

THE VALLEY OF BROKEN HEARTS

by John Glanville Dixon

By the turn of the century Owens Valley seemed to be headed for a great future. Her orchards and vineyards were winning blue ribbons at State and County fairs, while fields of potatoes and sugar beets were producing record crops, and lush fields of alfalfa and grassy bottom lands favored sheep and cattle grazing. Her "Alfalfa Palaces", built with baled hay, were becoming noted for attractive exhibits of fruits, vegetables, honey, etc. I remember one display in which a farmer surrounded his exhibit area with fence the posts of which (two feet high above the ground) were long, stout sugar beets. On this fence he had placed the sign, "Can you beet this?"

Yes, Owens Valley most certainly would have become a hard place to beat with agricultural production, as well as being a most delightful place in which to live, if only she had been allowed a normal chance to develop.

But problems were developing. For one thing, spring freshets of water would come down from the mountains faster than needed, and not being able to store and control them, the ranchers would flush-irrigate alfalfa fields and grass lands, in an effort to conserve it underground, this being mistaken for "wasting" water. Meanwhile, the Dixon brothers were very busy noting and surveying storage possibilities in the glacier-carved lakes and valleys above and, with others, were trying to secure Federal Aid from the Reclamation Service, and applying for some sites.

Because it would be costly for a rural community to finance a dam, alone, Congress had previously passed the Reclamation Act, to aid new rural areas develop agriculture and related industries to feed cities of the future, and help the general economy, by giving these new growing regions the right to repay on a long-term basis, out of the newly created profits. My father and uncle were very anxious to obtain this help for the Valley. My father was sent to several irrigation and reclamation meets in the west, and twice to Washington, D.C. to advance this cause.

They surveyed and planned for a reservoir, a site in a small recess-like valley in the volcanic plateau Northeast of Bishop, because hydro-electric plants were being installed on Bishop Creek above this site, which needed a steady flow of water all year, while the farmers needed it to be held back in winter, for summer time use only. This site, known as Fish Springs, seemed ideal, for it could store water after passing through the power plants in winter, to be used on the lower lands in summer, summer power plant flow being then used on the upper lands, thus bringing a greater summer flow to the whole valley. This seemed a good solution to the conflict between power and agriculture. The plan, advanced by the Dixon Brothers, seemed to be regarded favorably by the Reclamation Service, and the Valley was looking forward with great expectations of a very productive and happy future.

After a very long period of silence and waiting to hear from the Reclamation Service, I began to note a sad and worried face on my father. He said nothing, but we knew something must be wrong. Finally we learned that the Reclamation plans had been abandoned and the whole water system had been turned over to Los Angeles. All of our hopes were dashed.

Meanwhile Los Angeles City representatives had secretly gone to this Federal Agency saying that the City needed this water for future growth. Of course, the plea of "securing the greater good for the greater number" and nearly all branches of the Federal Government flocked to the City's aid leaving the valley out in the cold.

Frederick Eaton, an ex-mayor of Los Angeles, had secured a ranch-home near Big Pine, and "water rights" in Long Valley, the best reservoir site on the Owens River, and was apparently holding it for "grazing", for it was many years before the dam for Crowley Lake was finally built there.

Also, meanwhile, several events occurred, with unexpected results. For one thing a neighbor of ours, Jim Butler, started out from his ranch in Big Pine, in 1900, crossed over the Inyo Range and desert areas into Nevada in search of mineral wealth, and found it by picking up a stone to throw at his ornery, straying mule. Then he noticed it was a rich piece of ore, the start of Mizpah Silver Mine. This discovery began the Tonapah-Goldfield silver-gold rush, which turned out to be one of the most important finds in the mining history of the West.



The author at age 20.

Soon much more power was needed there to operate the mills (imported fuels being found expensive and inefficient). Then, in 1904, a Denver firm sent two engineers into the field to locate, or buy, mining property, but by then, not finding just what they wished, and noting the power need, they turned westward into Owens Valley "in search of gold", and found it on Bishop Creek, in the form of "Liquid gold" for hydro-electric power.

Acting swiftly, a company was formed and plans were drawn up for five plants in series in lower Bishop Creek Canyon. A road was being driven up the canyon side. Work was started on a dam on Lake Sabrina, for storage. Pipe was being laid for the lowest and largest unit, Plant 4. Twenty-horse teams appeared, hauling armatures and other heavy equipment to the site; and a power line was being hastily extended to the Nevada mines.

