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The Transformation of the Santa Ana River: A Story of Changing Demographics, Values, and Landscapes

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History

Kyle Larkin was inspired to conduct his project through a course titled “History Research Seminar.” In it, Professor Iglar guided students through the process of designing and carrying out a large-scale project, from forming a research question through to its completion. Kyle particularly enjoyed the opportunity to travel to archives—such as the Sherman Library in Corona del Mar—to dig through their collections for useful material. After graduation, Kyle is planning to take a year off before attending law school to pursue his passion for environmental law.

Abstract

The Santa Ana River is the largest river located solely in Southern California; however, today it hardly resembles a river at all. Instead, a series of man-made concrete channels and dams dominate the river’s course to the sea. This paper aims to explain the transformation of the river from a perennial waterway to a contained series of concrete channels. In it, the traditional explanation—the construction of the Prado Dam in 1940—is acknowledged yet challenged. This paper instead argues that the true transformation occurred in the 1850s to the 1880s when southern California towns and cities began to emerge. Americans in the region commodified the river, changing its role from a natural waterway to a source of profit for an emerging agricultural industry, as well as a source of water for a growing urban population. This paper argues that demographic changes and the emergence of American settler values in the mid- to late-nineteenth century lower Santa Ana River Valley ultimately transformed the landscape of the river. This study also highlights a conflict between competing systems of water appropriation, thereby acting as a microcosm of the complex history of California water law. The result of this research is a more nuanced understanding of the Santa Ana River’s transformation that illuminates an often-overlooked period of dramatic change in the lower Santa Ana River Valley.

Faculty Mentor

Key Terms

- ◆ Anaheim Water Company v. Semi-Tropic Water Company
- ◆ Early California History
- ◆ Environmental History
- ◆ Santa Ana River
- ◆ Water Rights



This study details the extent of the physical changes wrought by human action in the last century and a half. From a rocky and sometimes roaring current to a tamed trickle framed in concrete, the Santa Ana River’s story is intertwined with capitalism, land hunger, industrialization, and waves of community displacement. This paper shows what’s possible with a careful reading of local history.

Larkin’s research reveals the social dynamics, political struggles, and environmental consequences of the early U.S. colonial settlement of Orange County. This is an important story about unforeseen consequences and a powerful reminder of the unacknowledged past contained within familiar local landscapes.

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Introduction

The Santa Ana River is approximately ninety-six miles long, running from the San Bernardino Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and stretching across three counties. At one time, the river was powerful enough for local residents to describe it as “a rocky gorge, roaring and foaming over boulders, the waters teeming with trout, and so deep at the crossing as to swim a horse in August,” and in 1969, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers declared it to be “the greatest flood threat west of the Mississippi River” (Gardner 5; Mitchell 46). Today, the Santa Ana River is not considered much of a “river” at all. In fact, water only flows down the dusty, concrete-lined channels on rare occasions when heavy rains overwhelm the upstream dams; years of urbanization, development, and imposed flood control measures have effectively tamed the watercourse. What was responsible for this drastic alteration of the river? Although some observers rightfully point to the construction of the Prado Dam in 1940 as a milestone of the Santa Ana River’s transformation, the complexity of this process has largely been overlooked (Mitchell 46). In fact, it was the much earlier period of the 1850s to the 1880s—a period characterized by a distinct shift from Mexican ranchos to American farming towns—that truly transformed the landscape of the river and its role in relation to the human inhabitants surrounding it. At the pinnacle of this shift lies what historian Phil Brigandi termed the “water wars,” as a growing population, shifting demographics, and the emergence of American settler values in the region spurred intense conflict that culminated in the pivotal *Anaheim v. Semi-Tropic* court case (Brigandi 21).

