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SOME EARLY HISTORY OF OWENS RIVER VALLEY

BY J. M. GUINN

Since its connection to Los Angeles by the Aqueduct, Owens River Valley has become almost an appendage of our city. Of the thousands of people who use the water brought two hundred miles through the Owens River Aqueduct very few know anything of the early history of the river, the valley or the lake. Who discovered the valley? who named the lake and the river? and for whom were they named? are questions that would puzzle many of our local historians and confound the mass of its water users.

Fremont, the Pathfinder, named the lake, and the river takes its name from the lake. He named it for Richard Owens, one of his most trusted guides and Indian fighters. Fremont's exploring expeditions were not complete without Alexis Godey, Kit Carson and Dick Owens.

In August, 1845, Fremont's third exploring expedition arrived at Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River. Godey was with him, but the other two were not. Fremont sent a message to Carson, who, with his friends, Owens, had established a stock rancho on the Cimarron river. Carson sold out his range and cattle at a sacrifice and, with Owens, joined the expedition. Fremont says: "I received them with great satisfaction."

Owens was the senior captain of Fremont's battalion when it marched down the coast from Monterey in 1846, to capture Los Angeles. When Fremont was made governor of California by Stockton, Captain Richard Owens was given command of the battalion and was mustered out with it at San Gabriel April 19th, 1847.

When the Aqueduct scheme was first agitated a noted writer of California history—city librarian at that time—was asked to give some information in regard to the man for whom the river was named. He replied: "The resources of the city library have been exhausted, but nothing has been found to give the desired information." The Aqueduct has made the name of Owens as familiar as that of Fremont.

On the 27th of October, 1845, Fremont's exploring expedition had reached Walker's lake. Here it was divided into two bodies. Fremont, with fifteen men, started for Sutter's Fort to purchase supplies. The main body of the explorers, numbering about fifty men, under command of Theodore Talbot, after remaining at the lake to recruit their horses, under the guidance of Walker, resumed their march southward. Travelling along the eastern base of the mountains, on the 18th of December they came to the head-

waters of a river and, following it down, they found that it emptied into a lake. Fremont, after the two divisions came together, reviewing the discoveries made, says: "To one of the lakes I gave Owens' name." He gave the names of several of his band to rivers, creeks and lakes that the expedition discovered, but only Owens and Kern remain. Kern river was known to the Spaniards as the Rio Bravo.

Owens River Valley remained a terra incognita for nearly two decades after Fremont's explorers passed through it. The Indians who lived on the headwaters of the tributaries of the San Joaquin river and ranged over the desert to the settlements of Southern California were inveterate horse-thieves. After the secularization of the missions many of the neophytes became renegades and joined the mountain Indians. These renegades knew the country well and were expert vaqueros. They led raids upon the rancheros' bands of horses and ran them off to their mountain strongholds, not for riding, but to kill them for eating.

Fremont, on his journey to Sutter's Fort, ran into one of their strongholds, where the ground for acres was whitened with the bones of the horses they had slaughtered. His party was attacked by them. Owens, with his long rifle, brought down their chief. The Indians stole horses in preference to cattle, because cattle could not be driven fast enough to escape pursuit.

The United States government in 1854 established Fort Tejon at the head of the San Joaquin valley in the Tehachapi range to check the raids of these Indian horse-thieves. The Sebastian Indian reservation had been established in a valley near the fort in 1853. It was part of the duty of the soldiers to keep the Indians on the reservation, but they would stray away and go back to their old tricks. The depredations of these Indians caused great loss to the rancheros. The Santa Barbara Gazette estimates the loss of stock to the farmers of the southern counties from 1850 to 1854 at \$600,000.

Owens River Valley was supposed to be one of the retreats of the Horse Thief Indians, the name by which these mountain and desert Indians were generally designated. In July, 1859, a military expedition was organized at Fort Tejon to explore the valley, investigate the character of the Indians who inhabited it and recover stolen stock if any was found in the possession of the Indians. A correspondent signing himself "Quis" accompanied the expedition. His letter was published in the Los Angeles Star of August 27, 1859. It is, so far as I know, the only description extant of the valley and the Indians who inhabited it before the white men took possession of the land and killed off the Indians. The editor of the Star throws out these headlines: "Military Expedition to Owens Lake"; "No Stock in the Valley"; "Indians Peaceable and Reliable"; "Discovery of a New Route to Salt Lake." I copy the portion of the letter

descriptive of the route to the lake and what the correspondent tells of the valley and the Indians inhabiting it:

Tejon, August, 1859.

"Sir: I had the pleasure of accompanying the expedition dispatched from Fort Tejon by the commandant, Lt. Col. Beall, consisting of Company B and a detachment of Company K, First Dragoons, in command of Captain Davidson, assisted by Lieutenant Chapman, to visit the country and Indians in the vicinity of Owens lake and river. The officers and soldiers of the expedition were supplied with thirty days' rations and commenced their march on the 21st of July, with instructions to proceed to the country in the vicinity of Owens lake and recover certain parcels of stock that had been stolen from the vicinity of Los Angeles from time to time, if found in possession of the Indians of that valley; meting out proper punishment for their offenses; making a map of the route and country, with notes of the reconnoissance. One wagon and a howitzer were the only incumbrances, in addition to the pack train, to retard their movements.

