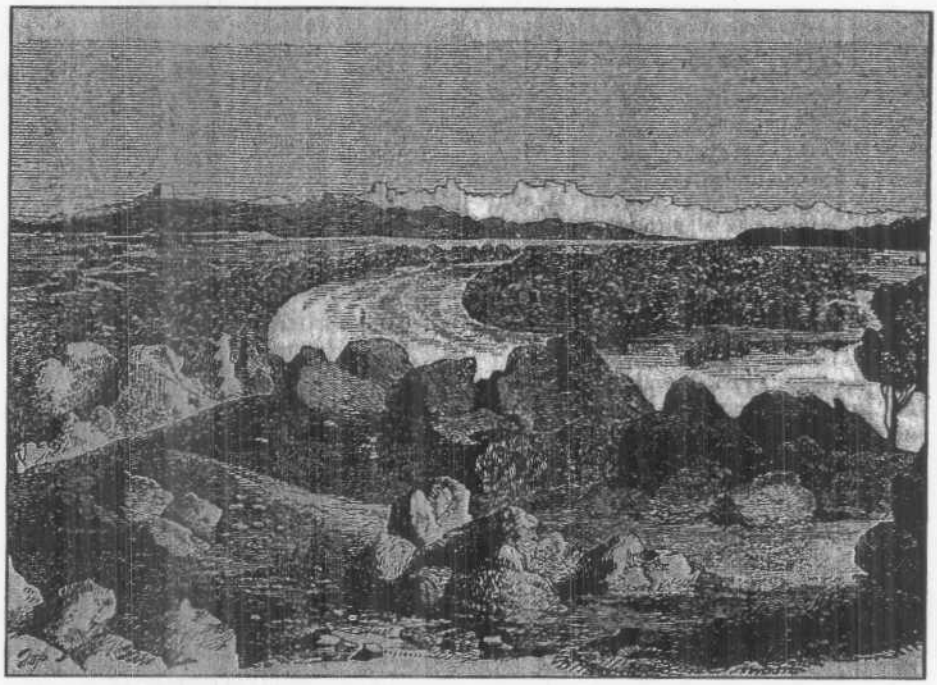
by Steve Bogdan



The Birth *of* A Valley

The month of December heralds the 100th anniversary of the settlement of the Imperial Valley. While work on the canal system had begun earlier at the Colorado River, it was in December 1900 that the first plow bit into the rich soil of the desert floor. In past issues of this magazine, I have written of the early pioneers involved in the herculean effort to reclaim this barren landscape. As we begin a yearlong celebration of anniversaries, it is appropriate to present an overview of the events that led to this momentous episode. Although many of the players and facts of this history will be familiar to regular readers of *Valley Grower*, fixing them in a proper timeline should prove beneficial to all.

The study of the past is divided into two parts: that which has been recorded is called history, while that which occurred before records were made and kept is called prehistory. The prehistory of our Valley begins, naturally, with the geographic development of the region.

Eons ago, perhaps five to seven million years in the past, the body of water we now call the Gulf of California extended farther north than it does today. Much of modern Imperial County was ocean floor, as evidenced by the fossilized remains of over 200 different marine invertebrate species unearthed in the Fish Creek area and in the Coyote Mountains. Also recovered from what geologists have called the Imperial Formation have been the remains of such marine vertebrates as the bat ray, white shark, tiger shark, giant barracuda, pufferfish, sea cow, baleen whale and an early walrus.

Beginning approximately four million years ago and roughly ending with the advent of the last Ice Age, the area surrounding this body of water supported a diverse population of mammals. Now extinct giant ground sloths, herds of mammoths, sabercats, American zebras, lions, bears, llamas, camels and horses all roamed the countryside, along with the more familiar vultures, gophers, mice, kangaroo rats, rabbits and a bevy of snakes and lizards.

Over the course of countless centuries, the oceans receded and the Colorado River began to create its alluvial flood plain. As the deposited silt built up it eventually formed a natural delta dam to the south, creating an inland sea. Separated from the gulf waters, the area to the north eventually dried up except for periodic and extensive appearances of a fresh water lake formed by the Colorado, whether by overflow or because its flow had been completely diverted into the basin. This body of water filled the basin (or sink) at various times until the latter part of the 16th century. The shoreline of ancient Lake Cahuilla, as it was known, can be seen etched along the hills to the west and northeast of the present Salton Sea.

Some time during the course of the last few thousand years, groups of Native Americans settled around what is now the Imperial Valley. Among these were bands that are recognizable today. To the east, hugging the great river, were the Quechans or Yumans, to the south were the Cocopahs, and to the west were assorted branches of the Kumeyaay, who are now found primarily in San Diego County.

