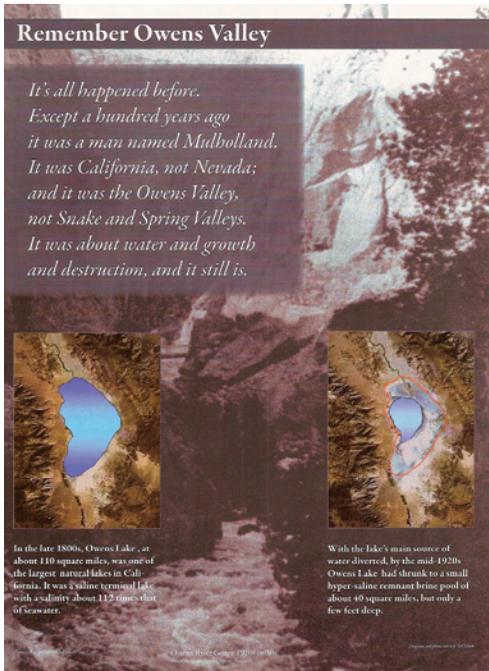


Another Owens Valley

John Walton, Ph.D.

“This will be another Owens Valley!” The outcry recurs whenever communities in the Western United States are threatened by metropolitan water grabs. As warning and rallying call, “Remember the Owens Valley!” evokes the now-famous environmental struggle and strategy of resistance to the expropriation of local water resources and the destruction of water-dependent ecosystems in the interests of far-flung designs for urban expansion.



A 2006 publication of the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada warns that Las Vegas's plans to export water from rural counties of Eastern Nevada promise another Owens Valley by destroying local ranching communities and the natural habitat.

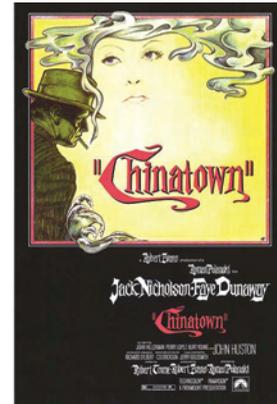
In 1905, as the City of Los Angeles began acquiring water rights in the Owens Valley under the cover of a U.S. Reclamation Service project, local townspeople and farmers protested in rallies and petition drives. Defeated when Teddy Roosevelt sanctioned building the city's aqueduct, citizens mounted a spirited rebellion in the 1920's as drought and groundwater pumping for export dried up the sources of local livelihood. In the unfolding water war Owens Valley residents pursued a two-fold strategy: negotiate with the city for a share of the water and, when rebuffed, resist in forceful action. Citizens formed their own irrigation district as a public body to confront the city. When all else failed, in November 1924 they attacked pipelines with bombs and famously occupied the aqueduct's Alabama Gates, dumping its water on the dry valley floor. This history was turned to legend in a series of muckraking exposés, novels, and

films, including the celebrated *Chinatown*, which transformed political events into a tale of mystery, incest, conspiracy, and futility.

Real progress, however, came only in the 1970's when Inyo County and the Owens Valley Committee began a series of legal actions. Lawsuits under the new National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) finally provided the leverage to hold the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) accountable for environmental depredations and to compel LADWP to begin mitigation. Those efforts continue today with important victories that restore stream flows to sixty-two miles of the lower Owens River and the delta ecosystem at Owens Lake. These days, “Remember the Owens Valley” can refer to both the environmental dangers of exporting the water supply of small rural communities for urban development and the strategies developed in one community to resist their own ruin.

