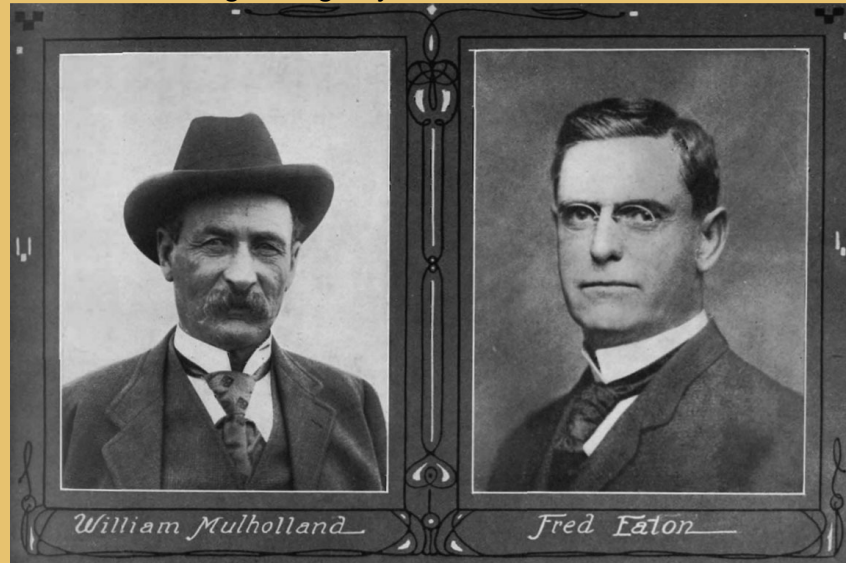


When California's Water Wars Turned Violent

Los Angeles was the West's fastest growing city, but its insatiable thirst came at a high cost.



In September of 1904, William Mulholland, the man in charge of making sure Los Angeles had enough water, took a fateful camping trip. Together with one of the city's former mayors, Fred Eaton, Mulholland drove northeast about 250 miles to the Owens Valley, where the Sierra Nevada mountain range stood off to the west, its gleaming snowcaps melting into streams that fed the Owens River—or to Mulholland's eyes, what could be an abundant water supply for the distant city.



Fred Eaton returned in 1905. Posing as an agent for a government public irrigation project, he began to buy up land and water rights for the city of Los Angeles. In the coming years, Owens Valley residents, just then unaware of the Angelenos in their midst, would grow to deeply resent both Mulholland and what he stood for: a thirsty metropolis whose ever-increasing water needs took primacy over their own livelihood.

Grand ambitions drove Mulholland's divination pilgrimage. In 1904, the population of Los Angeles had climbed to around 200,000, and already the city was running dry. Tapping the Owens River—which meant conveying it the more than 200 miles downstream, cutting across arid desert and tunneling through hardrock mountains—was a design and engineering feat, but Mulholland meant to make it happen. "Titanic Project to Give City a River," the *Los Angeles Times* lead headline proclaimed after the project was made public. And of the Inyo County property surrounding the river? "Eaton has made every option solid and secured all the land the city wanted."



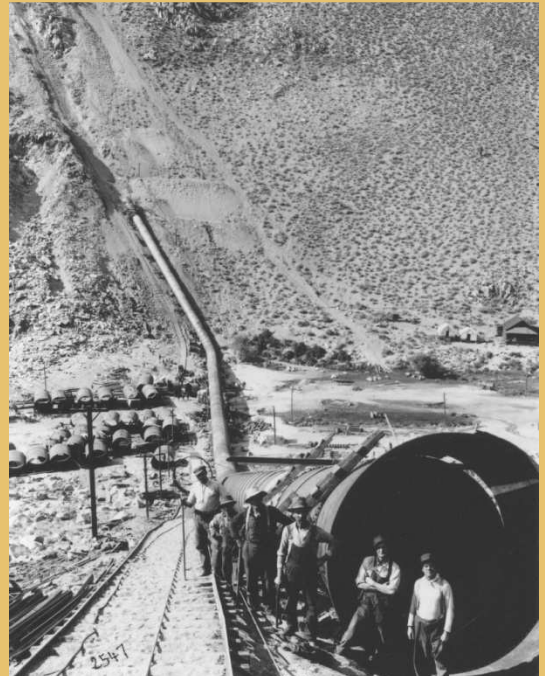
William Mulholland, taken in the field with a surveying instrument.

Historical Photo Collection of the Department of Water and Power, City of Los Angeles

Owens Valley residents had another read on Los Angeles' buying spree. Eaton had quietly begun purchasing water options adjoining the river without revealing to the farmers and ranchers what he and Mulholland intended to do with them. "Three months ago Eaton bought the holdings of the Rickey Cattle Company," the *Times* reported on July 29, 1905, "comprising about 50,000 acres of water-bearing land. It was then thought that Eaton was going into the stock-raising business here, but it has since been learned that he was securing options for Los Angeles city." (Soon after the *Times* made Eaton's scheme public, he was visiting one of the Valley's small towns with his son. A mob ran both Eatons out of town, but not before the prospector was promised unhappy consequences should he return.) Construction began in 1907.



