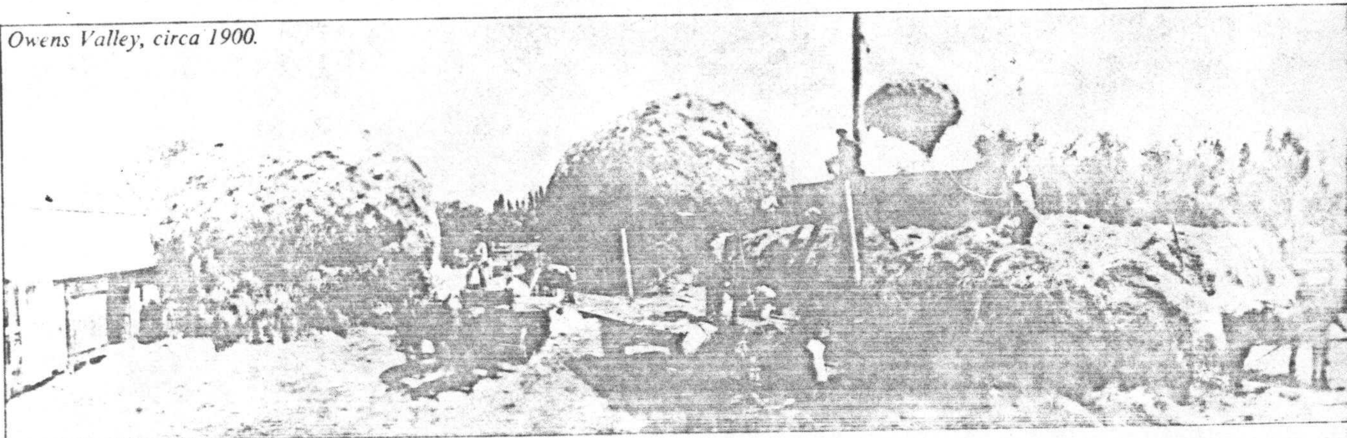
R.R. CALIF. WATER CRISIS

How Green Was My Valley

By Ehud Yonay



Owens Valley, circa 1900.

"... 'Los Angeles took my grandfather's water and nearly bankrupted my dad,' says Vernon Holland. 'Now they're about to drive me out' ..."

Only 267 miles by car—or 142 by air—separate wildly disparate places that may determine how much water flows to Los Angeles for years to come. At the southeast there is the snowpack of the Sierras, where employees of the L.A. Department of Water and Power, like Chuck Seybert, are measuring an amount of snow far too small to replenish the ground-water table of the Owens Valley, which in turn provides 80 percent of L.A.'s water. Northwest of Mammoth and the Sierra Nevada mountains is the Third Appellate District Court of Sacramento, where associate judges Leonard M. Friedman, Edwin J. Regan and Hugh A. Evans are deciding the merits of a lawsuit against the DWP brought by Inyo County (which includes the Owens Valley).

If the county wins, the DWP would have to reevaluate its entire water import program, or perhaps even surrender Owens Valley as its prime source of water. And even if the court upholds the DWP position and allows it to continue pumping down more water, the case is certain to be appealed to the environment-minded State Supreme Court, where observers believe Inyo County stands a good chance of winning. The end of the most bitter water war in the state's history is now in sight.

Over the last few months, the confrontation between the city and the valley has reached an intensity unequaled since the violent battles of the 1920s. Last summer, the city aqueduct was blasted with dynamite (and an eighteen-year-old youth was arrested). Then last week the DWP asked the court for permission to pump twice as much valley water while the valley's suit remains unresolved.

I went to the embattled valley, 250 miles north of L.A., and traced the story of one family that has been living under the Los Angeles DWP's dominance for the last seven decades:

Harry Holland lasted a little longer than the others, but on the night of July 14, 1932, he, too, gave up and sold his stucco house on East Line Street in Bishop to the City of Los Angeles. He figured that, with everybody leaving town, and with his theater taking in a bare $10 a night, the money he could get for the house would allow him to pack up his family and move away. Besides, there was no point in waiting for a better offer. For more than two decades L.A. had been acquiring nearly every square foot in the valley. Some clown had actually posted a "Los Angeles City Limits" sign at the north end of town.

