

Myth, History and Water In The Eastern Sierra

By Abraham Hoffman

When it rains in Los Angeles, it often does so with a vengeance that more than makes up for the dry spells. Expensive homes in Malibu tumble into the sea, landslides block Pacific Coast Highway, children make the fatal error of trying to ride an inner tube in the Los Angeles River channel, streets are flooded, traffic gets hopelessly tied up and roofing contractors get lots of work. Meanwhile, television newscasters assure viewers that all the rain is a Good Thing, that because of the rain the snowpack in the Sierra is above normal.

To most of the residents of Los Angeles, the size of the Sierra snowpack has little or no meaning. At best some Angelenos have a vague idea that there's an aqueduct which brings water to Los Angeles from somewhere else. They often confuse the California Aqueduct with the one bringing water from the Owens River. In many ways Los Angeles is a city without a history. An overwhelming number of new and recent arrivals, speaking languages from all over the world, have no idea that the main reason Los Angeles exists as a megalopolis is because of water brought to it from more than 200 miles away.

As such, they live with the consequences of decisions made almost a century ago -decisions that affected the lives of people who lived or would live in two regions: Los Angeles and the Owens Valley. The consequences of these decisions are obvious. The City of Los Angeles has a population of more than three million people. Inyo and Mono Counties have a combined total about 27,000. Los Angeles dominates the economic and political life of most of the southern California area. The Eastern Sierra is an economic vassal of southern California, its residents very much involved with the tourist trade as those southern Californians come up Highway 395 heading for ski resorts or camping trips. Los Angeles wallows in urban problems: crime, graffiti, traffic congestion, overcrowded schools and underfunded public services. Many a Los Angeles resident who has visited the Eastern Sierra region longs for the slower pace and greater sense of community to be found in Bridgeport, Bishop, Independence, or the other small towns of the region.

But the current status of the quality of life in both regions is based on the decisions of long ago which created the consequences. Hindsight is 20-20, so the explanation is easy to see. A big city triumphed over an agricultural region and took that region's water supply. Thus simplified, the story of the Owens River-Los Angeles water dispute becomes a morality play, or at the very least, a motion picture, "Chinatown."

Public perception of the water controversy lies more in popular culture than history. When my book "Vision or Villainy: Origins of the Owens Valley-Los Angeles Water Controversy" was published, I kept running into people, who on hearing of my work would say, "Oh, yeah - "Chinatown." As if seeing the movie made them instant experts on the history. "Chinatown," of course, created its own myths and distortions. While it successfully recreated an era of political intrigue and mystery, it obscured basic facts by setting the story in the 1930s instead of the early 1900s, murdering the Mulholland character, and even injecting incest into the plot. I have found that in talking to anyone whose interest in the water controversy was whetted by seeing

"Chinatown," I first have to strip away all of the fictional devices in the film in order to start discussing the history. And, of course, some people are disappointed that there wasn't any incest after all.

The true history - as opposed to the myths, distortions, and fictionalizing lies in the ambitions of two agricultural regions of California. In 1896 southern California (not just the City of Los Angeles) was heavily promoting itself as a center of economic opportunity. The focus of this opportunity was citrus agriculture, particularly oranges. Real estate speculation had peaked in the Boom of the 1880's, but the City of Los Angeles, the center of the Boom, still had a strong sense of boosterism. Its population in 1890, some 50,000 people, was a five-fold increase over its size in 1880. Community leaders were involved in a wide range of economic activities. A "businessman" did not concentrate on merely one line of work - not when there was real estate, transportation, agriculture, oil, and the beginnings of industrial activity.

The Southern Pacific Railroad had connected to Los Angeles in 1876; a decade later, the arrival of the Santa Fe generated a rate war which dramatically lowered the price of a train ticket to southern California. Some 120,000 people arrived in the region in 1886 just to see what all the publicity was about. Pasadena, Arcadia, Ontario, Redondo Beach, and Inglewood are examples of communities that effectively began in the 1880's. It should be noted that McPherson, Gladstone, Chicago Park, and Alosta exemplify real estate promotions that never went anywhere. Stories were told of extravagant advertising claims. Among the most extreme were the speculators who tied oranges from Joshua trees in the middle of the desert to swindle gullible investors.

