

Owens Valley On Tap - Early L.A. and the Quest to Quench Her Thirst

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**OWENS VALLEY ON TAP
EARLY L.A. AND THE QUEST TO
QUENCH HER THIRST**

STEVEN SOLARI

The story of Los Angeles and its growth throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries relates directly to the efforts to locate and extract water from the Owens Valley. Years before 1913 when William Mulholland uttered his now famous words, “There it is, take it” as the water flowed over the last bit of terrain and down in to the San Fernando Valley reservoirs, the city’s biggest supporters had their thirsty eyes on the ever-flowing Owens River. As early as 1887 the Los Angeles Times described the sheer beauty and magnificence of Owens Valley and its potential as a gaming paradise, also subtly mentioning the almost never ending runoff from the Eastern Sierra which border the valley to the West. In this paper I seek to address the underhandedness and premeditation of the City of Los Angeles as it positioned itself over two decades to re-route the waters of Owens valley into the burgeoning metropolis and the ways in which the City used newspapers to spread false truths, false promises, and false hopes for parties on both sides. Furthermore, I will describe the difficulties that the resident of Owens Valley experienced by examining primary source documents of merchants and local city leaders. These documents will shed light on the need for the city of Los Angeles to over estimate the amount of water it would need, for it’s plans were bigger and thirstier than anyone could have imagined.

The late 1870’s saw a growing Los Angeles with several newspapers, an enormous brand new port, and a system to disperse clean water from the Los Angeles River. All these combined with a serious growth-only vision for itself. City boosters fought for the types of services and infrastructure needed to compete with the likes of San

Francisco and San Diego. As the population rose, the water question became the next step in creating the vision of Los Angeles members of the Merchants and Manufacturers had for the city.

During the early twentieth century most large manufacturers were based on the East Coast, and as they sought to get a piece of the new west, they were courted by Los Angeles and its open shop tactics of preventing the spread and infiltration of unionized workers. This option, plus the constant sunshine, brought companies to the Los Angeles area by the dozens. Furniture companies, rubber and tire plants, aviation, and military operations saw the tremendous opportunity to locate themselves in a place where with excellent weather and a non-union labor pool. But before any of this industry could develop, the city boosters had to address the question of whether or not there was enough water to slake the thirst of industrialized operations, and an expanding population.

As early as 1887, the idea to build a railroad from the Mojave Desert, alongside the Owens River and Owens Lake was in the minds of city leaders. “It would be better to construct the line as a purely local project than to let it go by default,”¹ wrote a *Los Angeles Times* columnist as he describes the business and pleasure opportunities of a rail line from the top of Inyo County to the Los Angeles rail system. He went on to say of how important this opportunity, how vital “this short stretch of railroad, is the want of which is the only bar that Prevents Owens Valley from becoming the most valuable region for business that the city (Los Angeles) would be connected with.”²

¹ “A Rich Province,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1887, p 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

² Ibid.

The prospect of business was surely an attractive one, but regardless of these tales of better business for those in Owens Valley, the article clearly stated that the valley inhabitants were not the savvy city folk that sought an industrial complex; rather they were settlers. While Los Angeles's neighboring cities like Pomona and Ontario, were advertised as slices of the American Dream they lined the edges of the Southern Pacific Railroad, the reality is stated quite clearly in the coming paragraph where the author plainly says that no city in the world had a better opportunity to impose itself in a "business" framework. He states there is no better time "than is now within the grasp of Los Angeles by completing the short link of railroad that will give her control of Owens Valley."³ No better time in fact, to control Owens Valley...

Surely doing so would allow for a high-powered metropolis to ensure a future with the resources of a land not-too-distant, especially with a way to move heavy equipment to and from it, perhaps even build an aqueduct. Most interesting perhaps in this article from 1887 is the direct mention of the amount of water Owens Valley possessed. Speaking of the opportunities to irrigate over 200,000 acres of Owens Valley the author noted-"That there is a sufficiency of water, easily available, for at least that number of acres. Much of the land is to be had for the mere taking."⁴

This article described the beauty and bountiful nature of the Owens Valley, mentioned of a perennially glacier-capped mountain range and the waters that flow from it which were sufficient to irrigate it in its entirety. Three hundred miles away was a

³ "A Rich Province," *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 1887, p 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁴ Ibid.

place with 100 times the number of inhabitants and which had a knack for circumventing unionized efforts for fairness. Two years later, the plot thickened.