All of this hurry and bustle seemed, for a while, to be giving the Valley a new lease on life, hope that there would, at last, be some chance for a successful future, but it turned out to be just another build-up to another let-down. In fact there were about three "flies" in the disapp "ointment".

1. The news that a power company was building reservoirs to obtain power for rich mines gave men in the Reclamation Service the idea that this would also conserve water for the Valley's use, thus putting a damper on any hope of receiving help from that Department.

2. As seen before, the fact that power companies store water to equalize the flow for electricity, needed just as much or more in winter as in summer, while agriculture calls for holding back winter water in order to have more during summer. These two main water usages are therefore in conflict, when stored simply for hydro-electric energy.

3. But equalizing stream flow to these power plants, also equalized the flow of these creeks into Owens River, thus greatly aiding the City, as it injured the valley.

It was as a solution to this conflict that the Dixons had offered the good Fish Springs Reservoir Plan, but alas, it was blocked. This Reservoir Site was then designated as an Indian Reservation, so was withdrawn from the entry. Of course this didn't please either the Indians or the Valley ranchers, who wished to have these Indians closer, in order to hire them for ranch work. To this end my father had donated acreage on the Northwest corner of his property for an Indian Mission Chapel, headed at the

time, I believe, by Rev. Price, a Presbyterian, and an acreage closer to the road for a Parsonage, while other ranchers gave land for Indians to live on, near by.

This was still back in the "horse and buggy days", the roads being rough and sandy and cars still scarce and unreliable. One day a neighbor did drive in with a new car of early vintage. Showing it to our Indian irrigator, we asked if he intended to get one. "No!" he said emphatically, "Cars no have-um colts!" That settled it. He was not interested. Several months later, Tishanah came riding to work on the same mare, a cute little long-legged colt near by. Calling father over he said, "You see, me now have-um new model and me no had to buy um!" Tishanah's English was not perfect, but he had a way of getting his ideas across very effectively. We knew we were going to miss him, a true friend, for we were going to have to leave him.

Neighbors had arranged to get father appointed as Registrar at the U.S. Land Office at Independence, to try to find out just what was going on, and if anything could be done about it. He felt he should accept, but he had become very interested in his bees, their industry and thrift, the marvels of those insect communities, and their services to man, and would hate to leave that business. Nor did he wish to leave the orchards and the clover and alfalfa fields he had started. Although he could not see how he could give practical aid against such odds, he agreed to go, and spent practically the rest of his life in service for the Valley's cause.

Leaving Tishanah and his beloved ranch to a renter about 1906 he and the family prepared to move south.

The journey to Independence was both slow and sad. The 45 miles that can now be made by car in a short hour, then took a long day, by team, on the sandy, dusty road. There was some danger, for the horses in those days were deathly afraid of those new-fangled things that roared around with nothing to pull them, like metal apparitions. They were especially frightening to horses, when a motorist in order to avoid being stuck in the sand, would insist on staying in the deep tracks, while still moving forward and honking his horn for you to get off the road, which the team often did by running away. When this happened to us father shook his fist at the car vanishing in the dust and exclaimed, "That's no way to build a car! The wheels should be wide and the power should be applied to all four, then a car would move out of sand ruts easier than a team can!" What he had in mind back in 1906, was the jeep or dune-buggy. Though we drew up two models on which we might have had design patents, he was too busy, and I too young, to develop the ideas. He had earlier received patents on a fish screen.

As we drove toward Independence we noted, across the Valley to the East, Los Angeles City equipment digging the new aqueduct. It was being constructed for 900-second-feet capacity, from the intake on Owens River to above and around Owens Lake, and on south to Haiwee Reservoir, in order to store and regulate the water beyond and below the Valley. From there on, an aqueduct of half that capacity (450 second feet) was to be constructed to Los Angeles. Not quite to Los Angeles, just to the upper end of the San Fernando Valley, with Los Angeles City boundary being extended out over it, in order to sell the water there "for municipal use", that being the principal reason given for securing the water rights in the first place. For the first few decades, before the San Fernando Valley was subdivided into city lots, it was perfectly obvious that this water was being used largely for agriculture, on the orchards and truck gardens there. This situation led to nationwide joshing, as many "Los Angeles Boundary" signs were being found on the distant banks of the Colorado, Columbia, Mississippi, and even in Alaska.

I will admit that to use the water first on the fields of the San Fernando Valley was good hydro-logical planning, for it thus added to the underground water table, and flowed downward to the

"Narrows", where it could be pumped out and added to the original Los Angeles Water system, thereby "using the same water twice", - well part of it anyway.

