

A History of the Imperial Valley... Part I

The Imperial Valley may seem relatively new to our eastern countrymen. We have no Plymouth Rock, no Boston Harbor. But as the rest of our nation was on the brink of declaring its independence from its mother country, Spain had already solidified her claims to the Southwest by sending Captain Gaspar de Portola and Father Junipero Serra to establish the California mission chain of more than twenty outposts spaced a day's ride apart.

Fortifying the missions fell to Juan Bautista de Anza, a captain in the Spanish military. He explored for a land passage to the missions from the south and east, establishing contact with various indian groups along the way. His successful crossing of the area we know as the Anza Borrego Desert was made in 1774. The following autumn, Captain De Anza led more than 240 soldiers and settlers and their livestock across this same route. Although timed to avoid the devastating heat of the desert, an unusually severe winter and rare snowstorm was as harsh on the travelers as the summer sun might have been. The trip culminated in northern California with the founding of the Presidio of San Francisco. The year was 1776. In the East, the American Revolution had just begun.

Not until almost fifty years later was another attempt made to establish a desert settlement by non-natives. The newly founded Federal Republic of Mexico sent military engineer Lieutenant Alferes Romualdo Pacheco to oversee the construction of a fort at Laguna Chapala along one of the few routes traversing the area. Remains of the briefly occupied structure, sixty feet square, with stone walls, mud ramps and ledges, crowned by a thorny ocotillo barricade, were standing and visible northwest of El Centro until thirty years ago.

Of course, these early settlers were not the first to acknowledge the harshness of the desert or to appreciate the gifts of the Colorado River. Ancient native tribes had wandered from the coast land through the mountains to the desert for, perhaps, thousands of years. The Kumeyaay discovered the rich agricultural potential at the banks of the river in their yearly migrations. In addition to gathering edible plants and hunting for game, they fished with traps along the shores of Lake Cahuilla, a large body of water that covered part of the desert basin for hundreds of years. They supplemented their needs by cultivating crops such as beans, maize, pumpkins, and melons in the soft mud left by the flooding Colorado. As they traveled through, they pushed seeds into the fertile soil, returning later in the year for the harvest.

While they left no written records, we know them by their pottery, baskets, tools, trails, and remnants of temporary villages. The most spectacular legacy of these native peoples are the petroglyphs and geoglyphs left on the ground and rocks.

These artforms, believed to have religious meaning, were made by ancient man by scraping designs in rocks (petroglyphs) or aligning small stones in various patterns on the desert floor (geoglyphs). There are more than a dozen sites with petroglyphs in Imperial County and this area is one of only three known places in the world to have geoglyphs. They range from a three foot high human figure to a geometric shape more

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It was the Colorado River that led Dr. O.M. Wozencraft, who originally had come to California for the Gold Rush, to begin his thirty eight-year quest to bring water to the area. In 1859, Wozencraft received support for his idea from the State Legislature of California, which granted him rights to the land should he be able to establish the water supply as he proposed. The Federal Congress showed some interest in Wozencraft's proposal, but the Civil War and other matters demanded greater priority. Until his death in 1887, Wozencraft, realizing the many possibilities for wealth in the agricultural potential of the Colorado Desert Valley, worked diligently to achieve his unfulfilled dream.

Nearly forty years of speculation and comment had taken place regarding various desert irrigation plans when, in 1892, a company out of Colorado sent Mr. C.R. Rockwood, an experienced irrigation engineer, to Yuma. While investigating the possibility of irrigating the Sonora, Mexico, desert area with water from the Colorado River, Rockwood found instead that such a project was more feasible into the Colorado Desert. The project was approved and the search for financial backing was begun. Rockwood was named as chief engineer.

Surveys revealed a total of two million acres in the Salton Basin and Baja California could be irrigated from a single canal project. The Salton Sink would serve as an area to receive drainage from the irrigation system. The company staked out the proposed route of the canal; yet, financial resources were slow to materialize leaving Rockwood to revise plans to a less expensive route.

In a further reorganization in 1896, a new investment group was formed, the California Development Company, with Mr. A.H. Heber of Chicago, Illinois, as president and Rockwood as vice president. Three years later, Rockwood himself headed the organization.

The search for financing eventually led to George Chaffey who originally had rejected the desert plan when Wozencraft had proposed it to him eight years previously. In the intervening years, Chaffey had experience and success with similar irrigation systems in the hot arid lands of Australia. He was now convinced that the Colorado Desert could become productive and well populated.

To help finance the canal system, another California Development Company subsidiary, the Imperial Land Company, sold shares of water stock through locally owned mutual water companies.

Chaffey began to dredge in August of 1900, creating a canal bed from Hanlon Heading to the border (a track less than five miles in length), then west for two to three miles to connect with the Alamo River channel. Minor excavation was needed for forty miles along the channel to Sharp's Heading. The central main canal went north and west to pass four miles east of the Calexico area. A lateral canal was built west of Calexico. On May 14, 1901, water was diverted from the Colorado River to the canal for the first time.

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During the next two years, more mutual water companies were formed, with the California Development Company building most of the distribution systems as well as the main canals and laterals to service these newly developed areas. W.F. Holt, who established the No. 7 Water Company and the town of Holtville, also built the Holton Power Co., a small hydroelectric plant, that began supplying the first electricity to the Holtville area in 1904. By 1905, eighty miles of main canals and 700 miles of distribution canals were in existence.

