

Desert Sun.

A dry desert with its history surrounded by stories of water

Tracy Conrad, Special to The Desert Sun Published 7:00 a.m. PT April 7, 2019

CONNECT TWEET LINKEDIN COMMENT EMAIL MORE



A waterwheel and a footbridge of the Tahquitz Ditch circa 1898. (Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/Special to The Desert Sun)

Despite its designation as a desert, the Coachella Valley is blessed with water. The very names associated with the most prominent places and businesses in the desert, such as the Oasis Hotel, Mineral Springs Hotel, Deep Well, Indian Wells, Palm Springs, Snow Creek, and Tahquitz River Estates, all conjure up pretty images of water.

But the early story of desert water is more utilitarian than picturesque: it quite literally can be seen as a history of ditches.

More than a century ago a prescient and patient few understood that water was the most precious of all resources in such an arid region. Hydrology was the purview of engineers, and the first way to move water was in ditches. The most famous Southern California

water scheme, made to ensure a reliable water supply for burgeoning Los Angeles, came at the cost of turning a once fertile pasture surrounding a lake situated 200 miles away from LA into a dust-polluting salt flat the size of San Francisco. But here in the natural desert, there were visionaries thinking about using local water and building their own infrastructure to deliver it.

As early as 1830, the local Cahuilla people brought water from Tahquitz Creek to their village by simple ditches constructed for irrigation. The flow was seasonal and subject to diversion and clogging. Those at the end of the line seldom got water.

In 1887, early white settler John Guthrie McCallum formed the Palm Valley Water Company and began the construction of a stone-lined irrigation ditch to traverse what is variously reported as 16, 17, or 19 miles of desert between the San Gorgonio Pass and Palm Springs to carry the flow of the Whitewater River (whatever the actual distance, it was an astonishing accomplishment).

McCallum also developed the waters of Chino Canyon for irrigation, and hoped to prosper by raising figs, grapes, olives and apricots earlier than coastal farmers. There were unauthorized diversions of the sluice and many disputes — exacerbated by a flash flood that destroyed the canal — followed by more than a decade of drought during which most of any civilization in the Coachella Valley perished. By 1905, when the drought finally ended, actual lack of water and legal disputes over water rights left very few Cahuilla and even fewer white settlers in the region.

Bucking the exodus, Nellie Coffman arrived in 1909 and established the Desert Inn, which offered tented accommodations. Shortly thereafter, visitors began to appear in the valley. Wealthy oilman Tom O'Donnell was a guest at the Desert Inn and greatly admired Nellie's hospitality. He decided to help transform her unrefined establishment into the then popular Spanish-Mediterranean style. O'Donnell offered her the astronomical sum of \$350,000 as a loan in exchange for her building him a house in the same style on the hillside above the inn.

More: ['It is so beautiful out here': The world watched Albert Einstein enjoying Palm Springs](#)

More: [Tennis, dogs, horses and cowboys made early Palm Springs holidays bright](#)

More: [Architecture after the midcentury: Desert designs of Hugh Kaptur](#)



Civil engineer Herman Makosky by the Tahquitz Ditch, circa 1912. (Photo: Palm Springs Historical Society/Special to *The Desert Sun*)

Not surprisingly, she agreed, and he held the mortgage on the inn. When he moved in following a honeymoon stay at the Willard Hotel in Washington, D.C., the newlywed found the water pressure to be inadequate. Complaining to the water company proved fruitless, so O'Donnell encouraged local builder Alvah Hicks to buy the company and improve conditions for customers, starting with him and his house on the hill.

In 1927, Alvah Hicks acquired the Palm Valley Water Company with a loan from Mr. O'Donnell, reorganized it and changed its name to the Palm Springs Water Company. Hicks sourced water from Snow Creek and Falls Creek, each with their own conduits, while presumably improving water pressure up the hill. Alvah's sons Harold and Milton Hicks took over the stewardship of the company from their father, expanding pipelines and supplies. Alvah prided himself on building for future capacity and his sons carried on that forward-thinking practice. Therefore, in addition to the flumes, wells were drilled to tap into the aquifer — the vast lake beneath the valley floor. Ironically, abundant water had been just below the ground for millennia — a legacy of the prehistoric Lake Cahuilla that had once inundated much of the valley.

P.T. Stevens, known locally as the builder of the El Mirador Hotel and for subdividing Las Palmas, owned vast tracks of land that came with water rights. Stevens and Hicks collaborated in building custom homes on 20 prime acres in Las Palmas. In 1927, Stevens formed the Whitewater Mutual Water Company and supplied irrigation water from the Whitewater River for residential and agricultural use. He had his own system of pipes and ditches that would divert the river, while allowing for intermittent flow from the river. Tom O'Donnell owned shares in Whitewater, which irrigated his golf course.

At the south end of the Coachella Valley, there was an even more ambitious ditch-digging project, rivaled only by Mulholland's Los Angeles aqueduct. Starting in 1900, the

California Development Company constructed hundreds of miles of irrigation ditches and canals to bring water from the Colorado River to the arid desert and create fertile farmland out of the Salton sink. At first the effort worked, but it lasted for only a few years until the silt-laden Colorado water clogged the canal.

After a prodigious rainfall in 1905, a breach in the walls of the canal caused the entirety of the river to flow into the sink for the next two years while workers frantically worked on repairs. This tinkering with nature resulted in the Salton Sea, the fate of which will write a new chapter in the valley's evolving water story. The rest of the interesting story of water in the desert will be explored on April 11th. Tickets available at