

Where Have All The Ranches Gone...

By Frank Madina
Native American pioneer from Independence, CA

This is what the city of Los Angeles Water and Power did to Owens Valley years ago. So people that comes to this valley can see and imagine. I came to Owens Valley years ago. I was very young, a descendent of the Apache Indian Mescalero from Bisbee, Arizona. The Owens Valley was very beautiful, great big apple orchards, pears and peaches, and many other fruits. There was plenty of water for irrigation. Pure drinking water that came from springs and snow from the mountains. People did not fight over water. Every got their share. Most of the farmers raised cattle, sheep and hogs. They butchered their own cattle and hogs. They made their own ham and bacon. They raised chickens, ducks, turkeys and rabbits. In those days there was no refrigeration like we're accustomed to today. They had rock cellars to keep their meat fresh. They ran a little water on top of the cellars to keep it cool inside. There was a big ice house that made ice for sale for 1¢ a pound. Ice came in 100 pound blocks or any amount to fit your ice box. The ice man delivered in town every day. The farmers had beautiful Jersey cows for fresh milk and butter and cream. Bishop had a big creamery. All of the surplus milk that the farmers did not use was sold to the creamery and was made into butter and cheese. The butter and cheese was sold in Los Angeles or San Francisco. They also raised lots of honey. Owens Valley had two flour mills – one in Laws and one in Bishop. Many farmers raised wheat which they sold to the flour mills. Lots of lour was sold in the big cities.

Owens Valley had many industrious people. In the winter they would burn pinion wood. The wood was cut and hauled by Mexican woodsmen. Most of the wood was cut in the Black Canyon in the White Mountains. They had big long wagons which were pulled by six mules. In those days no permit was required. Everybody worked on the farms, at the flour mills or in the mines. A fishing license was one dollar and fifty fish was the limit, very few people went fishing. I used to fish a little and in no time caught a few fish and then quit. You could see deer feeding along the river banks. During deer season we used to go to the foot of the mountains and get a big four point buck. Quail and grouse were all over the valley. If you went higher into the mountains, you could get mountain quail, a beautiful bird, very big. You could run into mountain sheep. You don't see many of them any more. Most of them were shot by greedy men.

In those days there was no such thing as welfare. You could get up early in the morning and smell the coffee and the smell of the pinion wood smoke. In the fall of the year, around Labor Day, the farmers and the business men got together and made a big celebration. The farmers donated a cow or two for a barbeque. Women made lots of homemade bread, big salads, home cooked beans, pies and cakes, and lots of coffee and Cool Aide. The men made the barbeque. They dug a big pit in the ground and made a big fire. The meat was prepared by a good cook and well seasoned and ready to be put into the pit. Late in the evening the meat was put in the pit and covered with dirt. Men watched it all night. The next, day about 2 o'clock in the afternoon, the meat was ready to be served. The farmers wives and daughters served it. You had all you could eat, pie, cake and coffee at no charge! They also had a little parade for the kids and little prizes were also given to the kids. They sure enjoyed it! The men had a few drinks of home made wine or a little home brew. There were no drunks because the sheriff and the under-sheriff were there to keep things in order. At that time we only had the sheriff and the under-sheriff and one deputy for each little town in the valley. One was in Lone Pine, one in Big Pine and one in Bishop.

The Indian people in Sun Land Reservation had their own celebration. They had a big barbeque. Lots of deer meat was well cooked under the ground. The men used to go and get a few deer for the barbeque. I lived with the Paiute Indians for many years. I learned many things from them. I knew many old time Indians who were very good people. I saw all of these things that I write about here.

In the summertime we used to go pine nutting in the mountains and camp under the pine trees. We made a big fireplace to cook our meals. Men went hunting and in no time came back with a big deer for camp meat. It was hung under a big tree. We picked pine nuts all day. In the evening we came to camp for supper and rest. Women cooked fried potatoes. Indian bread was cooked over the red-hot coals. Deer meat was roasted in a big Dutch oven and buried in the ground all day. After supper we sat by the fire and ate pine nuts cooked in a willow basket. Some old men would tell us stories that happened years ago, legends of the past which were very interesting to all of us. After we picked a few sacks of pine nuts, we would break camp and go home very happy.

Two days before Labor Day, men went to the mountains and killed a few deer for the barbeque. We made a great big corral out of willow branches. Everybody worked some cutting willows and some tying the branches together. A few tents were made for card games and a big place for ring dancing and a place for hand games. Men dug a big pit for the barbeque. The meat was put in a flour sack and well seasoned. Later in the evening it was put in the pit to cook. Men watched it all night long. In the meantime there was a big hand game going on and card games and ring dances. Many Indians came from the State of Nevada and some came from Arizona and far away places. They came in big wagons pulled by big mules. The celebration lasted three days. When the meat was done, the barbeque was served. There were all kinds of Indian food like "cicada." The Indian name is "pisgesh" and "coshavich." It comes from Mono Lake. Also "coouah," a bug, comes from the earth in the springtime. When it comes from the ground it is green but after a few hours it turns brown and sings. It is related to the locust bug. It produces a vibration noise when mating. The Indian people use to roast them and eat them. Lots of deer meat was served. Pie, cake, and coffee, all you could eat free of charge. Even white men came to eat. Some even played hand games and sang Indian songs. Some danced the ring dance and some even spoke Indian. Ring dance - old people and young people danced. We had good singers. I will name a few, but they are all gone forever: Johnny Mager, Hendry, Garrazon, Tom Stone, and Johnny Shaw. The old-timers sang war dance songs and danced the war dance. Some had old-time customs.

When the city of Los Angeles bought most of the Inyo County land, the farmers had to leave the valley. Some went to the state of Nevada, some to Oregon and many went to the San Joaquin Valley. Everything had to be moved by horse and wagons. Many farmers had to leave many things, many left beautiful horses. Some even left chickens and turkeys. No one fed them, so they went wild. Many times I went to the old ranches and caught a wild chicken or a turkey. In the summer time you could go to the farms and pick all the fruit you wanted. The city of Los Angeles destroyed many beautiful homes. Some were burned to the ground so they did not have to pay taxes to the state of California or the federal government or the county of Inyo. Some homes were sold for five dollars or ten dollars and hauled away. That is what the Water and Power from Los Angeles did to Owens Valley. Later on, they pulled out all of the orchards to save water so they could sell it at Los

Angeles for big money. Years later there were lots of wild horses in the valley. The city of Los Angeles claimed they drank to much water, so they had the U.S.A. kill all the wild horses and sell them for dog food. That was when things were tough. There was no work at all in 1930. People were hungry, maybe poor people ate some of it. Even today the city of Los Angeles still is pumping water from underneath Owens Valley and getting away with it.

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