Despite the shenanigans and the inevitable bursting of the bubble, southern California continued to grow, though more modestly than in the frenetic 1880's. There seemed only one limitation that might slow or even stop the growth: reliable water supplies.

In the 1890's agriculturists seemed to be more concerned with the start of the rainfall season than its connection to the local river systems. For the local boosters, the question about the start of the rainfall season was not if but when. The semiarid climate of the region defied rainfall predictions. Its average annual rainfall was as speculative a figure as the real estate value of Gladstone or Chicago Park. Newspapers editorialized and published cartoons discussing the prosperity that would surely come once the rain started falling. The National Weather Bureau began keeping rainfall statistics for southern California in 1877, but no clear pattern could be seen. There had been droughts, most terribly in the early 1860s.

In the 1890s growing numbers of agriculturists began to investigate the benefits of irrigation. But irrigation demanded water already on the ground, not waiting for it to fall from the sky. Meanwhile, some 250 miles to the north, another region was considering the benefits of its own growth and development. American explorers first visited the Owens Valley in the 1830s; John C. Fremont named the valley in 1845 after one of his expedition's members. Beginning in the 1850s, a series of gold and silver strikes in the Inyo-Mono area brought people to such mining camps as Cerro Gordo and Bodie. The Cerro Gordo mines brought out some \$17 million. The region, however, was isolated, and badly in need of rail and road connections to the outside world.

Ironically, Los Angeles provided the first economic outlet. Freighter Remi Nadeau brought out bullion and transported in supplies to the Owens Valley. By the 1870's Los Angeles considered Bakersfield a rival for the Owens Valley trade. One scheme to solve the problem was a railroad connection between Los Angeles and the Owens Valley. Senator John P Jones of Nevada proposed a Los Angeles and Independence Railroad in 1875, an ambitious connection that would have made Inyo County directly accessible to a Pacific seaport. Jones created a seaport town, Santa Monica, as the terminus of the railroad. Unfortunately for his plans, Jones' railroad never made it east of Los Angeles. The Southern Pacific proved a formidable rival, and Jones ran into money problems. When the Owens Valley did obtain its rail connection, the tracks came from another direction.

The Carson and Colorado Railroad was a narrow-gauge line that stretched from Carson City, Nevada, to Owens Lake. Despite its name, however, the railroad never reached the Colorado River Settlers in Inyo and Mono Counties found three problems hampering their development. The Paiute Indians didn't want the newcomers digging holes and trenches all over the land, and the 1860s witnessed a series of bloody confrontations between whites and Indians. With the Indians pacified, settlers had to face a second problem: mining was a boom-arid-bust, extractive economy - not the best basis for stable growth.

Bodie, one of the West's most notorious mining towns, shot up from a few hundred to as many as 12,000 people in the late 1870s. No one has ever come up with a truly accurate count of Bodie's population in its brief and turbulent heyday. As the mines around Bodie declined in production, people left for richer diggings elsewhere. Some departed in such haste that they left their personal possessions in their rooms and houses, which explains why these artifacts may be seen today through dusty windows at Bodie State Historic Park. Bodie residents found it easier to take from the environment rather than work it. Enterprising food providers ransacked gull nests at Mono Lake for eggs and shot the birds. Other people, with long-range views, took up farming.

This evoked the third problem; outside markets for surplus agricultural goods. Freight wagons moved too slowly for perishable items. The Carson & Colorado Railroad provided an outlet of sorts, but its connection to Nevada made it a roundabout route at best for Eastern Sierra residents. With the beginning of the 20th century, a new opportunity promised to provide a market for Owens Valley products. Southwestern Nevada became the location for a series of gold strikes and the creation of new towns, including Tonopah, Goldfield, and Rhyolite.

A new rail line, the Tonopah & Goldfield Railroad, connected with the Carson & Colorado at Tonopah Junction. Now the Owens Valley was directly connected to what promised to be a series of towns with a growing population base. No one in Owens Valley seems to have considered the lesson of Bodie - that if the mines played out, the new Nevada towns could become just as deserted as Bodie, Dog Town, and Monoville had become after their moment had passed. This is speculation, not history, because the Owens Valley settlers never really had a chance to develop a Nevada market.