In an 1889 article from the *Los Angeles Times* titled “The Arid Lands of California,” the author described the overall irrigable acreage of the state as if he were speaking of a small farm. Numbers flew in every direction describing lands for growing, lands for living and lands for the taking. Huge sums of money were discussed as the article focused on the idea of progress identified as man’s conquest of the land. To add to this whirl of ideas, the author noted that certain varieties of fruit only grew in California, furthering his claim that the lands available for agriculture were dependant on the ability to irrigate them. “In Inyo County there are from 3000 to 4000 acres of land of unsurpassed fertility, which is utterly worthless without water.”⁵ This is a clear statement of the potential for growth, but also of the need Owens Valley has of it’s own water supply to ensure a livelihood for itself. The author marveled at the amount of water Owens Valley had, noting that “Owens River carries on average, and during the summer months, water enough to place at least a surface depth of 15 inches upon an area of 300,000 acres of land...” He was describing a vast amount of water that was almost a year round phenomenon. Owens Valley was a goldmine of resources and the Boosters knew it.

Only six months before this article appeared in the *Times*, another account of the Owens Valley was written, but this was again in relation to the idea of a connection between Los Angeles and Inyo County. Abandoned was the rail idea and instead a road

⁵ “The Arid Lands of California,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 22, 1889, p 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

was in the works. Once again disguised as a magnificent recreation area, Inyo County was slated to be the recipient of a road stretching from Mojave Desert near Mono Lake, to the end of Inyo near Owens Lake. William Mulholland himself was there to survey the possibility of this construction project, but nothing was mentioned of the water, so much as the focus was on the beauty of the natural surroundings.⁶

By 1890, the Water Question was at the forefront of the minds of Angelenos. Population had swelled to 50,000 up dramatically from roughly 1600 not 50 years before.⁷ That kind of growth was exactly what the boosters of Los Angeles were betting on and those numbers intensified the water question ten-fold. An 1890 article in the *Los Angeles Times* stated, “the subject of domestic water supply has become one of paramount interest in Los Angeles.”⁸ It is no surprise that this article was prominently featured in the paper in the hottest month of the year, smack in the middle of July. To question water in Los Angeles in a pre-air-condition world is akin to discussing the need for fur in Antarctica in February. The water question would become a water war, and Owens Valley, with its overabundant supply, would become enemy number one.

The man to lead this booster army was none other than the well-known “zanjero” himself, William Mulholland. His previous work to reclaim water from the areas original Spanish and make it available to the municipality would prove him the man for the job and shore up his credibility for the momentous task of quenching the city’s thirst for more water. The *Times* article lent to his credibility with the sub title, “The Man for an

⁶ “Interesting Topics,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 14, 1889, p 2, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

⁷ “Los Angeles Timeline,”

http://www.twoop.com/places/archives/2005/10/los_angeles.html

⁸ “The Water Supply,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 16, 1890, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

Emergency,” as it detailed his humble devotion to the city’s water system with a story about his commitment the day before Christmas, Mulholland was awakened “when alarm was given, and he didn’t have a chance to undress and go to bed again like a Christian for four days; but he got the conduit open and the city was without water for but a minute.” This story not only showed his devotion to his role as superintendant, but also his humble nature, his unceasing allegiance to Los Angeles, and his capability to apply the same Christian work ethic to the momentous task of bringing Owens Valley water to Los Angeles.

