

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Artesian wells supported desert agriculture

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Emblazoned across the storefront in the desert of Coachella was an enticing advertisement, “Earliest Fruit and Vegetable Land in California – the Home of the Early Grape and Cantaloupe. Flowing Artesian Wells at Small Cost Insure Abundant Water of Unexcelled Quality. Address Coachella Land and Water Company for Price of Land and Further Details.”

To whom the enticement of fertile land was addressed was not immediately clear. There were not a lot of people passing through, but the few who did were encouraged to stay and put down roots. They could make a living making the desert bloom by the simple addition of water.

The discovery of water beneath the sand created an agricultural boom in the earliest part of the 20th century. By the time of the advertisement there were hundreds of wells plumbing the gigantic aquifer under the Coachella Valley, seemingly emancipating the area from dependence on rainfall.

The wells were most welcome. Within living memory, all development at the west end of the valley had been decimated by an eleven-year-long drought at the end of the 19th century. It had been the most recent drought in recorded history. There had been many droughts before, keeping the desert perpetually unpopulated and uncultivated.

The extensive orchards of Palmdale (where Smoke Tree Ranch is currently) desiccated and were abandoned. The narrow-gauge railroad intended to carry fruit to the coastal markets was disassembled. The acres of careful planting by Judge McCallum, the beginning of settlement at the base of Mt. San Jacinto in Palm Springs, blew away with the sand. Without the fruit trees, there was little reason to persist on the desert, and even the heartiest of souls left in search of greener pastures while the shriveled village waited for rain.

In March of 1899, a Los Angeles Times staff writer evaluated the situation. “A drought has always been considered the greatest evil which can come to any agricultural country. It was such in ancient Egypt, and the records



Workers in Coachella with artesian well. COURTESY COACHELLA VALLEY HISTORY MUSEUM AND JEFF CRIDER

of loss of crops from failure of rain follows through all history from that time down to the experience of some of the Western States in very recent years. But there are droughts and droughts and now that California has the misfortune to suffer to a certain degree from this cause, it is probably best that the conditions should be fairly and fully stated, that, on the one hand people should not place too great expectations on the future, and, on the other hand, that they should not build unfounded fears of the results of the coming year.”

Such optimism was possible in the desert thanks to the discovery of the aquifer and the drilling of wells. Jeff Crider’s excellent history of the Coachella Valley Water District’s history notes that another Los Angeles Times reporter traveling west by train reported on January 1, 1905, “The Coachella Valley comes as a welcome relief to the eye for here we have the first dots of vivid green strung along the railway like ganglia on a nerve fiber – Mecca, Thermal, Coachella, Indio, four oases in the wilderness. The average tourist and sight-seer does not linger here and yet this valley touches some of the most beautiful scenery in the state, while it also teaches a wonderful lesson of human enterprise.”

The blooming desert at the eastern end of the Coachella Valley and the scenic beauty of the Indian Canyons near Palm Springs bracketed the rich farming potential of the vast flat between, if it could be perforated by wells. “Think of this, 300 artesian wells pouring forth tens of millions of gallons of water every day, and clothing with vegetation a val-



Early 20th century Coachella storefront. COURTESY COACHELLA VALLEY HISTORY MUSEUM AND JEFF CRIDER

ley that was inexorably marked ‘desert’ on every map up to four or five years ago.”

Prior to this sort of irrigation, the desert was thought a wasteland of biblical proportion. With the discovery of subterranean water, agriculture started in earnest in the valley. Another article noted, “In no previous year in the history of Southern California has there been anything like the extent of water development of the past few months. A vast amount of experimental work has been done in sinking wells, and the results have been surprising, alike to old Californians and newcomers. The subterranean water courses discovered this year doubtless exceed, several fold, the entire number discovered previously...”

The desert was now ripe with possibilities. “The old doctrine that a large portion of the country must remain without irrigation because of a lack of water...first promulgated by Maj. Powell of the Geological Survey has been accepted as a subject to mathematical demonstration by many...however, the fact has become apparent that Maj. Powell has under-estimated the water supply, while it has become equally evident that he failed to take into consideration...vastly greater resources than the mathematical prognosticators had led

us to believe, when they built what they claimed to be the boundary fence of cold figures.”

But Major Wesley Powell, the Civil War veteran with only one arm, who surveyed the West including the mighty Colorado River, had hardly miscalculated.

Artesian wells seemed to have changed the calculus regarding the desert. Unlike the end of the 19th century, farmers in the early decades of the 20th drilled what seemed like an endless supply of water instead of praying for rain. “The great fruit interests have not suffered in any great degree from the short supply of water, for the reason that irrigation has been an insurance against loss, and in the cases where the water supply was shortest the development work...has been the greatest.”

Crider recounts how a reporter visiting the valley in 1904 downplayed concerns about the impact the growing agricultural industry would have on the valley’s artesian water supplies. “The Cassandras in our midst say that with 300 wells perpetually flowing, and with eight drilling plants steadily at work, pulling down others, the end must come soon...but actual experience gives not the slightest support to this prediction. It is conclusively proved that the artesian supply is quite independent of the rainfall in the adjacent mountains and is absolutely unaffected by local conditions.” That certainty, put forth as if it were mathematically determined, was quite incorrect. Unbeknownst to scientists at the time, the aquifer needed to be recharged.

By 1907 there were approximately 400 wells in the Coachella Valley, and by 1913 there were 4,000 acres under cultivation. At that same time, thirsty Los Angeles had successfully tapped the Owens Valley via aqueduct. In the Coachella Valley, despite the numerous wells, the wild Colorado river had been redirected into canals in order to water the desert, proving the concerns of the Cassandras and the calculations of Major Powell ultimately correct.

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