Background on Water Rights

Disputed water rights played a central role in ushering in the American settlement of the lower Santa Ana River Valley and spurred later litigation by settlers in the 1880s. Such issues were not static, however, as the legal terms of water rights had been in flux since the arrival of the Spaniards in the late eighteenth century. Water rights on Spanish land were based on a theory of common benefit for all users of a given river’s flow. This theory was originally established in Spain’s 1783 Plan of Pitic, which was developed for New Spain and its arid landscape. This doctrine stated that “[p] astures, woods, waters, hunting, fishing, stone quarries, fruit trees, and other privileges shall be for the common benefit of the Spaniards and Indians residing therein,” and that “care must be taken to make it clear that the citizens understand...what is held in common, such as the...water” (Hundley 41). In the Santa Ana Valley, the limited water

supply and the Plan of Pitic undoubtedly influences the ways in which the first Spanish missions and rancheros in the region irrigated their fields and used the water of the Santa Ana River. This system based on community ownership of natural resources began to fade, however, as a period of political change swept through California. In 1821, New Spain was swiftly incorporated into the newly formed Mexican state and then, as a result of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo that ended the Mexican-American War, a large portion of Mexico was acquired by the United States. This sudden shift in power and influence in what is now known as the American West transformed the political and legal landscape of the region and, hence, set the stage for legal disputes.

The most pressing legal issues of this transformative period related to water rights, as the newly acquired territory consisted of large swaths of arid and semi-arid lands. The Plan of Pitic was essentially the Spanish equivalent to the idea of riparian water rights, which originated in English Common Law (Hundley 42). This traditional system of water rights began to be contested by a more modern concept—prior appropriation—that was adopted in the aftermath of the California Gold Rush. The main difference between these two doctrines revolved around contradictory notions of water accessibility. Riparian water rights were inherently connected to ownership of land along a river’s banks and landowners therefore had the right to use a “reasonable” amount of river flow for their own intents and purposes. Prior appropriation, on the other hand, allowed anyone—no matter the location of their land in relation to the waterway—to claim water for “beneficial purposes” (Miller 10). By 1866, Colorado and Nevada had adopted the latter as legal doctrine, as it was the preferred system among American Settlers moving west (Miller 6). California water law was not so simple. Most Anglo settlers in California—like their counterparts in Colorado and Nevada—viewed prior appropriation as the ideal model for water law as it was often associated with agricultural growth and economic prosperity. Although the appropriation doctrine was accounted for in the 1872 California water code, the state judiciary still recognized the legitimacy of riparian rights that were granted under Spanish and Mexican rule. The undeniable need for irrigating farmland that was not located directly on the banks of rivers coupled with the contradictory nature of the state’s stance on water rights opened the door for extensive litigation. As historian M. Catherine Miller argues, “courtrooms [became] a theater for conflicts over economic power” (Miller 6). In the lower Santa Ana River Valley, these issues came to a head, not between Mexicans and Americans as one might expect, but

among rival American settlers who favored the doctrine that best suited their needs. Therefore, the legal conflict between the Anaheim Water Company and the Semi-Tropic Water Company not only legitimized American power in the region, but also symbolized a microcosm of water issues in California before the twentieth century—as inconsistent, wavering waterways across the state became increasingly valuable and, therefore, highly contested (Hundley 86).

Early Spanish Land Grants in the Region

In order to fully grasp the significance of the demographic changes and the emergence of American settler values in the mid- to late-nineteenth century lower Santa Ana River Valley, we must first delve into the history of land grants that existed before the founding of the first cities in what is now Orange County. José Antonio Yorba, a Spanish soldier, arrived in 1769 as a member of Gaspar de Portolá’s expedition. He acquired cattle ranching land on the south side of the Santa Ana River upon the death of his father-in-law, Juan