Previously, potable water was hauled south from Coachella Valley by railway car. With water finally available from the Colorado River, the population boomed. In 1901, few white men inhabited the Imperial Valley other than the surveyors working on the canals. In four years, by 1905, the residents numbered 12,000. Irrigated acreage had increased from 1,500 acres to 67,000 acres.

The need for transportation to bring goods into the Imperial Valley and to ship agricultural products out prompted a citizen demand which finally spurred the construction of a branch line from the Southern Pacific railway near present day Niland south to Imperial early in 1903 and then on to Calexico early in 1904. By 1919, El Centro was linked to San Diego by rail.

To facilitate development and the conducting of business, the desert lands east of the coastal range of mountains were organized into a county structure separate from San Diego in August 1907 and Imperial County was born. Previously only one town, Imperial, had been incorporated; however, in 1908, the cities of Calexico, Brawley, Holtville and El Centro formed official governments. Smaller communities included Heber, Silsbee, Seeley, Niland, Westmorland, and Calipatria. In Mexico, the community of Mexicali, founded about the same time as Calexico was established, was thriving.

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The desert pioneer was accustomed to hardship. Hard work and harsh weather were all endured to persevere in their dream. Yet hardship of a different form was to follow. Due to inaccuracies in early land surveys Congress authorized a new survey to be taken. Commencing in July 1902, it took more than six years to complete, leaving Valley land titles unofficial for that period and land owners unable to use their property as security for loans.

In addition, a government soil survey, released in January 1902 and expanded in 1903, asserted that the alkaline soil conditions here made "crops absolutely impossible to grow." National attention was already focused on the great undertaking in the Imperial Valley desert, and press reports quoting from the soil survey were completely devastating--credibility and credit were lost.

As if conditions weren't already severe, heavy silt deposits created growing problems of the irrigation project. The river swept this material along in its flow, enough silt, by volume, to raise one square mile of land 53 feet in height each year. The upper end of the canal, all the way into Mexico, was also filling with silt. An opening was dug as a bypass, with no control gate. A series of floods in the winter of 1904-05, resulted in rapid erosion and widening of the temporary bypass opening. The Colorado River flowed full force through this channel and into the Imperial Valley.

Numerous attempts to close the flooded channel were unsuccessful. The California Development Company's credit was severely strained at this point, and the Southern Pacific Company was induced to loan funds so that efforts could be continued to close the break in the riverbank.

In addition to the funds supplied, Southern Pacific dedicated enormous amounts of other resources to stemming the flood waters. Railway cars transported hundreds of tons of rock and gravel in a steady supply from the railway quarries to the river for several months. The rock was piled around trestles driven into the canal bed to stop the flow of the river. An initial closure was achieved in November 1906, but the river soon broke through again. Finally, in February 1907, the river was diverted back to its proper channel.

Results of the flooding were profound. Thirteen thousand acres were lost from the erosion. Salton Sink, virtually dry before the floods, had filled to become a 50-mile by 15-mile body of water covering 285,000 acres, the largest inland sea in North America. Damage to the railroad lines exceeded \$850,000. Two water companies were now without a water supply, causing a loss of 12,000 acres of crops and forcing families settled in the affected areas to move out, at least temporarily. Many settlers felt the flooding was a sign that desert irrigation was an impossible project, and moved away permanently.

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Heavy expenditures for canal improvements and floodwater diversion, as well as lawsuits over losses from floods on both sides of the border and the earlier water shortages in the Imperial Valley, had strained the California Development Company to its financial limit. The company was placed in receivership in December 1909.

Yet true pioneer determination was undaunted and efforts to regroup, rebuild and move ahead began. In July 1922, Imperial Valley voters approved the organization of the Imperial Irrigation District. Using bond issues for financing, the Irrigation District purchased the thirteen mutual water companies, bringing the Imperial County water delivery system under a single controlling body. Construction of an extensive drainage system was undertaken, with deep drains laid out to each farm. The first farm tile drainage in the Imperial Valley was in place in 1929.

In 1922 Imperial Valley Congressional Representative Phil Swing introduced legislation calling for construction of a dam at Boulder Canyon, eliminating the possibility of another devastating flood. President Calvin Coolidge signed the bill in December 1928. Today, Hoover Dam and a Brawley elementary school are among the standing tributes to Swing and his efforts.

Construction of a canal running its entire length through United States soil was begun in 1934. Mule teams pulling Fresno scrapers carved a path through the desert. Local workers earned three dollars a day at this task. Water was delivered through the All American Canal in 1940 and hydroelectric plants produced power for Imperial Valley just one year later.

Farms and other businesses flourished, and over the years, thousands of people from other areas of the United States and from all over the world migrated here to find the good life those early developers had envisioned. Today, more than 500,000 acres are under production in the Imperial County, yielding nearly one billion dollars in crops. The inexpensive land and adequate water supply that drew early pioneers are opening the Imperial Valley to a new breed. The advent of air conditioning coupled with low utility rates have drawn industry to the area. Geothermal Power, aerospace and manufacturing are now important residents in our area.

Each story, whether remembered by a pioneer family member or historian, is a part of the heritage of all the desert's citizens--present and future.

The memory of the pioneering people of Imperial County, their indomitable spirit and contributions to our society, will be preserved for generations to come.

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