Initially, the political fallout of the Owens Valley water war was registered statewide in the 1931 County of Origin law, which prohibited inter-basin water transfers that desiccate one region for the development of another. The legend has continued to spread. In the western Sierra foothills a Committee to Save the Mokelumne [River] organized in opposition to the East Bay Municipal Utility District: “This county can't let itself be turned into a 21st-century Owens Valley so residents of the East Bay can wash their cars in pure mountain water.” (*Sacramento Bee*, May 29, 1990)

Honey Lake Valley in northeastern California is threatened by the sprawling development of Reno. A battle began in the 1990's to prevent pumping the aquifer that runs from Honey Lake twenty miles east to Fish Springs Ranch on the Nevada side of the state line. At the outset



By far the most influential account of the Los Angeles-Owens Valley conflict is the 1974 Roman Polanski film *Chinatown*. Although fictionalized in many ways, *Chinatown* nevertheless told a resonant story of powerful city interests that crushed any opposition.

the press reported “natives, fearing that history may repeat, have begun to fight... We all know what happened in the Owens Valley. The fear is here.” (*Sacramento Bee*, January 22, 1990) Fish Springs Ranch was purchased by the Vilder Water Company of San Francisco, which maintained that their groundwater pumping would not affect the aquifer in California. Lassen County (CA) disagreed but lost the argument when

the Bureau of Land Management produced an Environmental Impact Statement supporting the ranch-to-Reno pipeline and sale of water for development. (*Lassen County News*, July 29, 2008)

Sometimes local and environmental groups prevail. The San Luis Valley in south-central Colorado and portions of northern New Mexico is a vast area (8,193 square miles, the size of New Jersey) with a rich history of Indian and Hispanic settlement. The Homestead Act of 1862 brought an immigrant population of European-ancestry farmers and ranchers, many of them Mormons. Canal companies modeled on the Hispanic *acequias*

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Great Sand Dunes National Park in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado was established through the efforts of a citizens' environmental movement founded on the protection of regional water resources and inspired by the Owens Valley experience.

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supported irrigated agriculture while simultaneously creating a social infrastructure of cooperating groups—very much like the Owens Valley ditch companies. San Luis Valley also contains the Great Sand Dunes, a unique natural formation that became a national monument and later a national park. The sand dunes are stabilized by the valley's aquifer, and geologists believe excessive pumping would destroy the dunes held in place by underlying groundwater.

In the mid-1980's, American Water Development, Inc. (AWDI) bought a large ranch in the valley and laid claim to 200,000 acre-feet of groundwater. Their plan was to send San Luis Valley water to the rapidly developing Front Range cities of Denver, Pueblo, and Colorado Springs. Citizens for San Luis Valley Water (CSLVW) organized at the grassroots and pursued an energetic campaign of publicity, legislative lobbying, lawsuits, and environmental awareness. Owens Valley provided them a model. As one observer reported, "CSLVW took full advantage of the parallel, arranging for current residents of the Owens Valley to come to the San Luis Valley and recount their valley's fate." CSLVW successfully challenged the water-rights claim of AWDI, which in turn sold out to a San Francisco investment firm that adopted the name Stockman's Water Co. for the Colorado operation. The fundamental purpose remained water export and sale to Front Range cities, but the new company presented itself as an environmentally friendly promoter of a "preserve" and wildlife reservation. In response, the opposition reorganized as Citizens for Colorado's Water with statewide support. The citizens' movement won a permanent victory when The Nature Conservancy purchased the ranch and water rights and, with the help of Colorado senators and Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, donated the property to the newly designated Great Sand Dunes National Park.

Strictly speaking, there is no other Owens Valley. Each region and water export scheme has its own time, place, and conditions. The parallels are not perfect and any credit for recent efforts to defend local water resources belongs more to citizen initiatives than to historical models. Yet the Owens Valley experience remains a powerful symbol and practical guide to environmental action—a model for those needing encouragement. The legend grows because it teaches and inspires.

[This is the first of a two-part article. The next installment in our December issue will pursue the theme "Another Owens Valley" by drawing on contemporary cases in Northern California and Eastern Nevada.]

*John Walton, Ph.D., is a research professor in sociology at UC Davis and the author of *Western Times and Water Wars* (University of California Press), the definitive story of Owens Valley and the struggle with the City of Los Angeles.*