Pablo Grijalva. Yorba filed for an official land grant and, on July 1, 1810, the Spanish authorities granted Yorba and his nephew Juan Pablo Peralta 63,414 acres of land under the name Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana (Brigandi 11). With the establishment of this rancho came the first irrigation ditches in the region. These ditches were rudimentary in comparison to the canals that the American settlers would later build, as their purpose was to provide water for a small number of residents and irrigate crops such as barley, wheat, and oats to sustain livestock (Scott 202). After the deaths of Yorba in 1825 and Peralta in 1829, their families divided the large rancho (Brigandi 13). One of Yorba’s four surviving sons, Bernardo Yorba, however, sought land and wealth of his own. Rather than sharing his father’s land with his three brothers, Bernardo petitioned for his own rancho on the north side of the river and, in 1834, his request for a 13,328 acre plot of land was granted under the name Rancho Cañon de Santa Ana (Scott 197). Three years later, Juan Pacífico Ontiveras was granted a parcel of land west of Bernardo’s under the name Rancho San Juan Cajon de Santa Ana. These neighboring ranchos played a significant role in

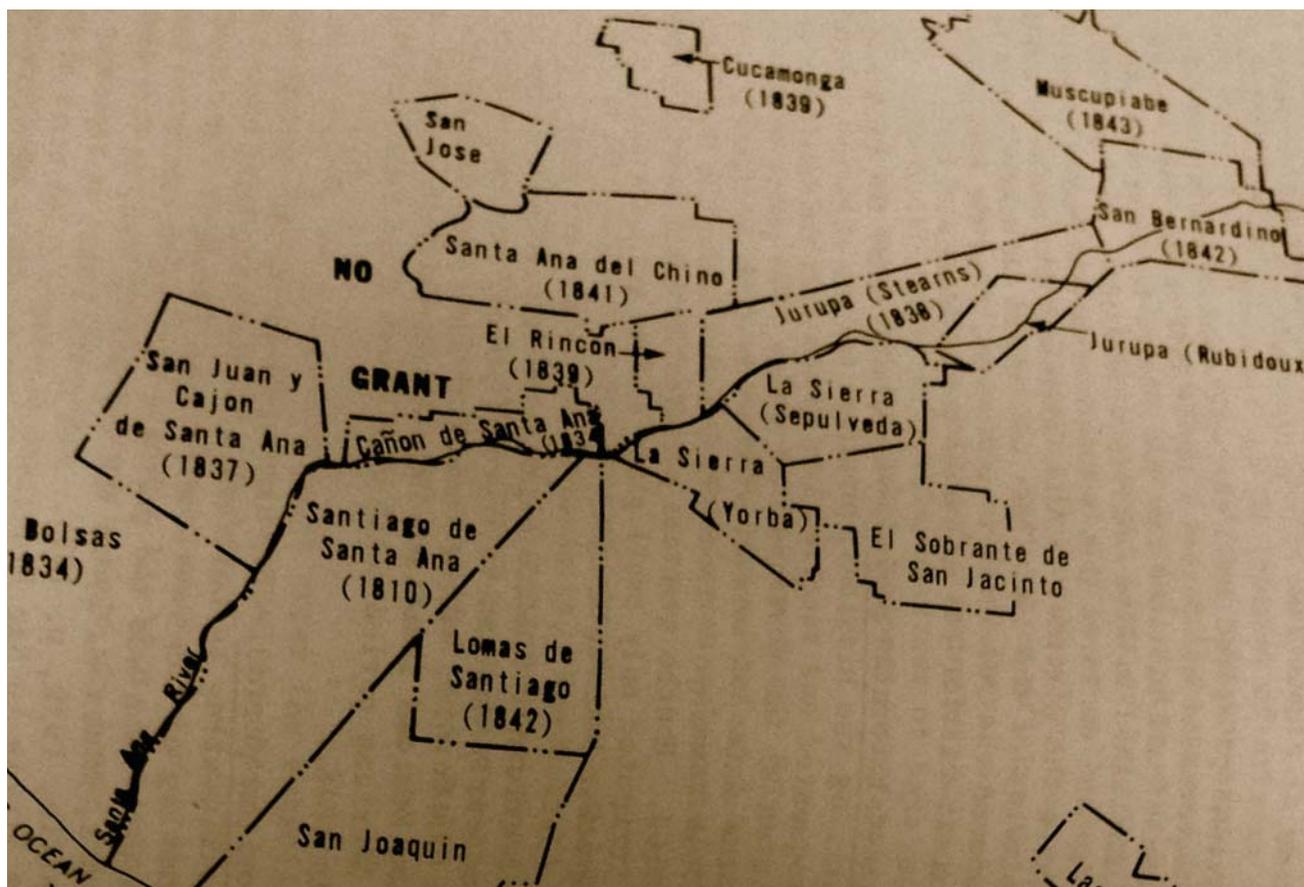


Figure 1
Map of Spanish land grants in the lower Santa Ana River Valley. Here, the Pacific Ocean is located in the bottom left-hand corner (Scott 10).