Thirteen-year-old Vernon, eldest of the six Holland children, was only

"... Looking across the arid landscape, Holland said, 'It was green all the time, and all the ducks and geese would blacken the sky' ..."

vaguely aware of what was happening. All he knew was that the family was sitting around the heavy oak kitchen table, and they were all crying. Across the table, his mother was staring at a gilt-framed, ivory-toned photograph of her grandfather, who had come to the valley 70 years earlier to fight Indians. "What a waste," she said to nobody in particular. "You bleed and sweat to build something in this wilderness, and as soon as you succeed some bully takes it away from you."

Vernon wondered if the sale of the house included his room—an old miner's shack his father had hauled in from the hills and set up in the back yard next to the horse pasture. Vernon and his brother Jim had it all to themselves, an incredible luxury even though the shack was not heated against the freezing winter nights at the foot of the Sierras.

But Vernon was crying mostly because he did not want L.A. to get the house. Ever since he could remember, friends and neighbors who knuckled under to the city would come around to say good-bye, crying and dragging their feet. In his mind the city loomed like a huge, shapeless monster rolling across the countryside, devouring everything in its path. Now his father, too, was selling out to the monster.

The man from the city finally came. Vernon would forever remember him as big and fat and mean-looking, like the villains in the moving pictures in his father's theater. The man gave Holland a sheaf of papers, which he signed without looking up. Vernon felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach.

A few weeks later, Will Rogers drove up to the valley to shoot a film and filed the following newspaper dispatch: "Bishop, Calif., Aug. 25—Ten years ago this was a wonderful valley with one quarter of a million acres of fruit and alfalfa. But Los Angeles needed more water for the Chamber of Commerce to drink more toasts to its growth, more water to dilute its orange juice, more water for its geraniums to delight the tourists, while the giant cottonwoods here died. So, now, this is a valley of desolation."

"I shall never forget that night as long as I live," shouted Vernon Holland, now a rugged, ruddy-faced 57, as he gunned his maroon pickup truck down Highway 395 south of Bishop. "Every time I think of what the city did to this valley, I see red. My father lost everything. My friends had to leave. I'll never forget."

Around us, the sagebrush desert stretched from the granite wall of the Sierras on the west to the White Mountains, six miles to the east. "On the right it used to be all alfalfa and grapes. On the left, potatoes as far as the eye could see," Holland shouted, sweeping his massive arm over the arid landscape. "Hell, it used to be all green all the time. There was more fishing and hunting than we knew what to do with. Ducks and geese would come through here till they blackened the sky. For a kid, this valley was the greatest place on earth."

He stopped the truck on Warm Springs Road. We jumped over a barbed wire fence into the chest-high dusty rabbit brush and spent the rest of the afternoon roaming through the remnants of a vanished civilization—crumbled water gates, broken-down house foundations, fallen canal bridges, weathered corral posts. As the sun sank behind the Sierra peaks, Holland dug up a rusty old cast-iron school desk. "My grandmother was such a great lady, the first white baby born in Camp Independence. She used to teach in the school that once stood here," he said softly.

I have been following the dispute between the DWP and the valley since 1972 when the Inyo County district attorney sued L.A. for diverting the valley's underground water without filing an Environmental Impact Report. But this ride through the valley, with its ghost ranches, was different from the abstract discussions of cubic-feet-per-second water flows that I had had with shirt-sleeved city engineers on the air-conditioned fifteenth floor of the DWP building down in Los Angeles.

The story of the Holland family's five-generation struggle is the saga of the valley itself. It would have made a corny B Western, starting with the Indian fighters and ending with the uprooted settlers driving off into the sunset. But there was a big difference here. The baron who uprooted them and turned this valley into a desert was a city. Los Angeles.