"The route selected was through Walker's basin and the Kern river mines; up the south fork of Kern river, through Walker's pass; thence along the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevadas to Owens lake. The distance from Fort Tejon to the desert by way of Walker's pass is about one hundred and seventeen miles, with good camps at convenient distances, and, with the exception of ascent in Walker's basin, the road is quite good for wagons. Along the edge of the desert to the lake, with the exception of the first thirty miles, water and grass exist at convenient distances.

"Arriving at the foot of the lake, we found a fine meadow of eight hundred or one thousand acres, well supplied with fine water. This constitutes the only desirable spot on the confines of the lake, as there are not five acres of grass at any one other spot on its borders.

"This lake is emphatically a "saline lake," as its waters contain salts to near the point of saturation, producing a density sufficient to support the human body on its surface. From a casual examination, I am of the opinion that those salts consist principally of the bi-borate of soda (borax) and the chloride of sodium (common salt). Upon the surface of this lake swam myriads of small flies, of a species with which I am not familiar, where they deposit their eggs, the larvae of which constitutes an important part of the food of the Indians of that region. The constant winds from the desert drive the larvae in large quantities upon the shore of the lake, where they are easily collected by the squaws. Besides Owens (or as the Indians call it Wakopee) river there are some four small brooks emptying their waters into the lake.

"For some distance along the river, after leaving the lake, but

little desirable land is found, except that supplied with water by little rivulets flowing from the mountains. Twenty-seven miles from the head of the lake is Pine creek, with a large body of meadow land and the first timber we encountered growing in the valley, save a few small cottonwoods. Beautiful streams of clear, cold water come gushing fresh from the snows of the Sierras at intervals of one to ten miles, irrigating beautiful and fertile portions of the valley for the following sixty-two miles from Pine creek, principal among which are Clark's and Dragon forks, either of which supply nearly as much water at this season of the year as does the Kern river.

"Large tracts of land are here irrigated by the natives to secure the growth of grass seeds and grass nuts—a small tuberous root of fine taste and nutritious qualities which grows here in great abundance. Their ditches for irrigation are in some cases carried for miles, displaying as much accuracy and judgment as if laid out by an engineer, and distributing the water with great regularity over their grounds, and this too without the aid of a single agricultural implement. They are totally ignorant of agriculture and depend entirely on the natural resources of the country for food and clothing.

"One of the greatest aqueous curiosities of the trip was a single spring, to which was given the name of 'Mammoth,' from which runs a stream of water, with a fair current, fifteen or twenty feet wide and about two and a half feet deep.

"Although from some distance below the lake we encountered the temporary abodes of the Indians, yet in no instance were the troops enabled to get sight of a single one, they having fled before our approach (as we afterwards learned), having been told that they would be killed, until we reached Pine creek, when the interpreter found a poor woman attempting to escape with her crippled child. She having been assured that the people would not be injured soon became the means of reassuring the Indians, after which there was but little difficulty in communicating with them.

"To our surprise we saw but very few horses among them, and that too on the upper portion of Owens river, and these evidently were obtained from the Walker river Indians. They informed Captain Davidson that some four or five Indians, in years past, were in the habit of stealing horses for the purpose of eating them, but esteeming it wrong they some five years since punished some of the party with death and the rest had died from natural causes; since when none had been stolen by their people. They told us where we could find the bones of the animals thus destroyed, and most certainly the appearance corroborated their statement, for there were no bones of more recent date than four or five years.

"The Wakopee or Owens river Indians appear to be both morally

and physically superior to any of their race in California, for in point of probity and honesty I certainly have never met their equal, and as to their physical condition, I saw none sick or infirm, save the child already alluded to—although they will number twelve hundred or fifteen hundred souls.

“To illustrate their ideas of truthfulness: An Indian boy who was anxious to return with Captain Davidson, after descending the river fifty or sixty miles, met his elder brother and, being somewhat unwell and perhaps a little homesick, asked his brother’s advice in regard to turning back. ‘Have you promised to go?’ said he. ‘Yes.’ ‘Well, then, do not ask me; if you have promised to go, you shall go.’

“Whilst talking to their head men, who had assembled for that purpose, Captain Davidson informed them that so long as they were peaceful and honest the government would protect them in the enjoyment of their rights. Their reply was that such had always been their conduct and should ever be—that they had depended on their own unaided resources—that they had at all times treated the whites in a friendly manner, and intended to do so in the future. He further informed them that should they become dishonest and resort to murder and robbery, they would be punished with the sword. The old captain or head man turned with a smile to the interpreter and said: ‘Tell him that we fear it not, that what I have said I have said. I have lain my heart at his feet; let him look at it.’