the lower Santa Ana River Valley's transformation, as the purchase of a large portion of Rancho San Juan Cajon de Santa Ana and a small, yet crucial section of Rancho Cañon de Santa Ana in 1857 would mark the beginning of the end for the river's status as a perennial waterway.

Changing Demographics in the Region

The first wave of American settlers in the 1850s was a group of German-Americans from San Francisco who embarked on a business venture in 1857 in hopes of establishing a prosperous vineyard colony in southern California. Naming themselves the Los Angeles Vineyard Company after the county in which they were to conduct business—Orange County wasn't founded until 1889—they established their colony near the north bank of the Santa Ana River in order to support their agricultural endeavors (Grimshaw 333). On September 12, 1857, the group purchased 1,165 acres of land from Ontiveras' Rancho San Juan Cajon de Santa Ana for \$2 an acre and, shortly thereafter, established the city of Anaheim (Scott 202). The city's name translates roughly to "home by the Santa Ana River" in German, with "Ana" referring to the Santa Ana River and "Heim" being the German word for "home."¹ Thus, since the city's founding, it is clear that the river was always fundamental to the German settlement. This is further illustrated by the fact that the sale included a strip of land adjacent to the river. This land was originally part of Bernardo Yorba's Rancho Cañon de Santa Ana and was bought by Ontiveras eleven days prior to the land transfer to the L.A. Vineyard Company. This crucial piece of land was demanded by Anaheim's founders on account of their need to create an irrigation canal at a higher elevation than the existing Ontiveras ditch, which was insufficient for the colony's population and agricultural aspirations. With a slice of Yorba's land, the L.A. Vineyard Society successfully constructed a new canal named the Anaheim Ditch and secured rights to construct a diversion dam. Most importantly, according to subsequent testimony from the Anaheim Water Company, the L.A. Vineyard Society was granted the right to "construct a water ditch eight feet wide and two feet deep... to keep said ditch constantly full to its utmost capacity at all times and seasons of the year...for domestic and irrigating purposes, all of which said Vineyard Society had good and lawful right to do" ("Anaheim Water Company v. Semi-Tropic Water Company" 7). As M. Catherine Miller contends, among American settlers in 1850s California, "the key factor in claims to water was the notion of first in time,

first in right...which allowed claimants to acquire exclusive transferable rights to finite quantities of water" (Miller 6). The L.A. Vineyard Society operated on the belief that its claim to water based on the concept of prior appropriation was legitimate, as it did not hold riparian rights from the colony's location. No one questioned this belief until more than a decade later when Anaheim's canals ran dry due to the diversion of large quantities of water by upstream users during unusually dry years. Tensions began to escalate when similar irrigation developments began to take shape on the opposite side of the river in the years prior to the catastrophic 1862–4 drought, thus inducing further stress on the limited water supply (Scott 211).