Farmers mainly cultivated the soil in the northern half of Owens Valley. This meant that by the start of the 20th century, most of the valley population lived in that area. Bishop surpassed independence, the county seat, in size. In 1903 Bishop became incorporated and made plans to put in water and sewer connections as well as a telephone system. But there was a hitch in these ambitious plans which were based on the needs of the people in the Nevada mining towns.

Despite cultivation and their anticipation of prosperity, settlers didn't have control of the Owens River. Low lying areas became swamps in flood season. Potential acreage needed irrigation to grow crops. The cost of gaining control of the Owens River; to use its water for irrigation, exceeded anyone's individual capital. At this point the destinies of Los Angeles and the Eastern Sierra came together

In 1902, the New Lands Reclamation Act created the U.S. Reclamation Service and provided for the irrigation and reclamation of undeveloped lands. Created in the spirit of progressivism, the goal of the reclamation movement was to conquer arid America by constructing dams, channels, and flood control systems, thereby opening new land for cultivation. This new land would be made available at reasonable cost to prospective farmers who would repay the cost of Reclamation Service work into a revolving fund.

In practice, little worked the way the Reclamation Service intended. Political rhetoric claimed that people crowded in eastern cities would flock to the newly reclaimed lands. Few made such a move, and those who did learned quickly that some expertise in farming was a prerequisite if one was to succeed on the land. Those who did establish farms complained that the payment schedule was too demanding; they needed a longer period for repayment of their debt.

Requests for surveys far exceeded the number of projects feasible under Reclamation Service appropriations. Politics also intruded. Eastern senators and congressmen failed to comprehend the differences between humid and arid environments. There was also a fundamental contradiction in progressive philosophy. Essentially an urban movement, progressivism called for the greatest good to the greatest number, in the tradition of John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham. No one at first seemed to notice that this view contrasted with the goal of reclaiming land in remote areas.

In any event, one of the first areas picked to be surveyed for a possible reclamation project was the Owens Valley. It was not the only site. Frederick H. Newell, chief engineer of the Reclamation Service, noted that "in California the number of possible projects and their range is so great that much time and thought must be given to the work in order that each possible project should get adequate consideration." Newell suggested to Joseph B. Lippincott, the Reclamation Service engineer in charge of work in California, conducting a survey in the Owens Valley as to its feasibility for an irrigation project. Lippincott passed the assignment to one of his assistants, Jacob C. Clausen, to conduct a preliminary survey. Clausen reported enthusiastically on his initial reconnaissance of the valley. In August 1903 Lippincott recommended that Owens Valley public lands should be withdrawn from any further settlement pending a full-scale survey of Owens River possibilities.

Meanwhile, certain people in Los Angeles had begun considering the Owens River for quite another use. Frederick Eaton, former city engineer and mayor of Los Angeles, had recognized as early as 1892 that a potential use of the Owens River existed beyond its own watershed. As he watched Los Angeles grow, he also recognized the limits of the Los Angeles River to supply the number of people, who kept coming. Given a few years, Los Angeles might well become the victim of its own Success.

This problem was also becoming apparent to William Mulholland, chief of the Bureau of Water Works and Supply (forerunner of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power). Mulholland had arrived in Los Angeles in 1876. At that time the water distribution of the Los Angeles River was under a franchise granted to a private firm, the Los Angeles City Water Company. Mulholland went to work for the water Company and rose through the ranks to become its superintendent. The company failed to keep up with water demands from the grow-mg number of people in Los Angeles, and after some litigation, the city won back its distribution rights from the private Company. Water distribution then became a municipal operation, with Mulholland the bureau's first manager.

The years 1896-1905 have been the subject of debate as to whether the decade was a period of continuous drought for Los Angeles. Historians have argued back and forth on this issue, with no one investigating weather reports or rainfall figures. Since the question of a drought is a necessary point of argument in understanding Los Angeles's craving for Owens River water, it is surprising that no one has checked the validity of the alleged drought since the information sources are easily available. Between 1896 and 1905 Los Angeles indeed sustained long dry spells, although no evidence exists to suggest a continuous 10-year drought. What is of interest is the uncertainty of when the rain would fall in a semiarid environment.