Subsequent newspaper articles are quite disturbing. They detail the grooming of the residents of Owens Valley for a dramatic change in their way of life. By the 1890’s now they had a post office and were regularly receiving the Los Angeles Times. The articles that mentioned them were eerily positive and hopeful, despite the back-story of hostile takeover. On 1893, April 1st, an article entitled – “Big Irrigation Enterprise,” read “A canal for irrigation purposes is to be constructed under direction of the Owens Valley Canal and Irrigation Company, and it will extend from a point near the northwest Inyo County, to the southern border” (near Owens Lake). This was the same route as the proposed rail track, as the proposed road, and now it would be the route of the proposed “canal for irrigation.”

A mere six and a half years before the city would begin to buy up as much land and water rights as it can find, the area was being surveyed for a dam at the southern point of Inyo County to accommodate the agricultural prospects of the area. All this talk of the abundance of water in the Owens Valley region occurred at the same time that in Los Angeles the water question was becoming a demand. The article detailed the same

route. “It will extend southerly, keeping close to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada range, and will pass through Independence, Lone Pine, thence near the western shore of Owens Lake and through Olancho. Hawaii, Rose Spring Valley, and end in Salt Wells Valley.”⁹ Salt Wells, only a few miles outside of the town of Ridgecrest, is 116 miles from Los Angeles. This is approximately 35 miles short of half way. But construction of the canal never happened. The Owens Valley Canal and Irrigation Company never materialized and the work was never completed. However the entire area had been surveyed, information and data in regards to water, allocation, storage, and distribution were now at hand and readily available to the administrators of Los Angeles.

Over the next five years Los Angeles bought up land in Owens Valley at the rate never before seen in these sleepy towns. Towns like Independence, Lone Pine, Bishop, Big Pine, and Olancho were all but erased from the map. From booming agricultural and livestock raising areas benefitted by an abundance of water they were reduced to a desert from whence they came. J.D. Black, a property owner in the town of Big Pine, wrote to his friend and confidant Mr. Tuttle, a grocer and supplier from Los Angeles¹⁰:

“I figure you are on the square, and I am glad to inform you of my private opinions which I know you will keep strictly confidential. I am writing this [an account of the adverse situation placed upon Mr. Black as a resident and small business owner in Independence] so that you can use the same for comparison, and

⁹ “Big Irrigation Enterprise,” Los Angeles Times, April 1, 1893, p. 4, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

¹⁰ *Who's who in the Pacific Southwest: a compilation of authentic biographical sketches of citizens of Southern California and Arizona.* Los Angeles: Times-Mirror Print. & Binding House, 1913, 406 pgs. <http://www.sfgenealogy.com/calwatanook/tagdata/5-who/106.htm>

draw your own conclusions after investigating the facts of which

I am enclosing in this brief outline.”

He then described how years before a reclamation project was proposed in Owens Valley, and was subsequently turned down – “Immediately afterwards the Los Angeles aqueduct was built.¹¹” At this time the former Mayor of Los Angeles, Fred Eaton, and his longtime associate William Mulholland began to buy up as much of the Owens Valley as possible, including the water running through it and beneath it. Water rights were the target, not the land. Mr. Black continued to tell the story of how a once thriving community of farmers and settlers became a deserted wasteland. “All the families in these districts moved away, schoolhouses were abandoned, and the land under the water irrigated by these purchases went back to desert.”¹²

Ranchers and farm owners were financially destroyed by the speculations made by the prospect of a dam, and the passing of that project. What once was a generous price for a generous property would drop 50 cents on the dollar in a matter of a year. The people sold, and they left. Others “intended to leave once they received their money for their ranches – and business was quiet as hell.”¹³

J.D. Black is the perfect example of those who sought to find themselves among the beauty of Owens Valley. His family owned property, storefronts, and businesses in the center of town of Big Pine. His rents on properties fell, his investments crumbled and he and his family sat listless, as Los Angeles paid no mind to the lives it was destroying.

¹¹ Black, J.D., Letter to Mr. V.H. Tuttle, (May 27, 1924), *J.D. Black Papers*, CSLA-15, Department of Archives and Special Collections: Series 1 Box 1 Folder 3, Loyola Marymount University. Los Angeles, CA.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

“Just turn over for a few moments, he wrote to his colleague, “and imagine your name was Black, address Big Pine, California.”

