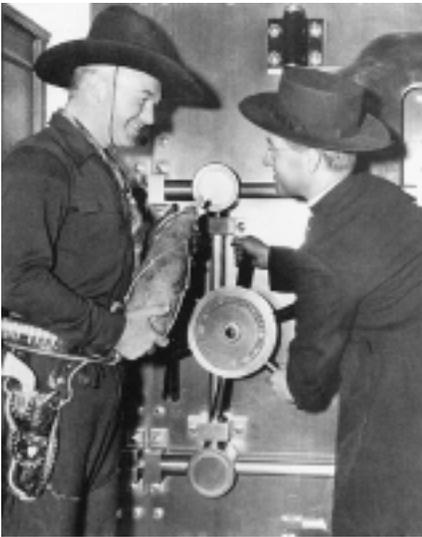


The Wedding of the Waters

By Fr. John J. Crowley

"Catholics of Monterey-Fresno will be interested in the story of those dramatic days in the eastern portion of the diocese, for all the events took place within the borders of the parish of Inyo, centering at Lone Pine. The two women who received the attention of all were Mrs. Agnes Lindner, the octogenarian daughter of the first white child to be carried through Death Valley in 1849 by the party which gave the Valley its name, and Miss Josephine Breen of Hollister, great-granddaughter of Patrick Breen, hero of the Donner tragedy of 1847. Both Mrs. Lindner and Miss Breen are Catholics, and were present at the outdoor Mass offered at Lone Pine during the celebration. The general chairman of the dedication was Monsignor John J. Crowley, pastor of the Inyo Catholic Missions. He had been unanimously elected to that post by the business and professional men of the region, and throughout they gave him the remarkable cooperation that was responsible for the extraordinary success of the affair.

"Many factors contributed to the possibility of a road dedication without precedent. For instance, not every road joins the top and bottom of a nation. The new link did just that, enabling the motorist to drive in safety from Bad Water in Death Valley, 279.6 feet below the level of the sea, to Whitney Portal, 8300 feet in elevation, at the actual base of the tallest peak, Mount Whitney, 14,496 feet. North of Whitney a mile or so lies Lake Tulainyo, 12,865 feet high, the highest lake on the continent, while Bad Water is the lowest water in the Western Hemisphere. The lack of a road to Tulainyo made the use of an Indian runner the most logical choice; the paralleling of part of the highway by the longest narrow-gauge railroad in America brought the Iron Horse into the picture in proper historical sequence; the only place at which a telephone line crossed the new artery was at the very spot where the new construction began, enabling the President of the United States to flash the signal officially opening the highway, the existence of a great playa at Panamint Valley permitting a takeoff by airplane at the proper juncture in the transportation pageant: all of these works of God and man lent themselves so naturally to the program that they could be well called providential.



"Early on the morning of Friday, October 29 Jerry Emm, a Washoe Indian runner from Nevada who had been chosen for the honor in a previous elimination contest, dipped a gourd into the icy waters of Lake Tulainyo, from whose banks the snow never melts. The gourd,

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specially prepared and donated by the President of the International Gourd Association, Mr. Joe Parks of Los Angeles, was to carry the crystal clear tears of the clouds down the Sierra slopes and across the sands to Bad Water's alkaline depths for such a wedding as America had never known. With the easy lope of his forefathers the Indian traversed rockslides and meadows, forests and chaparral until, exactly a mile nearer sea level, he burst from the thicket at Whitney Portal late that afternoon. It was the end of the Red Man's domain, the terminus of the White Man's highway.

"The Indian band played 'The Waters of Minnetonka' as Russell Spainhower, impersonating the Pony Express riders of old, leaped into his saddle and, with gourd hanging straight out behind him, galloped off down the canyon. Five miles below in the dusk another horse and rider waited, Ted Cook was ready to carry on. Down the switchbacks of the road half a hundred cars, spaced and paced by State Highway patrolmen, crept along in a veritable river of light, a chain of fire visible for leagues, telling the world that the water had begun its three-day journey, Into the dark raced Ted, to be met on Ruiz Hill, another seven miles east, by Bert Johnson, son of the man who first climbed Mount Whitney. There were lumps in cheering throats as his horse clattered down the traffic-cleared street to the bank, where Bill Boyd of movie fame stood ready to deposit the gourd in the vault until the morning.