It was entirely possible that December in one year could have eight inches of rain; in another year, December could be bone dry. The usual figure for the average annual rainfall for Los Angeles, fifteen inches a

year, belies the fact that half that amount could, and often did, fall in one severe rainstorm. Depending on southern California rain to water one's orange grove would be quite a gamble. On that basis, irrigation made sense for citrus agriculture as well as other water-intensive crops. A controlled water supply also meant that farmers could do well on as little as 10 acres if those acres were irrigated.

Apart from the uncertain rainfall, Mulholland faced another problem, Los Angeles was simply too successful at advertising itself. Incoming residents strained the ability of water works personnel to install new water hookups; and the Los Angeles River as a source of water to supply those new residents was fast reaching its limit,

The population of Los Angeles by 1900 had doubled over the previous decade, to 100,000. Growth was far exceeding estimates. The anticipated figure for 1905 was 200,000. Doubling in just five years! Mulholland could plan for the future, but he couldn't predict it. The Los Angeles River could not serve more than a city of 250,000. What would happen once that level of population was reached, then passed? It was therefore not only the threat of drought, but concern over a population growth that was welcome the town was booming - that brought Mulholland and Eaton together. Eaton had an idea about a future water supply, as well as a personal agenda for the advancement of his own fortune. Eaton's idea; construct an aqueduct linking the Owens River to Los Angeles.

Enter the wild card in the creation of the water controversy: Joseph B. Lippincott. Although Lippincott was a federal employee, his home base was Los Angeles where he had lived since 1892. Eaton, Mulholland, and Lippincott moved in the same social circles. As a Los Angeles resident, Lippincott knew full well the limits of the local river to supply the growing needs of the city. In the late summer of 1904 Lippincott and Eaton went on a camping trip in the Sierra Nevada. Although some historians have ascribed sinister and ulterior motives to the trip, it seems to have been pretty much a friend and family affair Lippincott's wife and daughter were along, as was the family of artist Fernand Lunoren and several other guests.

The trip started on the western side of the Sierra and went from Yosemite Valley to Tuolumne Meadows, and over Tioga Pass to Mono Lake. While getting supplies at Bishop, Lippincott met Clausen. The young engineer described his reclamation survey in glowing terms. Eaton was within earshot. No sooner did Eaton return to Los Angeles than he invited Mulholland to go with him to Owens Valley to see the river for himself. Mulholland came, saw, and was conquered. But what about the Reclamation Service survey?

In the weeks that followed Mulholland learned that Eaton's original idea was to own the water rights at certain strategic locations and to make a profit on that water as it coursed down the city's aqueduct. Mulholland knew that such an arrangement would never be approved since the aqueduct would be crossing public lands. Eaton gave in on the crucial point that the aqueduct, if and when it was built, would be a municipal operation from one end to the other, but he bought the Long Valley ranch in Mono County, knowing that it was the best and most logical place to build a storage reservoir - and that eventually Mulholland would have to approach him about it.

What followed does not represent Los Angeles's finest hour While the Owens River was not stolen in the technically legal sense, there was enough secrecy and backroom wheeling and dealing to justify the complaint of Owens Valley settlers that their water supply was unfairly, if not illegally, taken from them.

In November 1904 Mulholland, Eaton, and Lippincott met with Newell in Los Angeles. Mulholland promised Newell that any project undertaken by Los Angeles would be wholly municipal in operation. Newell then gave Mulholland the data on the Owens River that had been collected by the Reclamation Service in its

survey. Clausen's report, in Mulholland's hands, was invaluable to the city in the calculation of the benefits of Owens River water. Ostensibly, the Reclamation Service information would be weighed against reports of other potential water sources. In actuality, no other sources were seriously considered.

By March 1905 Fred Eaton was traveling through Owens Valley buying water options from farmers whose lands adjoined the Owens River. Contrary to general belief, most of these lands were in the southern half of the valley, below the point (the Alabama gate) where the city would make its diversion.

However, Eaton completed his negotiations for the purchase of the Rickey Ranch in Long Valley. Farmers had the impression that Eaton was buying these options on behalf of the Reclamation Service, a charge Eaton and Lippincott always denied. Eaton and Mulholland of course knew that if the farmers found out the city was the actual purchaser of the water rights, the price would skyrocket. Eaton may not have actually said he was acting for Lippincott, but it was known in the valley that they were friends, and Eaton did nothing to correct the misimpression.