Clearly the psychological effects of a hostile takeover were felt all over Owens Valley. The effects of a big city crushing the small guy for his resources is not an old tale, but is a very sad one. The people of Owens Valley were swindled out of their homes to accommodate growth 300 miles away. Mulholland and his constituents were rumored to make fun of the people of Owens Valley, and they were quite aware of this. He is rumored to have said that if the land was worth eight million dollars, he could have it for four million. J.D. Black commented in regard to this statement:

“I can’t say the above remark is authentic, but it surely is in line with their past methods. It is such propaganda as this, which has coursed so much ill feelings and as time has gone on this bitter feeling has continued to grow gaining momentum each succeeding day until today. It is as a rock rolling down a steep hill with the elements only in control.”¹⁴

Desperation colored his last words in this letter to a friend. Black was once again repeating his plight to a fellow, business owner and confidant. Time and again he hoped of gaining enough support to help the people of Los Angeles understand the wrongs done to the residents of Owens Valley.

“There is enough water here, enough for the City and the people here also if properly conserved and stored, and time will

¹⁴ Ibid.

come when the masses in Los Angeles will understand our position, and when that time comes it will be our salvation.”¹⁵

The 1920’s yielded little in the way of news articles, but numerous letters to the Editor from both concerned citizens of Los Angeles and particularly those in Owens Valley. Eager to criticize the methods of the Los Angeles Times, Owens valley residents would write to them describing possible solutions to the problem they saw around them. Frank Orr of Keeler California was one of them. Keeler, a small town with less than six residential streets, sits on the very edge of the former Owens Lake. “Our suggestion is that the city of Los Angeles is big enough and should be far-sighted enough to see that the taking of the larger portion of available water out of this valley will later on prove a very unsatisfactory business.”¹⁶ He continued to say, “All this land needs is water.” Strange, this is the same argument Los Angeles had for taking the water: all that land to the south, full of potential industry, suburban housing, and yards and pools needed was water. But Los Angeles differs in that it never offered compromises until much later. While residents from Owens Valley were aware that both areas could enjoy what nature had given them, it was Los Angeles that held out from that discourse until the city would grow enough to justify the water they so easily removed.

The city’s population grew to over 100,000 by 1900, and by 1910 it topped 315,000.¹⁷ The conversation only had to be avoided for two decades before the justification for taking Owens Valley’s water would be undeniably in favor of Los

¹⁵ Black, J.D., Letter to Mr. V.H. Tuttle, (May 27, 1924), Department of Archives and Special Collections: Series 1 Box 1 Folder 3, Loyola Marymount University. Los Angeles, CA.

¹⁶ Orr, Frank, “Letters to the Editor,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 26, 1925.

¹⁷ <http://discoverlosangeles.com/guides/fun-facts/historical-timeline.html>

Angeles. Heavy industry, film, manufacturing, aviation, and a housing boom – all contributed to the growth and need for water in Los Angeles – by then the seventeenth largest city in the nation.¹⁸

But the fight was not over for the people of Owens Valley. As a new generation of Owens Valley residents came of age, they saw the hardships and painful losses their parents had been through. They witnessed the injustice of the Los Angeles water situation and frankly, they sat on their parent's now useless lands and wondered why they could not make a life for themselves with it. This despair manifested itself in many ways, some passive, but others violent.

November 18, 1924 the ranchers and few remaining residents of Owens Valley took matters into their own hands. "The Crisis of Owens Valley" as depicted by the *Los Angeles Times* spoke of how "the ranchers, brazenly defying the orderly process of the law, hold the flood gates open wasting thousands of dollars' of water bought and paid for by the City of Los Angeles."¹⁹

This describes the successful attempt by the residents of Owens Valley to open a release valve of the Los Angeles Aqueduct located approximately 16 miles south of Big Pine. This valve is connected to a concrete riverbed that directly empties water from the aqueduct into Owens Lake. "The gang has held the spill gate for three days. More than \$50,000 worth of water has been lost to date."²⁰ In this article Sherriff Collins states, "I admit that a state of anarchy exists in Inyo County." He went on to say that any attempt made by him and his deputies would further infuriate the occupiers of the Alabama Gates

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "Anarchy grips Owens Valley, Says Sherriff," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 1924.