Vernon Holland's great-grandfather,

Happy days: *The family posed outside its new home in 1900. The grandfather had come to the Owens Valley in 1864 to fight Indians.*

James Haberlin, was a tousled-haired, Irish Navy deserter, who jumped ship in New York, changed his name to Malone and joined the U.S. Army. He escorted a wagon train across the plains and arrived at Camp Independence in Owens Valley in the summer of 1864 with a wife and a baby, who later died. After several years of fighting bands of Paiutes, he bought a 160-acre ranch nearby and settled down to raise cattle, hay and his five daughters.

Annie, his eldest daughter, a tall, athletic redhead, was the valley's first schoolteacher. In 1886 she married Henry Parnell Nelligan, a walrus-mustached house-painter from Reno. They moved to Bishop, where Nelligan opened a paint store, bought a six-acre spread on the outskirts of town and, in 1897, built a two-story Victorian home with turned-wood columns and doors which he decorated in his own special way, using his stiff thumbnail to carve chickens and hogs. Nelligan loved the valley.

His idyll did not last long. In 1904, in one of the most celebrated swindles in the nation's history, the City of Los Angeles seized the bulk of the valley's water and proceeded to let the land go dry and to drive the ranchers out (*see page 25*). Having gained control of the headwaters of the Owens River and its tributaries, city agents worked their way downstream, bullying, defrauding and seducing one rancher after another to sell out and clear out. Nelligan's ranch was being watered through a ditch he had dug from the north fork of Bishop Creek. He had no intention, however, of selling—not even after the city diverted Bishop Creek above his water gate, leaving him a mere trickle. Others also refused to sell; soon a wave of mysterious fires broke out on the ranches of recalcitrant farmers.

The Nelligans prepared for a siege. constant grin. He later joined road shows where he specialized in magic and ventriloquism routines, using a Punch-and-Judy dummy set he had carved himself. He came to Bishop in 1909 with such a show, quit and opened the Gem Theater. He subsequently built the Bishop Opera House. In 1918, Harry Holland married Nelligan's daughter, Belle. Their son Vernon was born a year later.

The battle between the city and the ranchers climaxed in the following decade. The ranchers fought back by bombing the city aqueduct and by appealing to Sacramento and Washington, but to no avail. During one legislative hearing, a DWP representative stormed out shouting that the city would invade any part of California if it needed the water. And it did. By 1930 the city owned 95 percent of the valley farmlands and 85 percent of the town lots. Businesses folded. Real estate values plunged. Con-

Defiant years: *The present family posed at the old house last month. For decades now they have been fighting Los Angeles for water.*

antique wood-grain patterns in the heavy varnish. Their daughter Belle, Vernon Holland's mother, was born the same year.

By the turn of the century, the Owens Valley was enjoying an agricultural boom, producing wheat, fruit, beef, eggs, pork and wool for the nearby mining towns of Mojave and Nevada. From the mountains, which the residents climbed on weekends in search of deer and new trout streams, one could see meadows delicately etched with rows of poplar and cottonwood windbreakers and small, picture-postcard farms with white silos and new corrals. New settlers were arriving daily. Business was good. Each morning Nelligan hitched his team and drove to work in town while Annie raised apples, corn, Annie boarded her girls in town and took turns with the boys guarding the ranch with a shotgun while Nelligan was at work. Their tenacity lasted through the cruelest water war in the West. "Years later, even after the city owned most of the valley, I remember him still refusing to let them buy him out," says Holland of his grandfather. "All he said was that nobody was going to drive him off it. After my father sold our house, I practically grew up on the ranch."

Vernon's father, Harry Holland, lost his parents by the time he was seven and had to fend for himself raising polo ponies in Texas and sheep in Wyoming. During a range war a cowboy shot him through the jaw, leaving him with an offset chin and the appearance of a struction halted. Like the Okies streaming out of the Dust Bowl, there was an unending exodus of farm trucks from the valley, loaded with household gear and tearful children.

When Holland sold the house, he wanted to move out, too, but Belle wouldn't hear of it. Her parents were still there, having lived through incredible hardships, and she was not about to quit and run. Holland finally gave in. "Okay, if you guys think you can stick it out, I guess I can," he said one evening, and they stayed.