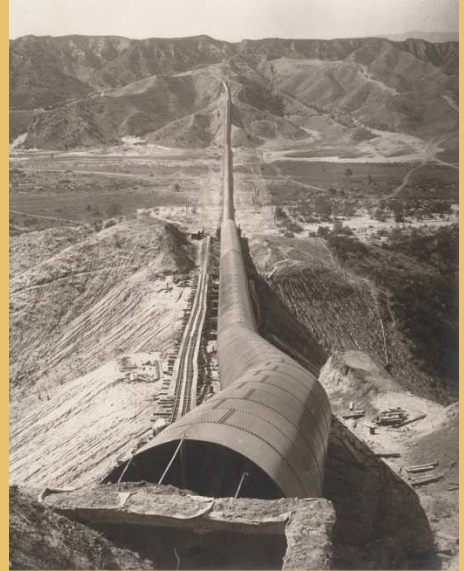
Open channel – Alabama Hills



Penstock Siphon - Jawbone Canyon

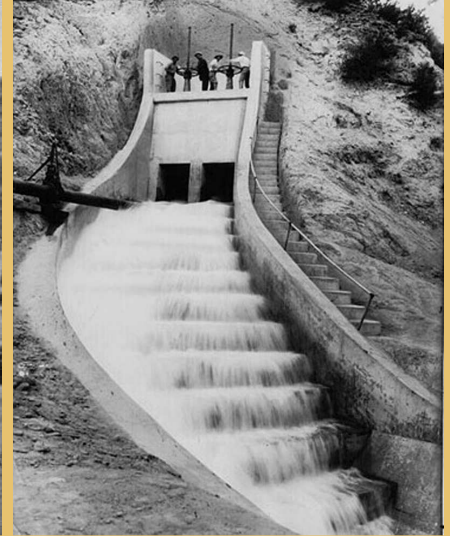


Mule teams haul European-made penstocks



Deadman Canyon siphon

Nine years after his camping trip, Mulholland's audacious plan to create the world's largest aqueduct came to fruition. Water was plentiful; Los Angeles became the fastest-growing city in the country.



Opening Ceremony – 1913 – The end of the Los Angeles Aqueduct (north San Fernando Valley)

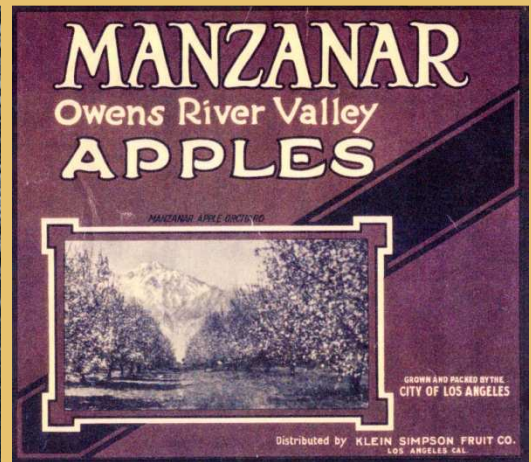


William Mulholland became one of the West's most famous men.

However, by the early 1920's Los Angeles needed more land and/or water rights. Owens Lake water levels lowered and the valley farming and ranching suffered.



Fishing Owens River



Manzanar town was known for its apple orchards.

Owens Valley's inhabitants came together in an attempt to negotiate with the city as a collective. Those attempts stalled. Worse still, Los Angeles went on the further offensive: In May 1924, the city filed a lawsuit against a lengthy list of individual farmers, claiming that they were the ones diverting water which belonged to the city. Failed by the law, several dozen Owens Valley residents took it into their own hands. In the early hours of Sunday, May 21, 1924, they bombed a stretch of the Los Angeles aqueduct near the town of Lone Pine. The explosion marked the opening salvo in what came to be called California's "Little Civil War."



Aqueduct Dynamited south of the Alabama Gate in No Name Canyon – 1924

To the city, the war had turned uncivil. The bombers were terrorists. A furious Mulholland quickly dispatched detectives to uncover their plot. The local community, however, circled its wagons. "Every resident of the Owens Valley knows who did the dynamiting," one of the investigators remarked, "but no one will tell. Some of the most prominent and wealthy farmers and ranchers in the Owens Valley are involved." To those farmers, ranchers and many of their neighbors, the 40 men with their 500 pounds of dynamite outside Lone Pine had finally taken a definitive stand against ceaselessly encroaching metropolitan interests. For years their prosperity had been draining away along with the 300,000,000 gallons of water going to Los Angeles daily; enough was enough. A few days after the explosion, a local newspaper summed up local opinion on the controversy. "The defendants in this case, the water owners and users of this section, are the men who helped build the west," the *Big Pine Herald* declared.