By 1866, a surge in American land ownership had altered the racial makeup of the south banks of the Santa Ana River. The crucial difference between the shift of the 1860s and the one that occurred nearly a decade earlier on the north side of the river was that the Anaheim development resulted from the demands of a business venture, whereas change on the south side was ushered in by a loan default. In the early 1860s, Leonardo Cota, son-in-law of Bernardo Yorba, borrowed a large sum of money from the prominent landowner Abel Stearns and put up his share of Rancho Santiago as collateral (Brigandi 14). An issue with offering a share of the rancho as collateral, however, stemmed from the fact that the original parcel of land had never been legally divided. Therefore, as historian Phil Brigandi notes, "All that anyone really owned was an undivided interest in the land. Bernardo Yorba, for example, owned one-seventh of one-half of the rancho" (Brigandi 14). When Cota defaulted on the loan in 1866, Stearns was well aware of the issue and quickly filed a lawsuit in the Los Angeles County Superior Court to partition the rancho. In response to the complexities of land ownership, the court issued a partition decree that effectively divided the rancho into 1,000 units to be divided among the Yorba and Peralta heirs, as well as those Americans who had purchased land in the region (Brigandi 14). The uniform commodification of land by the L.A. County Superior Court allowed for fluid land transfers and, with the influx of American settlers in the region, the remaining Yorba and Peralta heirs began selling large chunks of property. The buyers were predominately American settlers who sought to establish wealth and prosperity in a land full of what they perceived to be "superabundance" (Hundley 67). What followed was the establishment of the three new cities—Tustin, Santa Ana, and Orange—in the years from 1868 to 1871.

If the founding of Anaheim on the north side of the river in 1857 marked the incipience of settler influence in

1. The city was nearly named Anaberg, as "Berg" translates to "mountain" and referred to the nearby San Bernardino Mountains.

the lower Santa Ana River Valley, then the *Stearns v. Cota* case and subsequent partition decree of 1866 represented an opportunity for American settlers to demographically dominate the region and exploit its water supply for their own purposes. The newfound accessibility to property encouraged Americans to buy large land tracts in hopes of profiting from agriculture. As the increasing presence of American settlers began to be felt on both banks of the lower Santa Ana River, motives to exploit nature for material gain began to surface. In the process, the settlers essentially commodified what was once a thriving river, thus leaving nothing more than a weak, irregular stream to run past their settlements.

The Commercialization of Water Rights and Early Water Crises

The expansion of irrigation measures initiated the transformation of the Santa Ana River from a natural and wild source of life to the irregular stream that lingered in the wake of intense commodification. The land transfer agreement between the L.A. Vineyard Society and Ontiveras supposedly entitled the Old Anaheim Ditch to enough water to fill the canal to capacity, which was reportedly “6 feet wide at the bottom, 8 feet wide at the top, and 2 feet deep” (Scott 214). In 1859, prompted by the need to provide water to an increasing population of farmers, the L.A. Vineyard Society transferred all of its water rights, canals, and ditches to the Anaheim Water Company (A.W.C.). Stock in the A.W.C. was then granted to individuals in the form of Anaheim’s original fifty town lots and fifty vineyard lots. The A.W.C. was formed as a mutual water company, meaning it was privately owned and controlled by each water user (Hundley 105). In principle, water rights were inseparable from each lot, but by 1869 members of the A.W.C. began selling water to outside users for profit, and within ten years, 2,000 acres of land were supported by the ditch—double the acreage of the original land purchase—therefore increasing the stress on the limited water supply (Scott 203). On the south side of the river, similar developments began to take shape that had a direct effect on water availability in the lower Santa Ana River Valley at large.

With the founding of three new cities on the south side of the river by 1871—which boasted populations that, when combined, more than doubled Anaheim’s—the need for an extensive, yet reliable water system arose (Scott 213). The American settlers found the pre-existing ditches on the south side to be run down and inefficient as most had been built by the Yorbas and Peraltas decades earlier to provide water to small parcels of land. The influx of Americans in

the region and the subsequent urbanization left men such as A.B. Chapman—the founder of Orange—and his associate, Andrew Glassel, scrambling to improve the existing irrigation systems. Chapman and Glassel constructed a large ditch to provide water for the city of Orange in 1871; it was reportedly large enough to provide irrigation for 5,000 acres of land. In 1873, they formed the Semi-Tropic Water Company and within a few years, the company had grown to control virtually every ditch and canal in Tustin, Santa Ana, and Orange. In 1877, as a result of unusually dry conditions, a group of local farmers who were disgruntled with the scarce allotment of water decided to found their own water company: the Santa Ana Valley Irrigation Company, or S.A.V.I. This company gained popularity for its “one share per acre” policy and quickly gained enough power to buy out Semi-Tropic that same year (though the Semi-Tropic name continued to be used interchangeably with S.A.V.I. for years to come) (Brigandi 21).