"For a while the valley was still green, even after city bulldozers knocked down the farmhouses," Vernon Holland recalled. "The soil is so good, and water was so plentiful, that the grass kept coming back each spring as if the farms

Photographed by Jo Feiler

". . . Young Dan Holland, a college student specializing in ecology, says: 'I love the Owens Valley. I'm going to fight to save it' . . ."

were still there. But it got drier and drier, until the sagebrush took over."

The Owens Valley today is a quiet desert basin, dotted with small towns catering to tourists heading up to Mammoth or Tahoe. Bishop's Main Street is lined with motels, coffee shops and gas stations, but the side streets are still lined with houses and shaded by trees.

Some valley residents today actually welcome the DWP presence because it has kept valley lands undeveloped and saved Bishop and Lone Pine and Independence and Big Pine from becoming mere post office names in a sea of subdivisions. But even this acceptance of the city is wearing thin. "They kept the land open, by taking the water out," says Holland's son Jim, who owns the Village Motel in Bishop. "Now all we have is a lot of open sagebrush."

In 1963, after years of denying it was planning a second aqueduct out of the valley, the DWP proposed, and by 1970 completed, what it called a "second barrel." The analogy to a double-barrel shotgun was not inappropriate. Since the first aqueduct carried most of the valley's surface water southward, the new aqueduct could be filled only by pumped underground water. Such pumping was bound to lower the underground water table, and perhaps turn the valley into a dust bowl.

Vernon Burandt, a state fish and game warden in the valley for the past 23 years, has "reason to believe—and this is based on what city people are telling me—that the DWP has secret plans to put a concrete-lined conduit into every creek, up into the mouth of the canyon . . . to wring every drop of water from this valley." Duane Georgeson, aqueduct engineer for the DWP, assured me that the city had no such plans, but valley residents remain suspicious. Howard Holland, the youngest of the family, says, "The worst dog is the one who barks and wags his tail at the same time. You never know what he'll do next. The city is like that. On one hand they talk about how much they care for the valley's environment, but at the same time they hire somebody—who happened to be my friend, so I know—to drill holes at the base of the cottonwoods on their land and put in a root killer, because the trees take up water that the DWP'd rather take to L.A."

When the DWP first came to the valley, there were 60,000 irrigated acres there, and the government was about to double that acreage with a project that the city helped to kill. According to an Assembly Committee on Resources, Land Use and Energy report, there are 191,000 acres of prime agricultural land in the valley today, as well as 152,400 acres of potentially prime land. Last year the DWP helped defeat a bill aimed at protecting the state's farmlands from developers, because the bill's sponsors would not agree to exempt the Owens Valley from its provisions. Leonard Craft, the outgoing Inyo County agricultural commissioner, told me that the Owens Valley is very well suited for alfalfa, potatoes and summer grain.

For the residents of the valley, the remaining water is a matter of life and death. Their battle with the city is no longer over past wrongs, but over economic survival. With agriculture all but gone, the valley economy depends on tourism and recreation, both of which will be devastated if the city's "second barrel" dries up the valley and Mono Lake north of it.

Furthermore, while private land value and property taxes are skyrocketing (small, privately owned desert lots go for more than $10,000), the Inyo County assessor cannot touch the valley's biggest property owner, the City of Los Angeles; its land is assessed by the state under a formula that assures unduly low assessments. For example, Vernon Holland's one-acre private lot is assessed by the county at $10,000. Across his fence, a city-owned lot is assessed by the state at only $6,254 an acre. Holland feels that the valley's scant 17,000 residents are called upon to subsidize the largest absentee land owner in the state. And the DWP is not hesitant to display its power. When the Inyo County DA took the city to court over the EIR issue, a DWP representative showed up at a ranchers' meeting and threatened that their water would be cut off the following morning because of what the DA was doing.

Harry Holland died in 1950; his wife Belle died last year. Now the town of Bishop is building a park named after them. Five of their six children still live in the valley—and they are doing quite

Wet: *Before L.A. began siphoning off the Owens Valley's water, business boomed, families moved in daily and the corn grew to the sky.*

How the City Drained the Owens Valley

In 1903, the newly formed U.S. Reclamation Service was planning to double the Owens Valley's 60,000 irrigated acres by constructing a showcase federal irrigation project.

