54,000 acres of irrigated lands. Every acre is held in private ownership by farmers in lots of 40 to 320 acres. Larger ranches than 320 acres are rare, and in recent years the subdivision impulse has been at work and sliced up the holdings into some 5 and 10 acre tracts, given to fruit raising and gardening. For the irrigation of these lands the valley farmers since the decades of the seventies and eighties have appropriated and used about all the water which the Owens River and its principal tributaries bring down from the mountains during the growing season. The diversions from the river were made by a series of ditches or canals, dug by the farmers mostly during the winter seasons with horses and scrapers and picks and shovels. The Owens River Canal, the Bishop Creek Canal, the McNally Canal, the Rawson Ditch, the Farmers' Ditch, the Collins Ditch, the Sanger Ditch and the Big Pine Ditch are some of the names given to these local enterprises.

CO-OPERATIVE PROJECTS

All the larger canals were financed on a co-operative basis, ditch companies were formed and incorporated, the property interests were divided into shares and the shares distributed on a pro rata basis among the farmers.

A miner's inch of water is deemed necessary in the valley for the irrigation of one acre of land.

The normal flow of the Owens River where it breaks through its gorge to the upper end of the Owens Valley, about twelve miles northwest of the town of Bishop, is 30,000 miner's inches.

HAD PRIOR RIGHT

The significance of this fact becomes apparent at once. Even before the city of Los Angeles came into the field seeking for a share of the water every inch in the river during the irrigating season had been appropriated by the farmers in the Bishop district and was being used beneficially. Not only that, but twice the amount of land was already under cultivation as the river would normally water, with the result that the farmers were curtailing the use of the water wherever they could and sharing it with each other.

Los Angeles, however, did not come to Bishop for water when it first came to the valley in 1905. The mouth of the Owens River is sixty-five miles south of Bishop. Between Bishop and Independence, fifty miles south, a number of small creeks flow from the Sierras into the Owens River. Also, in an irrigating district the size of that about Bishop there is considerable seepage water and overflow from the irrigating canals that finds its way back into the river. Also, for seven months of each year the valley farmers were not using any water, and all this created a water surplus, season in character, but considerable in quantity, of which the city took possession.

BISHOP SHOWS FIGHT

A less alert and informed people might have paid little attention to this circumstance. At independence, in fact, where most of the county officials lived and where farming was carried on, there was little, if any protest. The farmers there sold out to the city, and were glad to, while some of the more prominent business and professional men went quietly, and for the most part secretly, into the employ of Los Angeles. At Bishop, however, a different spirit was shown. There, almost over night, the people organized themselves into a militant fighting force.

INTERNECINE STRIFE

Since then this fight has never ceased and the town of Bishop has always been its storm center. There has been the gathering place of the indignant farmers whenever some new move on the part of the invader has called for additional defense measures. The town of Bishop has furnished not only some of the funds spent in this warfare but most of the leadership – a leadership which in time has become divided, so that today some of the very ablest men in the valley are directing the strategy of the Los Angeles cause. There is, in fact, no question but that the most damaging blows which have been struck in the last two years against the valley as a whole have been directed by local talent – by valley residents who for profit or other motives have taken up the invader’s cause.

BATTLE TIDE EBBS

This cause has never been stronger and the valley’s side never so demoralized as it is today. Bishop is like a town besieged. Almost half the water which belongs to adjacent ranches has come in the last few months into the possession of Los Angeles and the town is benumbed by the shadow that has suddenly fallen across its way. Hardly a home has escaped the chill that is in the air. It is the chill of death which has moved in with the feeling of despair. One senses this even in the street during the busiest part of a busy day where the men gather in little groups to discuss the latest news or merely the rumors which outrun every new event.