²⁰ Ibid.

release valve and that he thought the retribution for any attempt at restoring order would result in a bombing of the aqueduct. He called upon the governor to send troops immediately.

The language used by the author and the sheriff is worthy of note. The residents of Owens Valley were not referred to as citizens, but rather as “ranchers” and a “gang.” But this characterization is not supported by research. These people were citizens of the United States, they owned small businesses, they were upstanding members of the community and the population that occupied the Alabama Gates were not the rough ranchers they were painted to be. Instead there were families, women cooking for their loved ones, children, and respected community members gathered at the site. They were not out for blood; they were out for recognition and to bring to light the level of injustice and wrongdoing done to them by the city of Los Angeles. They wanted to be heard, but instead they were vilified.

In the same issue of the *Los Angeles Times*, William Mulholland was interviewed for his opinion of the Alabama Gates incident. He condemned those involved and railed against their claims of any wrongdoing by the city, going so far as to say that during litigation “the Los Angeles camp was technical and hard against the residents of Owens Valley”, and that it is a great injustice to see the way they are responding to the 99 percent given to them as the best of it all the way though.” It is likely that he wanted Angelenos to believe that the best part of the aqueduct deal was in favor of the resident of Owens Valley, but the truth was an ugly picture painted by the newspaper that had only one thing in mind – to keep the residents of Los Angeles in a state of shock that a rural rabble would be so brazen as to attempt a fair stake in the new west.

What is evident however is that the people in the photographs depicting this conflict were clearly not the rebel army they were branded as. They were well dressed in their Sunday best. They were representative of those most affected by the situation placed on them by Los Angeles and not a “gang” or simply “ranchers.”

In an article from *The Fresno Bee* titled “Army of Ranchers Continues to Hold Gates of Aqueduct” a subtitle “Los Angeles Council Warns Ranchers” the reporter discussed how this event erased any current or future discussion in regards to releasing water for Owens Valley. In a telegram sent from Los Angeles to the Bishop Chamber of Commerce, city officials stated, “until those people of that section withdraw from their present attempt to shut off the Los Angeles water supply, the city cannot even discuss compromise of settlement of the water rights controversy.”²¹ The attempt by the citizens of Owens Valley to draw attention to their plight only landed them a bigger battle overall. The City was angry, and would not see their point of view.

The tensions escalated so much that local newspaper man W. Chalfant, editor of the *Inyo County Register*, wrote in an undated telegram to Governor Young in Sacramento that

“Cars on public highway south remote from aqueduct
being unlawfully searched by Los Angeles gunmen seemingly of
purpose of ending travel – STOP - City officials deny such acts
but untruthfully – STOP – reported stopping Nevada car caused
exchange shot – STOP – Valley people organizing to resist
unlawful interferences – STOP – Hundred gunmen sent from Los

²¹ “Army of Ranchers Continues to Hold Gates of Aqueduct” *The Fresno Bee*, p 1, November 19, 1924.

Angeles last night – STOP – believe immediate action by you
needed to avert bloodshed as situation serious – STOP – Troops
not desired or necessary but your intervention needed to prevent
interference with travel or possible conflict.”²²

Clearly the situation was out of hand. For the editor of the local paper to send such a message to the governor of California denoted the level of threat the Los Angeles police force posed to the people of Owens Valley. The propaganda against Owens Valley residents found in the *Los Angeles Times* likely influenced negatively the police department as to what kinds of people they were to encounter upon arrival at Alabama Gates.