While Eaton was buying up Owens River water rights, other city leaders had their own ideas about the uses of Owens River water in Los Angeles. One of the members of the Los Angeles Board of Water Commissioners, Moses Sherman, belonged to a land syndicate headed by Harrison Gray Otis, publisher of the Los Angeles Times, and his son-in-law, Harry Chandler. Although the paper trail is thin, the conclusion seems inescapable that this land syndicate used Sherman's inside information to buy up 16,000 acres of the San Fernando Valley that would be irrigable with Owens River water.

In 1905 the San Fernando Valley was a sparsely settled, agriculturally productive area. In no way did it resemble a "desolate desert" as some writers have claimed. Thousands of acres in the valley were under cultivation for wheat, beans, corn, and citrus. The headwaters of the Los Angeles River began in what is today Canoga Park. In the northeast corner of the valley, the City of San Fernando had coexisted with Los Angeles since the 1870's. Making San Fernando Valley land irrigable with Owens River water would increase its value and make a profit for the syndicate investors.

It should be noted, however, that Otis and company headed two syndicates, not one. The second syndicate bought up a much greater amount of land that formed the basis of today's communities of Sherman Oaks, Van Nuys, Tarzana, Reseda, and Canoga Park. This land acquisition, however, took place while the aqueduct was already under construction. Sloppy researchers have made the two syndicates into one and claimed a monstrous land grab. Whatever the dubious means by which the first syndicate acquired its information, the second syndicate was well in the public eye when it made its purchase.

To illustrate the power of advertising, Canoga Park was originally named Owensmouth even though it is some 20 miles from the Aqueduct Cascade at Sylmar. Los Angeles officials added to the modern sense of conspiracy by agreeing to keep all negotiations secret. Lippincott was paid by the city to submit a report claiming no other water sources matched the Owens River, a report the city rubber-stamped to justify its support for an Owens River Aqueduct. Rumors flew around Owens Valley in the spring of 1905 as to what was going on, but public announcement did not appear until July 29. "Titanic Project To Give City A River" proclaimed the Los Angeles Times.

The Reclamation Service, claiming limited funds and saying the survey had only been preliminary anyway, withdrew its plans for a contemplated Owens Valley reclamation project. Angry Owens Valley residents branded Lippincott as "Judas B. Lippincott." Lippincott wrote numerous and lengthy letters justifying his position in the affair. An internal scandal erupted in the Department of the Interior when Stafford Austin, a Land

Office official, accused Lippincott of conflict of interest. Lippincott barely escaped censure, then did his reputation little good by resigning from the Reclamation Service and, only a week later, accepting a position as Mulholland's assistant on the aqueduct construction project.

Ultimately, President Theodore Roosevelt gave his blessing to the city project under the philosophy of the greatest good to the greatest number. With acquisition of necessary water rights as fait accompli, Mulholland and his engineers proceeded to design and build the Owens River Aqueduct. Completed in 1913, it was compared to the Panama Canal in its engineering challenges, if minus the threat of yellow fever and malaria. But the aqueduct had one major shortcoming; Mulholland refused to pay Eaton's price for the right to construct a storage reservoir at Long Valley.

This major omission in the aqueduct network proved costly in later years. For Mulholland approved construction of a large storage reservoir at another site - San Francisquito Canyon, where Los Angeles built the ill-fated St. Francis Dam. Sometimes hindsight isn't 20-20. Some people need their history simplified, and so the period 1913-1923 doesn't exist. We move forward from the completion of the aqueduct directly into the water wars of the 1920s.

In actuality, the northern half of the Owens Valley remained relatively untouched by the aqueduct. The intake for the aqueduct was located at Lone Pine, well south of the Owens Valley farms. Willie Chalfant, long-time editor of the Inyo Register, could comment in 1922, "A satisfactory agreement should be the final chapter of a long-standing question." Chalfant repudiated this statement a dozen years later, bitter at the outcome of the renewal of the dispute between city and valley in the 1920s. Even Mulholland had failed to estimate the ever-increasing numbers of people coming to Los Angeles. By 1920 the city counted 576,000; in 1930 it topped a million. More water and power called for control of more sources. In 1923 Los Angeles commenced a policy of buying entire Owens Valley farms and ranches so as to increase the water flowing down the aqueduct. Merchants in the towns, especially Bishop, found their businesses spiraling down wards as the customers left the valley.

