

STRUGGLE FOR WATER IN OWENS VALLEY IS TOLD BY CALL STAFF WRITER

Here is the second 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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STATELY PEAK GUARDS VALLEY

Mt. Whitney, elevation 14,502, highest peak in the United States, and southern sentinel of the Owens River Valley, as it looks from the town of Lone Pine. On either side of Whitney are brother peaks almost as high, and an old sawtooth just to the south is often mistaken for Whitney. Many old mining camps first made Inyo County famous as well as the valleys where from time to time have been staged some of the most terrible episodes in the conquest of the West.



Photo courtesy of Greg Price

Geographically, the Owens Valley is a neighbor of Death Valley, the first lying in the northwestern corner and the other in the southeastern corner of Inyo County. It is, on the whole, a forbidding region, a land of desert, barren mountain ranges, deep depressions, some of them below the sea level, and about the last place an uninformed person would think of going to for a great city's water supply.

Mary Austin, novelist, who spent her young womanhood there, and she wrote the books which first made her famous, called it in one of these books "The Land of Little Rain."

The annual precipitation in Owens Valley is about five inches. But the entire eastern watershed of the Sierras for a length of 150 miles rains down through numerous streams into this valley, all of this water ultimately collecting in the Owens River.

HOME OF THE PIUTES

Originally the Piute Indians were the inhabitants. White settlers following the miners came there in the sixties, and in a decade had made themselves masters over the Indians, but not without many bloody battles and the help of a company of soldiers stationed at Fort Independence. Irrigation developed quite rapidly, and by 1900 practically the entire stream flow of the Owens River and the smaller streams had been appropriated. When the engineers of the United States reclamation service arrived there to make a survey for a prospective project under the Newlands Act, passed in 1902, they found 60,000 acres under cultivation.

DEVELOPMENT REACHES PEAK

The arrival of these engineers probably marked the high noon of the Owens Valley development.

The discovery of Tonopah and Goldfield, with their mushroom growth populations, had opened a new and very lucrative market for the Owens Valley farm products, hauled overland 150 miles by freight teams, and in the very hey-day of this new mining hub-bub arrived the government irrigationists with their promise of millions to develop the valley. Untilled desert lands were available and there was water enough, the engineers found to bring 120,000 acres under cultivation. The town of Bishop, the metropolis of the valley, began to have dreams of becoming a city of twenty or thirty thousand people.

PEOPLE 'DOUBLE-CROSSED'

This dream received its first jolt when in the summer of 1905 the news came there would be no reclamation project financed by government money. The service engineers had been withdrawn from the field, and such rights as the government had acquired in the valley to water and storage had been transferred to the city of Los Angeles.

From the town of Independence, in the southern end of the valley, northward for twenty miles, a man by the name of Fred Eaton, Los Angeles City's agent, had acquired options on thousands of acres of land flanking both sides of the Owens River.

The storm clouds which rose over the entire valley with the breaking of this news have never been dispelled.

SETTLERS INDIGNANT

The first indignation, naturally, was over the losing of the government reclamation project. This project was to have cost nearly \$3,000,000 – a huge sum of money for so isolated a community. It would have meant the doubling of the irrigate areas, and substitution of cement-lined canals for the old sand lined ditches dug by the settlers. It signified new homes, new farm buildings, new machinery, new markets, new people, new hopes!

All this had come down with one crash, and here, instead of a friend, was an enemy at the gate. In fact, the people of the valley felt that the enemy had not only arrived at the gate, but was within their home. Thousands of acres of land bordering the river for twenty miles were already in his hands.

FEELING STILL EXISTS

Right or wrong, this feeling has never entirely subsided. It has caused a cleavage between communities, between former friends, even between families in exactly the way that other warfare does. This resentment has blocked Los Angeles' work in the valley, and has fanned up feelings among some of the aqueduct builders which have worked a further harm. This resentment has been the fertile breeder of suspicions that have made agreements and amicable arrangements utterly impossible.

It seemed outrageous enough to the residents of the Owens Valley that a city should come hundreds of miles across the desert to demand from them a share of their precious water for domestic use. One can imagine how intense their resentment became when it was learned that not only did Los Angeles intend to have Owens River water for domestic use, but also intended to carry off a lot more for salt to irrigationists in the San Fernando Valley

OUTSIDERS PROFIT

The San Fernando Valley lies just north of Los Angeles. Both the coast line and the valley line of the Southern Pacific Railroad cross it. Twenty years ago the San Fernando Valley was as thinly peopled as was the Owens Valley. The miracle of its growth during the last twelve years – of the magic rise of such towns as Lankershim, San Fernando, Van Nuys and Owensmouth, has been the water from the Owens Valley which the builders of the aqueduct brought down across 200 miles of desert.

To the relinquishment of water for Los Angeles domestic use the people of Owens Valley have long since been reconciled. But to the use of this water for the San Fernando irrigationists they are as little reconciled today as they were when the full scope of the aqueduct project first became known to them.

IS TENDER SUBJECT

If one wishes to raise a thunder storm in the Owens Valley, search out a group of irreconcilables and casually state what a beautiful place is the San Fernando Valley. Its beauty does not interest them. They can think only of the price they have had to pay for it, and the means that were adopted to convert that semi-arid valley into the garden spot it now is.

They will even remind you, if the thought had not occurred to you, that for every acre brought under cultivation about the towns of Owensmouth, San Fernando, Van Nuys and Lankershim one or more acres have been devastated in the Owens Valley.

Ever since the aqueduct has been built this strange process of farm transmutation has been going on.

LOWER VALLEY GAINS

What the upper valley has lost the lower valley has gained. So far as the state of California is concerned, the score is probably even, but so far as individuals are concerned up in the Owens Valley, whether they were farmers forced to sell their ranches to the city, or townsfolk, denied the advantage of a growing community, the transmutation process has had a very uneven result. To the individual, indeed, the San Fernando gain has been an Owens Valley loss. The property values which have run away with the water, while they have enriched a whole valley, have to an even greater degree impoverished another.

One trough has led to another. Last year was one of subnormal rainfall – and snowfall. In the summer the aqueduct, carrying its double burden of domestic water for Los Angeles and irrigation water for the San Fernando farmers, began to run low. The city, alarmed, ordered the irrigation ditches closed. Immediately the San Fernando farmers were up in arms. They demanded water. There was only one place where it could be gotten, and only one way.

BUYS MORE WATER

The city hurried up into Owens Valley. It spent \$1,000,000 buying water lands. It bought an entire canal, known as the McNally ditch, from Owens Valley farmers. It paid big prices for the land, but it got no water. All the water, to which the McNally ditch owners were entitled, running down the river was diverted before it reached the city's aqueduct.

Below the McNally ditch was the Big Pine ditch, with its intake open. Outwitted, the city's agents hired men with teams and attempted to cut a new channel so that their newly purchase water would not reach the Big Pine ditch. The Big Pine farmers resorted to primitive methods. They armed themselves with guns and drove off the city's workers.