But, of course this same method could have been used in Owens Valley. The water could have been used for agriculture in the Valley and soaked down to the water table, then picked up down below for Los Angeles.

Reaching Independence at last, by evening, we unloaded household goods into a residence Father had rented next to the Land Office, then walked over to talk with Mr. Austin, the retiring Registrar, whom Father was succeeding, and his daughter, Mary Austin, author of "Land of Little Rain".

Returning to Sunland next day (it took 3 or more trips to move us), he gave our team a day to rest, while helping his sister, Aunt Mamie Hogle (newly widowed by Typhoid), to move about 60 miles to a school she had been asked to take at the now-closing Reward Mine, because by entering her four children the enrollment would be sufficient to get funds to keep the school open. Mostly she kept school in her own house. By the term's end, the City had bought out the nearby ranches on the McNalley ditch, taken the water, and closed the school. However, she and her youngsters were then hired to prolong the life of a small school in Palm Springs, under a similar arrangement.



Los Angeles aqueduct.
(photo courtesy of Ray DeLea)

I mention this to point out the contrast between the development of these two places. Since Palm Springs was able to retain even their meager supply of water, it and the whole valley has boomed. Owens was held back from becoming one of America's most productive valleys, with its fine orchards and fields, as well as most beautiful and pleasant resort areas, possessing a more excellent climate, and an even more inviting outlook and mountain back-country.

Father continued to make these trips between Independence and Bishop, to keep in touch with the people and valley proceedings, taking me with him as urged by my teacher, Mrs. Stevens, who would "fill me in on the lessons missed." She and I both felt that my dad was a wise and far-seeing man, ahead of his time, from whom I could learn much, and so I did. He tried to make these trips on weekends so as not to be away from the office, although there was a Receiver, Mr. Walters, there to keep the place open in case we were delayed, such as when we had to stop, hook on and pull cars out that were stuck in the sand.

Father made many predictions that came true. One was of the present oil energy crises. Another was of the tremendous energy hidden in a uranium specimen he brought me for my collection. "Watch this!" he said.

The next four years at the U.S. Land Office were very busy ones for Father, searching maps, documents, stream flow records, etc., along with being sent out to Reclamation Conventions, and even to Washington to a Congressional Investigation. I remember a picture taken by an uncle, Major H. B.

Dixon, calling on us, just back from the Philippines, showing my father sitting at his desk on which were piled papers representing \$80,000,000 worth (a lot of money in those days) of projected development Reclamation Works, another Railroad on the west side of the Valley, Highways, etc. All of these were abandoned with the crushing news that the Reclamation Services had stepped out of the Valley, in order to let the City of Los Angeles in to get the water supply.

We returned to Sunland in 1910 and were sad to find the ranch much run down and the apiaries ruined by "foul brood" because the renter did not understand bee culture. That ended our bee business. My dad repaired what he could, while continuing in touch with water affairs.

Mother insisted that I should attend Bishop Union High School, which I did, walking three miles each way during the four years until I graduated. My next several years of work for the Southern Sierras Power Company were interrupted by the need for me to stay home and run the ranch when in about 1920 my father was again asked to go to Washington to head another investigation.

He returned very tired, worn, and disappointed. He said wearily, "Well, they listened courteously, and hid our report in the great toms of the Congressional Record, which nobody reads - while the City's side is given front page space in the Los Angeles Dailies, which everybody reads. The truth never gets to the public that way." Even though disappointedly unfruitful, his efforts were applauded by the Valleyites. He was invited to a meeting where he was publicly thanked, cheered, and honored with an appreciation gift of a fine gold railway watch, which I carried for many years.

A few days later he was treated to a drink at the drug store, where a group toasted and cheered him with "the usual", while father, not in favor of the alcohol traffic, said, "Make mine malted milk, please".

Soon after he was taken ill, but thought it just a cold or something, and refused to stop working on reports. Then he became very ill and we called in a doctor. It was typhoid. We learned later that a girl who, unknown to herself, or anyone, was a carrier, had secured work at the dairy which supplied the milk for the malt that had contained the typhoid bacilli, and it was fatal. No one could be directly blamed, but the probability remained that had it not been for worry, the long, tiring, disappointing efforts father had made in defense of the Valley he loved, his brave Crusade for Justice, that it would not have happened. In this last tragedy our dear father had given his life for the Valley's Cause.