The residents finally abandoned their occupation of Alabama Gates after four days. But in those four days they were able to spark interest in the minds of readers of not only the *Los Angeles Times*, but also the local papers throughout California. Opinions differed greatly as some saw the stunt as a nuisance to a bad real estate deal, while others were highly sympathetic. Several years later, a dynamite incident reinvigorated the question of ethical practices to get the city to address the subject of returning a portion of water to Owens Valley. In a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* dated June 11, 1927, Paul De Gaston shared his frustration with the reaction to this crime by Los Angeles police and city officials. He stated that in regard to the incident, a \$10,000 reward was offered to find the perpetrators of the bombing. His statement contained the same rhetoric used by the *Los Angeles Times*, calling them ranchers, but his message did not reflect a generalization so much as it seemed to humanize those without water.

²² Chalfant, W., “Western Union Telegram to Governor Young, 1924,” Eastern Sierra Museum Archive.

“Is it water they want? Why not give it to them? It seems to me that \$10,000 which is offered as a reward for their apprehension would, with a little added capital, be sufficient to satisfy their needs in supplying them with some of the precious liquid. We all have a right to live, and there is room for all on this world. So why not settle this amiably?”²³

To answer Mr. Gaston’s question would have meant denying the plan of the Boosters of Los Angeles. It would have dimmed the light they envisioned that would radiate from this city of the future. The bottom line is that Los Angeles paid good money for good land through deplorable deals. This transaction yielded them water rights and as such they took the water to where they wanted it – to Los Angeles. The years that followed 1913 proved that this decision by Los Angeles decimated the livelihood of Owens Valley. What is now clear is that in response to the idea that “all the place needs is water,” Los Angeles became a super-city, but Owens Valley remains a pristine natural wonder. The cost of this exchange was the American Dream each of Owens Valley’s early residents had imagined.

In the first sentence of William Mulholland’s obituary in the *Los Angeles Times*, he was hailed as the “super-zanjero.” This term, zanjero, refers to the person who was in charge of the waterways carved into the landscape of early Los Angeles. These zanjeros sat on a board whose members discussed how to serve the mostly Mexican communities with water in a peaceful and democratic fashion. Free for all, the water was distributed

²³ “Letters to The Times”, R.M. Strother and Paul de Gaston, *Los Angeles Times*, June 11, 1927, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

for anyone and done so in a way that cost nothing to those using it. It was for everyone. The open system was a result of the early Angeleno's indifference to profit and immediate growth. There was no booster spin on the luxuries of Los Angeles. Water was for everyone, free and available. It is ironic that Mulholland was called a zanjero, when he directly benefitted from the privatization of water in Los Angeles. To call him a zanjero implied that the people of Owens Valley benefitted from their water source just as the Angelenos did. If he embodied any part of the title, the people of Owens Valley would have known the pleasures of the resource that simply, silently, and unendingly washes by them to this day.