'A little of the water was drawn from the gourd and served to Governor Merriam at the trout dinner that had been prepared for him and a score of national and state officials in Inyo for the fiesta. While he and a hundred others thus dined to the music of a genuine Mexican orchestra the county amused itself at wrestling matches, dancing, amusements galore.

"Saturday morning it was the Governor who stood upon the steps of the bank and handed the gourd to Sam Ball, the prospector veteran of fifty-one years on the desert. Sam tied the container on the back of his burro and trudged away to the south. Before the church stood parked a genuine covered wagon, one which had been driven from Missouri to Yolo County in 1849 by John Bremmerly. In the shafts a pair of spirited oxen fretted and through the canvas archway peered comely Josephine Breen, descendant of the Donner Party. Her costume of the period made the picture perfect, and the newspaper photographers did not miss the opportunity. The water was handed to her by Sidney Chester Doty, grandson of that Captain Ed Doty who had led the Jayhawker party through Death Valley. Beside Chester walked his father and his uncle, the latter trailing



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the identical gun that his father had brought to California on that harrowing journey. With them, also proud to repeat the covered wagon expedition of her mother, went Mrs. Agnes Lindner, daughter of Melissa Bennett.

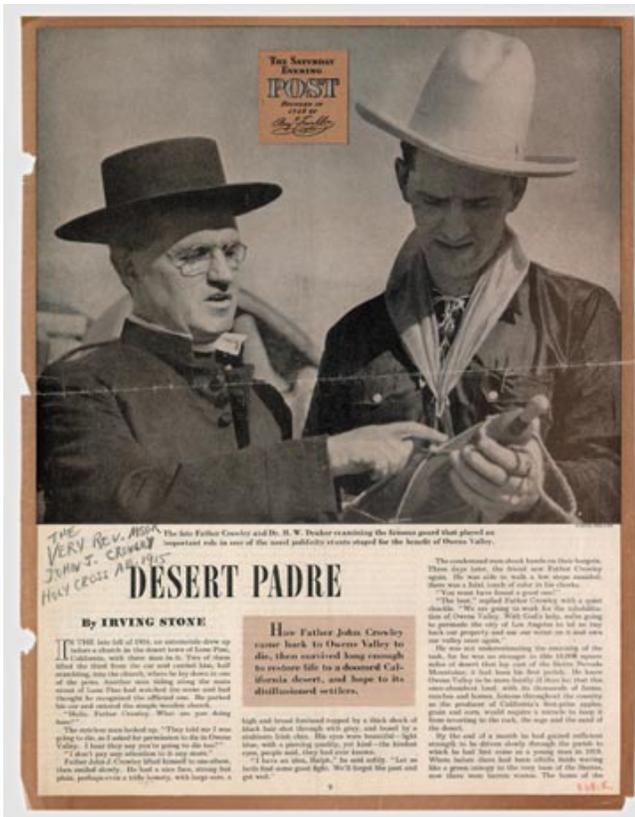
"Two miles south stamped a genuine twenty-mule team hitched to one of the original borax wagons for the last time. At the jerk line sat Johnny O'Keeffe, a pioneer mule-skinner. Even the driver of the oxteam confessed a thrill when Johnny, the gourd cradled safely on the driver's seat, clicked his tongue and the rippling muscles of the mules marked the thrust with which they began to pull their burden on its historic trek.

'Another mile, and a real stagecoach standing by the highway, Mount Whitney-Death Valley painted on its sides. Ollie Dearborn, who used to handle the lines in the seventies and eighties, rode the box, but Governor Merriam insisted on climbing up beside him. As the State's chief executive rode away, the Doty gun tucked in the crotch of his arm, the Padre at the microphone sang out 'Buck Merriam rides again!' Such was the spirit of those happy days.

"Where the highway crosses the narrow-gauge tracks, eight miles from Lone Pine, an old-time locomotive panted, and behind it all the passenger rolling stock for this branch that the Southern Pacific owns. The car deluxe, in which the Governor traveled, had iron beds and tin bathtubs. With Engineer Jim Henry carefully guarding the gourd in the cab, a wildly cheering mob rocked along to Keeler, scores sitting on the roofs of the cars or climbing to the platforms. At Keeler the water was left in custody of the Talc Company until the morrow. The Governor and his party returned to Lone Pine for the unique parade, featuring all the modes of transportation California has known and scores of horsemen on hand for the rodeo. Again a night of dancing, outdoor shows by movie stars, sharp-shooting, rock-drilling, street-singing, what a holiday!

