

A MESSAGE FROM OWENS VALLEY – THE VALLEY OF BROKEN HEARTS

By Owens Valley Property Owners Protective Association
1927

To the Legislature and the People of California:

We, the farming communities of Owens Valley, being about to die, salute you!

We are determined that this death shall not have been in vain!

May our destruction be a heeded warning to other foothill and mountain valley communities!

May our unfortunate water history be a pillar of fire by night and a cloud of smoke by day as guide to others who must travel the same dangerous road on which our own communities have been wrecked!

In Sacramento Tuesday night will be held the first general legislative hearing in years on California's biggest, most vital problem, its problem of life and death, of breath and vital fluids – the water problem.

In reality, this should be the most important legislative meeting of years, and this message hopes to bring it to pass that the meeting shall be so conceived, so dedicated, and so carried out.

The fight for the water hole – it is the old, the universal, the inevitable fight of the great Southwest.

Water, water, water! All wise men agree that its proper impounding and storage at headwaters, the squeezing out of every kilowatt of electric power, its storage nearer sea level and its full use to the last drop in irrigation – all these on at least a statewide and preferably a coast wide program and control – spell the entire story of California's future.

Keep that in mind Tuesday night and act accordingly. That is the message we send from the graveyard into which Owens Valley is being turned by a narrower view of the water question.

Make this meeting of Tuesday night not merely a review of some one small water dispute, such as riparian rights, but the initial meeting of a campaign to settle the water problem as a whole and to settle it justly.

Because this has never yet been done, we of Owens Valley see our homes being laid waste.

To save other homes, we raise the warning cry that this should now be done.

Owens Valley is the only instance in which the fight for the water hole is being waged to a finish by modern methods of warfare.

This war of might, not right, was waged by a special selfish interest, but a special interest as big and, one would think, as likely to be just, as any special interest could be – mainly, the proud metropolis of Los Angeles.

As a result of her blind ruthlessness, what once was a garden like unto the storied Eden itself is being turned back into a desert waste.

The desolating sagebrush is again spreading over acres painfully reclaimed from it, at the cost of privation unknown today, by the hardy pioneer, and defended by him and his family against the marauding Indian. The ghostly barking of the coyote is to replace the voices of children at play.

Neighbor has been turned against neighbor, wife against husband, father against children and sons against each other, and lovers have been parted and romance made a mockery, by the espionage, the intrigue, the propaganda and the connivance of the destructive city.

American homes at America's best, homes of the firmest corner cornerstones and the most exalted household gods, reared by the most devoted and exacting toil, are being burned, and the orchards surrounding them uprooted by tractors, at the behest of this Atilla of cities to conceal from the condemning eye of man the evidences of its ghastly and ghoulish crime.

Where the torch of civilization was once bravely lighted it is being blown out again. Where all evidences of civilization flourished soon only ruins will remain. What will the archaeologist say of them?

See this couple, upon whom life's weathers for sixty years have left their impress, who as children helped their parents dig the ditches irrigating this valley and plant and cultivate the seeds that made it flower and fruit, turn away for the last time from the home representing their life achievement. All the happy memories known to man are locked therein. Now the weeds have conquered lawn and garden and soon will almost conceal the house.

Wait a minute while they stop at the cemetery where their first born child is buried beside their own parents, with two grandchildren in the lot adjoining – and look for the last time upon the memorial stones which the drifting sands may be expected soon to cover.

Nudge them impatiently to hurry on, if they tend to loiter by the schoolhouse where they played or at the lane where they courted. They are only our neighbor and his wife of Owens Valley, going out at 60 to make a fresh start in a world they do not know and which will probably devour them.

And then in the end remember that the worst tragedy in the wreck of Owens Valley is one the eyes cannot see. Not the destruction of property, not the failure of businesses whose patrons are gone but which the city has refused to recompense – not any of these is the ultimate and the most pitiable result of the city's policy.

The tragedy of tragedies is the demoralization, the eating away, of human character. In Owens Valley as it used to be, all men were friends and no door was ever locked. Today no man dare look his neighbor in the face lest he detect a traitor or a spy, poisoned by the city's policy of individual purchases.

Is it any wonder that the bitterness in men's hearts has destroyed their faith – in Owens Valley? Trust in mankind is gone – that is the culminating loss.

And all this because Los Angeles wanted the water nature had given to Owens Valley, and refused to pay fairly for it, and would not build a promised reservoir which up to date would amply have met the needs of both. All this because an agency which, if any, ought to be generous and broadminded, has proven through petty and narrow, utterly without a heart and scruples.

Let all isolated communities take warning from the fate of Owens Valley.

Let them all join in demanding a broad gauge water program, and in demanding that we start to get it Tuesday night.

What California's welfare, her very life, requires is the settlement, not of some single narrow dispute such as riparian rights – but of the problem as a whole – the creation of a general water program of justice to the individual and community.

What the State's good demands is not adaptation of the law to some special selfish interest, such as a city or a power company, but justice to all and protective care for the least.

We of Owens Valley have faith that nothing is over settled until it is settled right.

We believe the water problem of this State will never be settled until the wrongs of Owens Valley have been righted.

Therefore we shall continue to carry our message to State and Nation, accepting in the last analysis no verdict short of that delivered at the bar of public opinion of the United States, to whose legislative assemblies the city of Los Angeles has gone for further favor.

OWENS VALLEY PROPERTY OWNERS PROTECTIVE ASSOCIATION

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