Some valley residents resorted to violence, periodically dynamiting the aqueduct between 1924 and 1927. Among the valley's most militant leaders were Mark and Wilfred Watterson, owners of a small chain of banks in Owens Valley towns. When a bank audit revealed that the Watterson brothers had been embezzling from their own bank, valley residents were shocked. The banks closed their doors, the deposits of valley residents were lost, and resistance to Los Angeles collapsed.

A few months later the St. Francis Dam failed, March 12, 1928, killing some 450 people. Mulholland's career was ruined. A note on Eaton's Log Valley ranch came due, but the money for it had been in the Watterson bank. Eaton lost his property. By the early 1930s the image of Los Angeles had become one of an aggressive and ambitious entity that was ruthless in getting what it wanted. This view became quite popular with the publication of Chalfant's "Story of Inyo" and Morrow Mayo's "Los Angeles," considered by many to be the best hatchet job ever done on Los Angeles.

Both books owed much of their information to a pamphlet written by Andre Nordskog, a self-styled reformer who had championed the Owens Valley cause. His pamphlet, which a friendly assemblyman inserted into the State Assembly record and then had printed at public expense, was based on documents Nordskog had obtained from the Reclamation Service. The fact that many of the quotations were taken out of context has not prevented careless writers from using the pamphlet in the mistaken belief it was an official state publication.

Los Angeles tried to make some amends. In 1941 the city opened Crowley Lake at the Long Valley site, providing a long overdue storage reservoir as well as an important recreational resource. The Department of Water and Power actively supported recreational development in the Owens Valley as replacement for the loss of the ranching and farming economy. Property was leased to ranchers for pastoral use. Although disputes over construction of a second aqueduct, the pumping of groundwater, and repurchase of property arose, both city and valley by the late 1980s managed to settle the last of the grievances and differences.

Further north, however, Los Angeles became involved in another bitter dispute. In the 1920s the city purchased the water of the streams flowing into Mono lake and constructed an extension to the aqueduct. Completed in 1941, the Mono Extension fed more water to the thirsty city. But it also meant that Mono Lake would slowly decline. By the late 1970s it was 40 feet below its 1941 level, and Negit Island was about to become a peninsula. If this happened, coyotes would have easy access to the island's rookeries.

In 1978 the Mono Lake Committee, a group of young biologists and ecologists, began fighting the degradation of the lake's environment. They took Los Angeles to court and roused public attention. The city lost one legal point after another throughout the 1980's. It was a case of David versus Goliath, and David won. Los Angeles also acquired water and more important, electrical power, through Parker Dam, the Colorado River Aqueduct, and its dominant role in the Metropolitan Water District.

Even in this instance Los Angeles was not free from litigation. Arizona sued for a greater share of Colorado River water and won its case. In the long run, if one looks for winners and losers, Owens Valley may have come out slightly ahead. Visitors to the Owens Valley tourist information centers find dozens of brochures offering motels, camping, hunting, and fishing excursions, local museums, and skiing accommodations. Mammoth has become one of the West's major ski resort areas. Recreational facilities in Inyo and Mono Counties, whether federal, state, or county operated, are excellent. In Mono County, the Lee Vining Visitor Center across from Mono Lake is a treasure trove of information on Mono Lake from the environmentalist viewpoint, with minimal input from the DWP.

The Inter-Agency Visitor Center at Lone Pine offers a surprisingly large number of books and pamphlets on the history, biology, botany, and geology of the Eastern Sierra region. Residents of the region enjoy a quality of life that includes clean air, stunning scenery, and a sense of community with their neighbors. To be sure, some 300,000 acres of the Owens Valley are owned by the City of Los Angeles. The city has both the water and the dubious achievement of being the second-largest city in the United States, with all the urban problems that go with that status. Ironically, many Los Angeles residents don't trust what comes out of their taps any more. They drink bottled water.

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