In the mid-1500s, the first European explorers arrived in the vicinity and ushered in the Valley's historic period. In February 1540, Francisco Vasquez de Coronado, the governor of Nueva Galicia in New Spain, began his expedition to the legendary gold-filled "Seven Cities of Cibola." He left Compostela and proceeded up the west coast of Mexico before turning

slightly inland, entering what is now the United States in April of 1540, at the southern end of the Huachuca Mountains, where his command split into a number of smaller companies.

One such company was led by Melehier Diaz, who forged a route that would later be followed, in part, by thousands of others. In October, he made his way to "a province of exceedingly tall and strong men living on a great river." By reason of a practice these men had of carrying in cold weather a firebrand (tison) to warm themselves, Diaz decided to name the river "Rio del Tison," or the "River of the Firebrand."

When he crossed it to explore the other side, he entered what would become Imperial County. Unfortunately, on the return journey he threw his lance at a dog that was bothering some sheep, and somehow managed to impale himself on the butt end of the weapon. Diaz had to be carried back along the trail by his men and died in route to Ures, New Spain.

Despite having claimed the vast area of the southwest for itself, Spain virtually ignored most of it for the next two centuries. In 1605, Juan de Onate reached the mouth of the Colorado River, traveling overland from Santa Fe, and calling it the "River of Good Hope," while Father Eusebio Kino called it the "Red River of the Martyrs" in 1701.

But it wasn't until the British and Russians began their western expansion in the late 18th century that Spain did anything to consolidate its claims in earnest.

Every California fourth-grader learns that on July 6, 1769, Mission San Diego de Alcala was officially founded, the first of a chain of 21 missions to be established along the California coast. These missions were linked by "El Camino Real," an overland route that extended from southern to northern California. But there was a second overland route that was founded just five years later, which only Imperial County fourth-graders know about. That's because an enterprising priest named Francisco Garces located a route from this county's eastern edge to the San Jacinto Mountains. The good father called it "El Camino de Diablo," because of the scarcity of available water along the way.

He returned in 1774 with Captain Juan Bautista de Anza and a party of 32, stopping at the Quechan village on the west side of the river, where de Anza had made friends with the tribal leader. In an attempt to open an overland route between Sonora and Monterrey, the expedition teamed up with a guide named Sebastian Tarabal, and after several false starts they reached the Signal Mountain area and pressed on to Mission San Gabriel, proving that a land route was feasible.

This overland route was short-lived, however. On January 7, 1781, two missions were established among the native people on the Colorado River, and they were supposed to ensure the safety of the crossing. These missions, La Purisima Concepcion and San Pedro y San Pablo de Bicuner, were attacked by the Quechans on July 17, and nearly all the men were killed, while the women and children were carried off as slaves. The aforementioned Father Garces was among the dead.

Spain sent troops to put down the rebellion, but after a few skirmishes the army mainly resorted to taking hostages that could be traded for the Spanish captives. The Quechan victory effectively closed the crossing and seriously crippled communications between upper California and New Spain.

But California changed hands in 1821, when Mexico won its independence from Spain, and began to make some attempt to reopen the

trail. In 1825, the government ordered Rumaldo Pacheco, a young lieutenant from the San Diego presidio, to build a fort between the river and the mountains. This adobe edifice, located about three miles west of present-day Imperial, christened Fort Laguna Chapela, was the only Mexican fort ever built in Alta California. On April 26, 1826, the Kumeyaay attacked the fort, killing three soldiers, and the trail once again fell into sporadic use.

In 1846 the Mexican-American War broke out, which changed the situation forever. Shortly after it began, preparations were being made to send General Stephen Watts Kearney and an American "Army of the West" from its bloodless victories in New Mexico to the battlefields of California. Kit Carson, who had been working as a guide for General Fremont, met Kearney on the open trail and told him that Los Angeles had surrendered. The general sent back 200 of his 300-man force and persuaded Carson to serve as a guide across the desert.

Unfortunately, the Californios had resumed the struggle, and Kearney and his men were met with a stinging defeat at the Battle of San Pasqual. Ultimately, the Californio forces surrendered and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on February 2, 1848.