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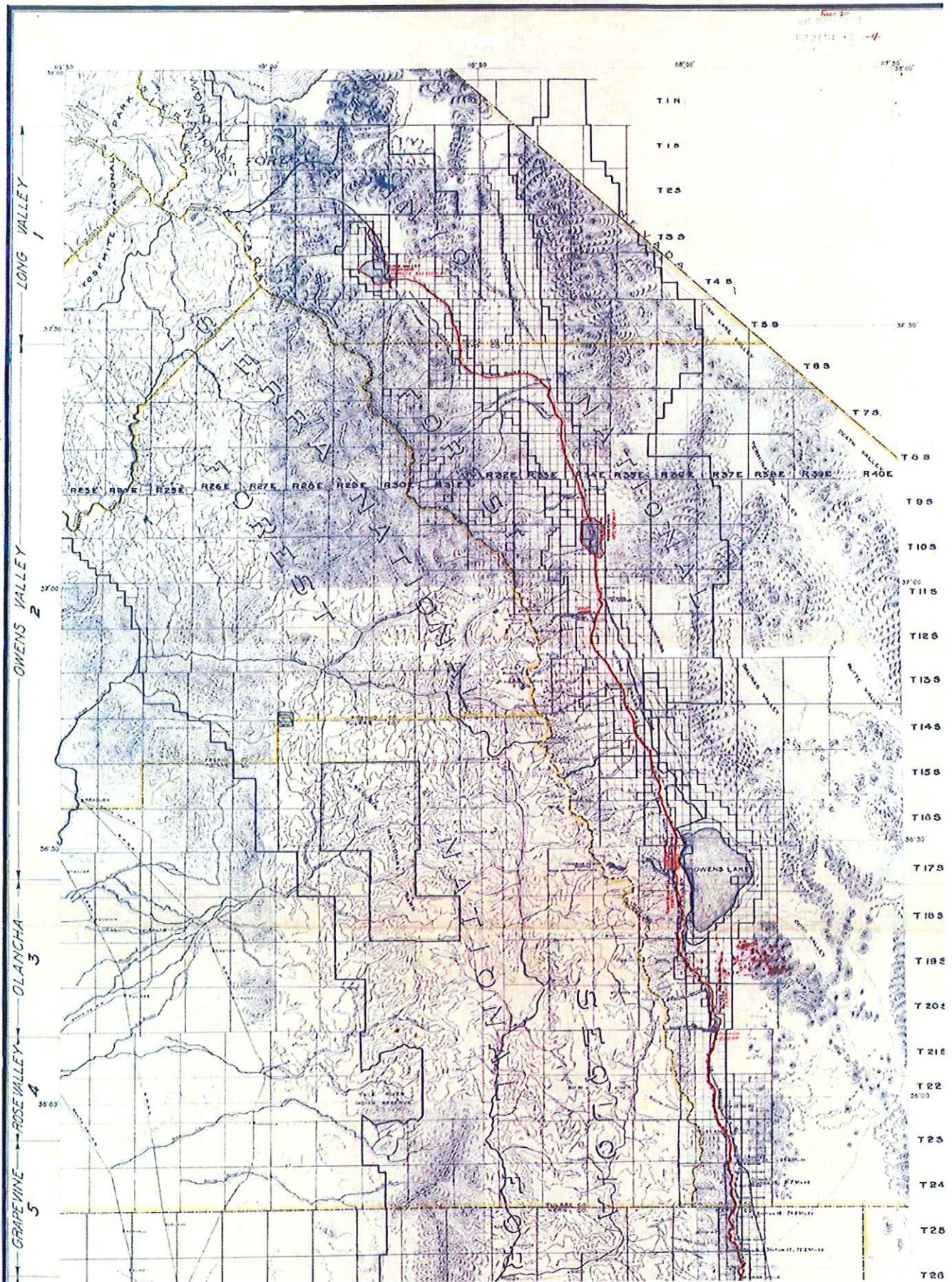
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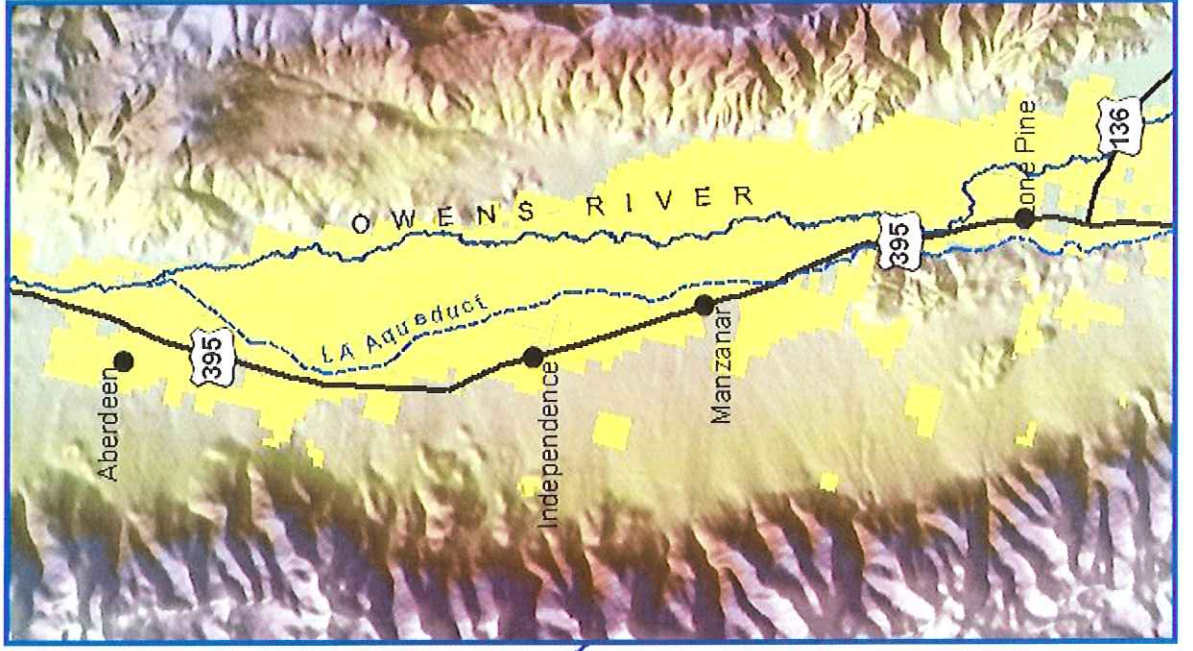
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