But Los Angeles had other plans for the valley. In 1904 Mayor Fred Eaton and his water commissioner, William Mulholland, took a buckboard ride to the valley, studied its streams and decided it was an ideal source of water for L.A. Then Eaton contacted an old friend, J.B. Lippincott, who then headed the U.S. Reclamation Service's Southwest operations. Eaton explained his idea—and also secretly placed him on the city payroll. Surprise!

Lippincott promptly informed his superiors that the Owens Valley was not suitable for the irrigation project after all and recommended that L.A. should get the water instead. He also gave Eaton a government badge that allowed him to pose as a U.S. reclamation agent, and begin collecting land options along the Owens River.

One of the few insiders who knew of the city plans, railroad tycoon Henry Huntington, organized a land syndicate that quietly acquired 16,000 acres of the old Lankershim and Van Nuys estates in the arid San Fernando Valley, near the proposed terminus of the coming city aqueduct. The syndicate included the presidents of the Union Pacific Railroad, and the Pacific Light and Power Company, Joseph Sartori of Security Trust and Savings Bank, L.C. Brand of Title Guarantee and Trust Company, E.T. Earl, publisher of the Los Angeles *Express,* and Harrison Grey Otis, owner of the Los Angeles *Times* and *Herald.*

On August 14, 1905, L.A. residents were suddenly given fourteen days to approve a $1.5 million bond to start paying for the city water project. To insure approval, Mulholland released false reports of an impending water crisis. The bond passed by 14 to 1.

The syndicate, which bought land for $35 an acre, sold at $500 to $1,000 an acre. Syndicate members also profited from development contracts. For example, one official act of the City of Burbank was to grant L.C. Brand a contract for home and street lighting. Otis kept 550 acres, which he sold to Edgar Rice Burroughs, author of the Tarzan books, who later renamed it Tarzana. Sherman took 1,000 acres that is now Sherman Oaks.

The story should sound familiar. Though romanticized a bit, it provided the background for Academy Award-winning *Chinatown.*

Dry: *Today, Vern Holland, one of the Nelligan clan, who is still living in the Owens Valley, poses with a dead reminder of the good years.*

well. But, unlike successful people elsewhere, they talk about their future with vagueness and hesitation. In Bishop the future depends on the DWP, and nobody knows what *They* are up to. There is fear that if the DWP becomes pressed for money, it may sell its valley lands to developers and destroy the last remaining resource—open space.

"It will probably be nothing but a sagebrush desert by the time I get back," says Howard's son Dan, 20, a junior in ecology and conservation at San Diego State, who plans to specialize in water quality control and settle in the valley. "I plan to get involved in the fight. I love the valley."

On one recent afternoon Vernon Holland sat on the patio behind his sprawling ranch house chewing piñon nuts and talked, almost defensively, about perhaps moving to Idaho, where hunting and fishing are still raw and plentiful, and where house payments and taxes are manageable. But the more he talked about moving, the angrier he got. I told him I had just spoken to James Wickser, who runs the DWP operations in the valley, and that Wickser said the valley was never really suited for farming, and that the residents who complained about what the DWP did to the valley were either lying or imagining things.

Holland raised his voice with frustration and anger: "This is just so much baloney. They have been running roughshod over us since they first walked into the valley, and they are still doing it today. My grandfather had to fight till the day he died to hold on to his land. My father nearly went bankrupt because of what they did here. Now they are about to drive me out of the valley. They say they want this increased pumping to beautify the valley. Hell, I don't believe it. Nobody here believes it. The city has lied to us too many times."

I asked him what he thought of the city. He thought for a second, then replied slowly, measuring each word. "I think they are a bunch of two-faced, lying, scheming, conniving people, with a lot of power and money to do what they goddamn well please. I think they all get together in Los Angeles, and say to each other, 'Hey, how about that bunch of yokels up there? We sure pulled another fast one over on them.' I think they are probably laughing their heads off at us. I really do." ■