Traffic on the trail increased considerably after that, especially after gold was discovered just one year after California's annexation. This southern route proved to be the only one that was open all winter, and it soon became flooded with gold-seekers. In 1851, a Texas newspaper printed this excerpt from an anonymous correspondent who had crossed this desert in July of 1849, traveling mainly at night:

– July 29. Continued our way [from Cooke's Well] at sunup and traveled 26 miles to the next wells. The journey was very fatiguing; over sand hills part of the way. This is truly a desert country, destitute of everything except desert shrubs, and reminds one of descriptions given by a traveler of the great Sahara, especially the clouds of sand which prevail, on a small scale, when the wind is high. We left this place at five o'clock, journeying 22 miles to a large, beautiful lake of water, and encamped on the east side of it in a pleasant grove of mesquite trees. This lake is about midway in the desert, affording excellent water. there is a small river making out from it a north course into the desert.

– July 30. Pursued our journey (leaving the lake at two o'clock), passing over the river that makes from the lake, 15 miles from our encampment. Here we found it about 30 feet wide and swimming. We were informed by the Mexicans that this stream in the desert was not known a few years back.

This was the first recorded mention of the stream which was quickly dubbed the New River.

As the forty-niners continued to rush into the new territory, the United States government participated in an International Boundary Commission which was to survey the new Mexican/American border. In October of 1849 an American border survey party, led by Lieutenant Amiel Whipple, established an observation post called Camp Calhoun amid the Spanish ruins on Indian Hill. The military escort for the party was led by Lieutenant Cave J. Couts, who helped to start a ferry for the wagons that were now plying the trail.

On September 23, 1849, Couts founded a military camp that was called Camp Salvation, located in what is now the present-day city of Calexico. The camp served as a refugee center for distressed travelers attempting to reach the gold fields over what was now being referred to as the Southern

Emigrant Trail. As the survey party moved on, the tent city was relocated three miles to the north, where it became known as Emigrant Camp. And it overlooked the New River.

In 1850, California became the nation's 31st state, and our eastern border touched what was then considered the New Mexico Territory. It was common to see the area referred to in San Diego newspapers as the "New River Country."

Among the thousands matriculating along the Southern Emigrant Trail was a 34-year-old Ohio doctor who decided to go west in 1849. It was during the last leg of his journey, as Oliver Wozencraft crossed our desert, in fact, that he had an epiphany. Having marveled at the presence of the Colorado in the middle of the desert, he conceived of an idea to reclaim it from the randomness of nature.

Back at the crossing, an on-again, off-again post called Camp Yuma had been established in 1850 to protect westward-bound emigrants, but a Quechan and Mojave uprising the next year led to its temporary abandonment. By 1852, the camp had been recaptured and made permanent, and people now referred to it as Fort Yuma. That year saw the first steamboat, the Uncle Sam, arrive to re-supply the fort.

In 1855, buildings that stand today were completed at Fort Yuma. Two years later saw the start of the "jackass mail" route from San Antonio to San Diego via the Imperial Valley. It was replaced a short time after that by Butterfield's Overland Mail Company, which ran from Tipton, Missouri to San Francisco, a distance of 2,812 miles in 25 days.

It was at around this time that Dr. Wozencraft began to act on his vision for the reclamation of the desert. By April of 1859, he had received the rights to 1,600 square miles of the Salton Sink. In the fall of that year, he had a bill before the U.S. Congress that was gaining favor in committee just as the Civil War started. Considered to be non-essential, under the circumstances, the plan was set aside indefinitely.

The end of the war saw another explosion of activity along the southern route. In 1873 a telegraph line was run across the Imperial Valley from San Diego to Fort Yuma, and in 1877, the Southern Pacific Railroad, following a northwest to southeast route discovered during the Civil War, cut across the Valley and connected in Yuma.

In 1884, the New Liverpool Salt Company began operations in the Salton Sink, and Pete Walters discovered the first gold vein at Gold Rock, and from this claim sprang a gold camp known as Hedges (and later as Tumco) that by 1899 would number more than 3,200 residents. Meanwhile, Wozencraft was trying to get his plan back on track, but to no avail. He approached an engineer named George Chaffey, and tried unsuccessfully to interest him in the project. After that, Wozencraft, who was 73 and had been working on the reclamation project for more than half of his life, died, and his dream might have met the same fate if not for another visionary named Charles Rockwood.

Already aware of Wozencraft's basic idea, he obtained a study done by an engineer of the Southern Pacific and became convinced that such a massive undertaking would be feasible. At the time, he was representing a Denver company that wanted to invest in a diversion project in Sonora, Mexico, but Rockwood believed the Salton Sink area held greater promise.

His initial report to the board of directors of the Arizona & Sonora Land & Irrigation Company was so encouraging that Rockwood was authorized to begin surveys and pledged $2 million for the enterprise. The firm even changed its name to the Colorado River Irrigation Company, which had a hopeful ring to it.

Alas, it was not to be.