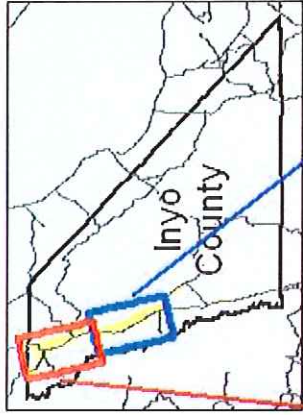
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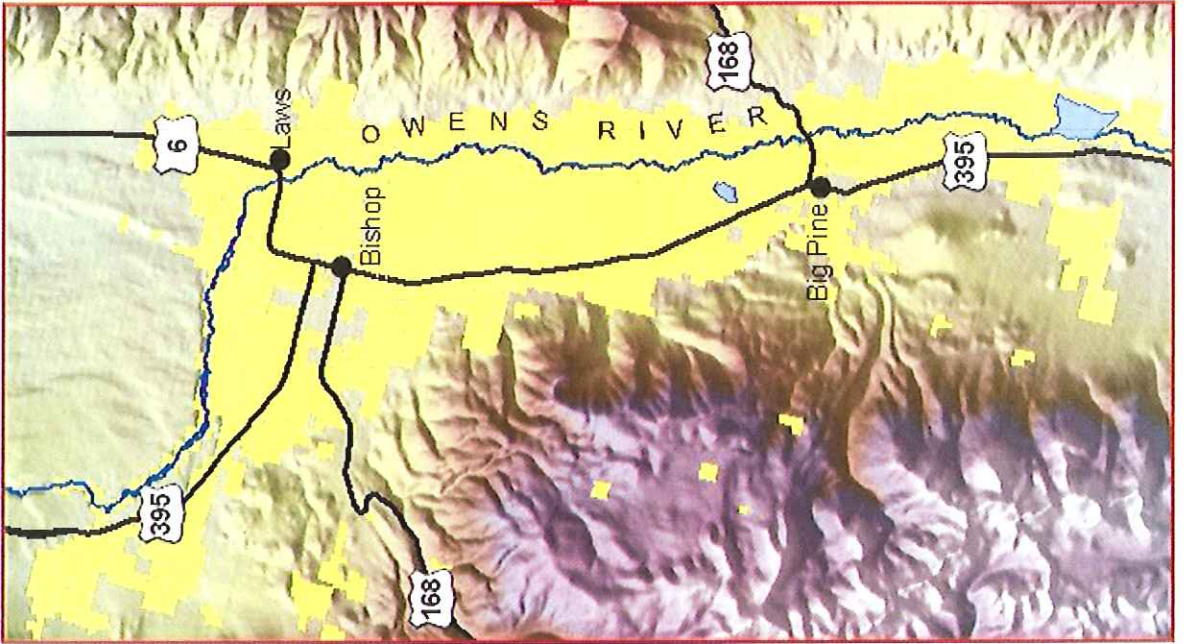




Southern Owens Valley



Location Map:



Northern Owens Valley