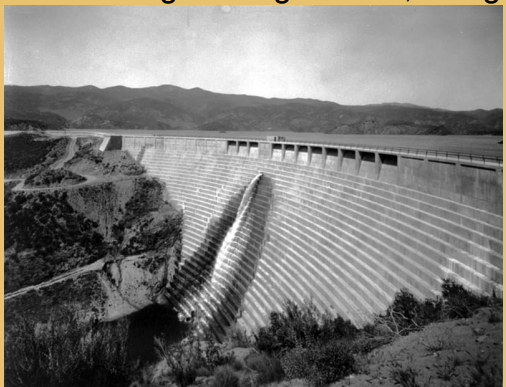
In giving sole credit to the valley's current inhabitants for its development, the paper took a decidedly short view of history. When white settlers first arrived in the Owens Valley in the 1850s and 1860s, they found native Paiute societies whose sophisticated irrigation systems were traceable back to 1000 A.D. The Paiute had devised ways to tap the Sierra Mountain's streams and drive an entire agrarian lifestyle. Using violence and deceit, the white pioneers dispossessed the native incumbents of their territory. A deep and dark undercurrent of irony flowed through current residents' outrage over their disappearing water rights. Less than 100 years after their forebears' arrival, Owens Valley residents still channeled their violent temperament—or as the *Los Angeles Record* romantically put it a month after the aqueduct bombing, "the fighting spirit of the pioneer type still lies close to the surface."

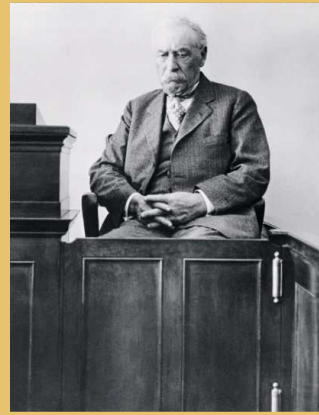
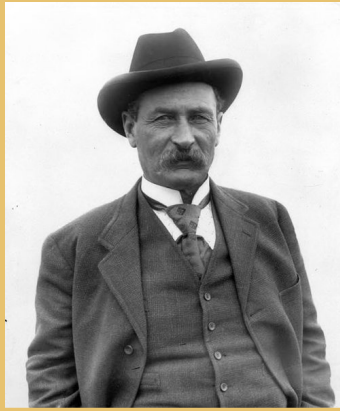
The aqueduct's vulnerability strengthened the city's resolve to consolidate its Owens Valley holdings. By the end of 1926, after another round of buyouts, Los Angeles controlled 90% of the valley's land and water. Uncowed, the resistance movement carried on its campaign: between 1924 and 1931 a local newspaper recorded 11 separate attacks on the aqueduct.

The St Francis Dam was built quickly. Perhaps in response to the disruption of the city's water supply, Mulholland built the reservoir to store water for Los Angeles.



However, two years after its completion, the dam began to leak. Mulholland inspected the leaks and declared the dam safe. Five days later on March 12, 1928 the dam failed. It was one of our country's worst civil engineering failures, killing over 400 and flowing to the ocean in Ventura.





Once thought of as the savior of Los Angeles, he retired that year in disgrace.

There was still much work to do. It was his idea to take water from the Colorado River by building of yet another dam. The Metropolitan Water District (MWD) was formed in 1928 to eventually construct the Colorado River Aqueduct (CRA). This concept came to fruition in 1933 with the construction of the Hoover Dam. Soon after, Parker Dam was built and created Lake Havasu as a reservoir. In 1939, 4 years after Mulholland died, the Colorado River Aqueduct would bring that Lake Havasu water to Southern California.



Parker dam creates Lake Havasu (1938) – AZ National Guard trying to prevent dam construction

The path uses open channels as well as siphons. It's lifted upward by a number of pumping stations along the way.



Hinds Pumping Station viewed from I-10 on the way to Arizona

Gravity brings the water down to its terminus at Lake Matthews in Riverside County.

The California State Water Project (SWP) was funded in 1960 to begin construction of the California Aqueduct. The aqueduct starts in Lake Oroville and ranges down thru the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. Along its way south, it also adds water collected in reservoirs in Northern and Central California valleys.

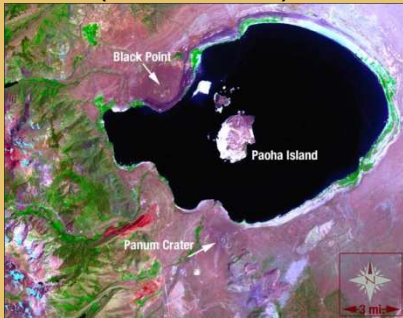


Oroville Dam



California Aqueduct

In 1941 LADWP would also divert water from streams that fed Mono Lake, an essential wildlife refuge. For 40 years the water level dropped 45ft exposing the now famous (infamous?) tufa towers.



Legal action to protect this crucial bird habitat finally stopped the diversions.

In 1970 the 'Second Los Angeles Aqueduct' would be added alongside the old 1913 Los Angeles Aqueduct (aka Owens Valley Aqueduct). It begins at Haiwee Reservoir south of Owens Lake.



The larger cascade on the right is the 1970 'Second LA Aqueduct' vs the wider but shorter cascade to the left which is that of the 1913 'LA Aqueduct'.

And the legal battles against LADWP continue to this day...