“Unsophisticated and uncontaminated by free intercourse with whites or vicious Indians, a lack of chastity is said to be a thing almost unheard of among them. The limited opportunities for observation favored the opinion that such was the case. In conversation with L. Anderson, the companion of the old guide and traveller, Captain Walker, this opinion is fully confirmed.”

The correspondent draws an attractive picture of the valley before the hand of civilized man had changed it. The natives, from his account, were certainly good Indians. In less than three years from the time the expedition visited this Arcadian vale of primitive contentment and peace, it had been changed to the theater of savage warfare and massacre. Gold and silver mines had been discovered on the eastern slope of the Sierra Madre mountains in the Esmaralda, Mono Lake and Owens Valley districts, and a miners’ rush was on. Settlers had taken possession of the Indians’ land and the red men, who a few years before had punished their own people with death for stealing horses from the white men, were themselves killed for resisting the theft of their lands by the white men.

The Owens valley Indians proved to be good fighters. The Los Angeles Star of April 26, 1862, under the head of “Indian Depredations—Battle With the Indians—Nine Lives Lost” gives this among other items of the Indian war in the valley: “A party of citizens, sixty

in number, had a fight with the Indians of Owens River Valley on the 5th inst., in which they were defeated with the loss of three men killed, viz: Mr. Pleasants, Mr. Morrison and Mr. Scott, the last named the sheriff of Mono county. The citizens made good their retreat under cover of night, going down the valley, and joined Lt. Col. Evans' command the following day.

"On the 9th instant Lt. Col. Evans' command, with fifty dragoons from Fort Churchill and some thirty citizens, attacked the Indians, who were posted on a very steep hill, and were repulsed with the loss of Colonel Mayfield, who commanded the company of citizens; Sergeant McKenzie, and a private, name unknown. * * *

"Previous to the first fight the bodies of two men were found on the road near the scene of the fight murdered, and four men who, on the road coming south, were attacked and barely escaped with their lives to Aurora, two of the party being badly wounded."

The editor of the Star presages further disaster to the white people of the valley. In his presentment of evil to come he gives us a glimpse of the wonderful changes that had taken place in the valley and the surrounding country in three years, all brought about by one of those cyclones of human energy, an old-time miners' "gold rush."

"The whole of Owens valley, with the different mining camps in that vicinity, together with the improvements of the settlers of the Owens valley and the valuable machinery in the mines, is entirely exposed to the attacks of the Indians. Within sixty or eighty miles of Owens lake there is an immigration of about fifty large wagons going to Aurora, Mono county, loaded with valuable goods and machinery, which can reach their destination by no other route than through Owens valley; besides, there are on the road a great many thousand head of cattle, sheep and hogs for the same destination."

A military camp was established in the valley and United States troops stationed there until Indian depredations ceased. The Indian war in Owens valley ended as all wars between savage and civilized man end—in the subjugation and extermination of the savage. It is simply the enforcement of one of Nature's inexorable laws: "The survival of the fittest."

One of the most violent earthquakes known in the history of California had its center of action near Owens lake. It occurred at 2 o'clock on the morning of March 26, 1872. It shook up all of Southern California and hustled thousands of its inhabitants in undress uniform into the streets on a frosty morning. In proportion to the population of Owens valley at that time the loss of life was as great as in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. The greatest loss of life was at the town of Lone Pine. Nearly all the buildings were of cobblestone and adobe. Every one of these was dashed into

a heap of ruins at the first shock of the earthquake. More than sixty persons were killed or wounded. Several were killed at other towns and settlements in the valley.

The earthquake performed some queer freaks. At a point about seven miles north of Lone Pine the bed of the river sank, forming a lake of several hundred acres. At another point the land sank on the west side of the river. The river left its old channel and formed a new one two miles east of its former one. The queerest freak the temblor performed was the moving of a division line between two ranches. The boundary was marked by a straight line of trees that crossed the main road in an unbroken line. The earthquake moved the line of trees on the west side of the road 16 feet further north, giving one of the ranchers that much of his neighbor's land. The trees continued to grow as if earthquakes agreed with them. Whether the man whose land was conveyed to his neighbor by a deed of the temblor sued to recover I do not know.

Had he done so he might have fared as the plaintiff did in the famous land suit that Mark Twain tells of in "Roughing It," the case of Hyde against Morgan. Mark lays the scene of the story in Nevada, but the story was originated in California years before Mark came west.

A man owned a ranch on the side of a mountain; another agriculturist owned one in the valley below. A cloudburst came along and slid the mountain ranch down on the valley farm and with it came the mountain farmer, still holding possession of his land. The valley agriculturist sued to recover possession of his holdings. The judge was ignorant of law, but had a large bump of reverence. He gave his decision in favor of the mountain man. The valley land owner loudly protested against the injustice. The judge, assuming all the dignity he could command, said: "That land was sent down the mountain by a decree of the Almighty, and this court, if she knows herself, and she thinks she does, is not going to buck against the decrees of the Almighty."