"Early Sunday morning Mass on the church lawn, with the pioneers and tourists and townsmen appareled as forty-niners, cowboys and gay caballeros. Then a race to Keeler, where Jim Henry had his train drawn up at the platform for the water transfer to the 1938 Lincoln Zephyr, the first public appearance of that model in California. Louie Meyer, three-time winner at Indianapolis took the gourd from the engineer and was off with a roar for the point of dedication, on the summit of the Argus Range, twenty-five miles away. There the Governor and the officials were already stationed, close by the temporary telegraph instrument set up by Western Union to receive the President's signal from Hyde Park. Promptly at eleven-thirty it came, clear in the hush achieved by a word of warning to the crowd. Instantly Captain Hardy and two members of the Los Angeles' Sheriff's Pistol Team fired a volley which severed the blue ribbon held taut

across the road, blasting open the highway in true Western fashion. The Los Angeles Police Band struck up the 'Star Spangled Banner,' and as the last note rang out over the sagebrush Josephine Breen advanced to the severed tape and Joined hands with Chester Doty, approaching from the Death Valley side. The mountains and the desert had been joined; the descendants of the two parties who had suffered in the heat and the snow of California thus symbolized the smashing of the barriers that had spelled death for their forefathers. Chester and Josephine then climbed into the Zephyr and were whisked over the new road down to Panamint Sink, followed by the hundreds of cars in the autocade. Out on the clay bed of Panamint Valley rested a great white bird, the first plane to land on the spot now used as an emergency field by TWA. Captain Carey, World War flyer, was handed the precious water by Meyer, and the graceful ship was soon skimming the dried adobe surface and spiraling off towards Telescope Peak, highest uninterrupted lift of any mountain on the continent, for it rises from below sea level. Over the range he dropped to the landing field at Furnace Creek in Death Valley, there to await the spectators following by car. En route the travelers paused for a barbecue at Stovepipe Wells, the second such free event to grace as many days.



"There was no doubt in the minds or hearts of those who followed the water that the last scene was the most impressive in a triduum of thrills.

"The sun had just dropped behind Telescope as the plane appeared over a rise just south of the depression called Bad Water, which nestles against the cliffs on the east side of the Valley. With the swoop of an eagle it came straight over the glassy pool, a fine spray shooting down from an opening in the cockpit. TR. Goodwin, Superintendent of Death Valley National Monument, was emptying the gourd. For a moment the watchers wondered if the water would ever reach the surface, but only for a moment. Upon the placid mirror a few drops appeared, then a gentle shower, coming from nowhere, passing like a breeze across the pond. Jose Arias's Mexican players strummed 'I Love You, California.' The crystal waters of American's highest lake had been joined with America's lowest; the Wedding of the Waters was o'er.

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"Up from the side of the pool shot a pillar of flame, the signal fire that would tell the watchers on the peaks that the pageant had ended, that Death Valley and Mt. Whitney had been linked forever. On Dante's View, six thousand feet above, the Boy Scouts caught the message, and set the torch to their pyre. Across on Telescope Hank Jones and two other Scouts touched off the huge pile of dead pinon trees gathered there by the sons of the Indians who had seen the mother of Mrs. Lindner enter Death Valley nearly a century ago. On Cerro Gordo, thirty miles distant, the watchers saw, and their fire soon glowed yellow in the dusk. At Lone Pine the cry went up, 'The water's gone through, Cerro Gordo's ablaze!' And they turned to Whitney. There, from the top of the nation, a tongue of light ascended to the stars. Norman Clyde, famed mountaineer, had not failed in his lonely and perilous task. It was he who wrote 'Finis' to California's greatest highway dedication, and the hundreds gathered in the town square at Lone Pine sang America with full hearts as the flame and the fiesta faded into the night.

"The chairman of one of the committees came to the Padre after all was over and expressed himself: 'It was a good thing we selected somebody close to the Lord to manage this affair for us, for the weather was perfect. I remember you used to say to us at the meeting when somebody would worry about the possibility of seasonal bad weather, you would reassure us, "Don't fret. Just attend to your own committee work. The weather is within the province of my committee." 'What the Padre did not tell them was that he had subdelegated the weather problem to the Patroness of Monterey-Fresno, the Little Flower, for all these doings were within her diocese. To her, under God, is due the credit for Inyo's biggest show.'"