The financial panic of 1893 would delay the project for seven long years, and most of the preliminary field work was paid for out of Rockwood's own pocket, as outside funding never materialized. By this time, the head of the company was John Beatty, and he replaced the board with New York captains of industry, all of whom received stock bonuses for the use of their names and were paid to attend meetings. The situation became so untenable for Rockwood that he had to file suit against the company and took possession of the surveys and equipment in lieu of payment.

He traveled to Scotland, having exhausted his domestic alternatives, to meet with a group of financiers who actually held the option from

Continued on page 32

Continued from page 29

General Guillermo Andrade to all of his lands in Baja California. The plan was to have them fund the entire project, but the financial panic had preceded him across the ocean, and the Scots were no help to him, either.

But he had picked up a second valuable piece of intelligence, in that the Andrade option expired the very next year, and Rockwood devised a plan to obtain it for himself. He broke off all ties to the Colorado River Irrigation Company and waited for his opportunity. He was assisted in this endeavor by a friend, Dr. W.T. Heffernan, who was the government surgeon in Yuma, and provided most of the project's early capital.

After he secured the option on the Andrade lands in 1895, Rockwood sought the assistance of Samuel Ferguson, who would serve as the promoter of the new venture. He also brought along an associate named Anthony H. Heber.

On April 26, 1896, the four men along with John Beatty's cousin, James, who had invested $50,000 in the enterprise, formed the California Development Company, with Heber as president and Rockwood as vice president. But the money woes continued, to the point that Heber, as president, had to hock personal jewelry for $125 in order to finance yet another fundraising trip to New York.

Finally, a major New York trust company indicated that it would back the project, leading Heber and Rockwood to treat themselves to a celebratory dinner (that set the firm back $1). The next morning, the New York papers were filled with the news that the U.S.S. Maine had been sunk in Havana harbor. The resulting Spanish-American War caused the tentative financing deal to fall apart, and the company continued to struggle against the odds and time.

Charles Rockwood met George Chaffey in 1899, presenting him with the same engineering outline he had been showing to everyone else, without success. Whether or not Rockwood knew of Chaffey's prior association with Wozencraft is unclear, but no mention was made during that first meeting of any direct investment. Heber resigned as president that fall, and Rockwood took over the company's day-to-day affairs, on top of his normal fundraising duties.

Chaffey made a fact-finding trip to Hanlon Heading in December, and what he saw did not reassure him as to the project's feasibility. His main objection seemed to be that it would be next to impossible to convince settlers to take up land on the desert floor. But in the end, he agreed to furnish the money if, and only if, Rockwood could guarantee that 50,000 acres would be populated by bona fide settlers.

As the year closed, the cash-strapped partners were now faced with the task of forming a colonization company which would, if at all possible, find enough stout-hearted pioneers to take up the desired acreage under provisions of the Desert Land Act.

The fledgling Imperial Land Company was chartered in March of 1900, and the Imperial Valley, which the partners favored over Professor Blake's hot-sounding Colorado Desert, was literally born. A program of nationwide advertising commenced immediately.

It was while conducting a survey party in April that the principals of the California Development Company met up with their first group of land-seekers. There were five of them, and they were being shown around by the new president of the Imperial Land Company, Mr. Ferguson.

After this encounter, two other prospective settlers made a camp on the shores of Blue Lake, which was one of a number of lakes created along the New River by the seasonal overflow of the Colorado River. A rudimentary rest stop for weary land-seekers was soon built there.

During that August, three more men joined the trickle of curious pioneers. After one such Land Company tour, William Van Horn, Lete M. Van Horn and Willard F. Gillett took up 320 acres between them, then returned to the Salt River Valley in Arizona for their families.

And so it was that William Van Horn, his wife, Maggie, and their six children joined Lete, a widower with four children and Will and Mary Gillett and their six children and they all set out from Cold Water, Arizona in three wagons brimming with household goods, and pulling scrapers and plows for their new farms. The children walked along the side driving horses and a pregnant milk cow. At night they slept under the stars.

The group picked up two more members in Yuma, as Tom Beach and a part-time Territorial Prison guard named Mobley Meadows crossed over into California with them. They would stay in this location for the next six weeks, working to scrape down the hard spots in the Alamo Channel. After that, they moved on to Cameron Lake (where Calexico is today) and crossed the borderline back into the United States on December 24, 1900.

The next day, the first families of the Imperial Valley celebrated their first pioneer Christmas. There were no recorded celebrations on either New Year's Eve or New Year's Day in the Valley, probably because to the handful of brave souls scattered across the basin these were just two more days in which to ready the land and break apart the virgin silt that the Colorado River had laid down eons ago. •

– by Steve Bogdan