Although the newly-founded water companies of the 1860s and 1870s improved canal efficiency, this expansion was plagued by overconsumption, tension and, ultimately, litigation. Increasing water use on both banks of the river coupled with the drought of 1877 ushered in the “water wars.” Furthermore, increased demands for water drastically reduced the Santa Ana’s flow as American settlers transformed it through exploitation and, therefore, weakened the status of the river as a perennial waterway (Gumprecht 115).

The Breaking Point

The factors that prompted the litigation of the 1880s stemmed from a complex set of issues that arose after American settlement in the region. The year 1877 proved to be a breaking point for all parties involved in irrigation practices along the banks of the lower Santa Ana River. In June, the people of Anaheim filed suit against the Semi-Tropic Water Company, provoked by successive years of unprecedented water shortages dating back to 1872 (Gardner 6). Many factors undoubtedly contributed to the shortages, but neither Anaheim nor Semi-Tropic would take responsibility for their potential overuse. Anaheim was quick to blame the developments on the south side of the river and subsequent increased water demands for its own lack of water—and for good reason. In 1869, Henry Watson bought 6,000 acres of Rancho Santiago and enlarged the existing Teodócio Yorba Ditch (Gardner 3). The city of Santa Ana was formally incorporated in the same year, and in 1871, A.B. Chapman constructed the Chapman Ditch to supply immense quantities of water to the cities of Orange, Santa Ana, and Tustin.

Unfortunately, the amount of water desired, coupled with the existing usage rate of Anaheim, far exceeded the average flow of the Santa Ana River.

Documents from the time period show deeply divided sentiment between the north- and south-side settlers. For example, the 1880 testimony of A. Langenberger—son-in-law of Juan Ontiveras and self-proclaimed Anaheim wine grower—is representative of the general sentiment of the Anaheim residents in relation to the water shortages. According to Langenberger, the Semi-Tropic Water Co. took “much more [water] than they had ever used before, so that our ditch was entirely dry for several months.” He added that they “caused this scarcity of water and that was the reason that we did not have the quantity of water we had been accustomed to” (“Anaheim Water Company v. Semi-Tropic Water Company” 120). Langenberger then drew attention to the consequence of this shortage as he added, “the effect was to stunt the trees, vines, and crops growing in Anaheim” (“Anaheim Water Company v. Semi-Tropic Water Company” 120). Such testimony not only reveals resentment between north- and south-side residents, but also demonstrates that the Santa Ana River’s flow had taken on the role of a commodity whose main purpose was to enable financial gain through crop growing.

The Semi-Tropic users had other explanations for the diminished flow. Some attributed it to the immense amount of sand that accumulated in the riverbed as a result of the flood of 1862, which led to higher absorption levels and water percolation through the soil into underground water tables (Gardner 7). Others, including Henri Gardner—who was highly involved in irrigation efforts on the south banks of the river before becoming a founder of S.A.V.I. in 1877—argued that Semi-Tropic had not increased its use of water, but rather that Riverside appropriators were to blame. Gardner would later write that the Anaheim residents were ill informed in their decision to file a suit against Semi-Tropic—a sentiment he expressed many years later in the *Santa Ana Register*:

When the Riverside diversions began to be felt on the lower river Anaheim at once attributed the whole trouble to the Chapman Ditch. They were a very conservative people and rarely went up to the Chapman Dam, and apparently never investigated farther up. They had always had water previously and now had none; ergo, Chapman and his successors—the Semi-Tropic Water Co.—were the cause (Gardner 7).

In similar fashion, E.W. Squires—a longtime farmer, land-owner, and speculator—offered his own personal story to aid in the explanation of the water shortages, which he also attributed to overuse by Riverside appropriators rather than the Semi-Tropic Water Co. He reported that, “They (Riverside) had put the water into one of their ditches which was not completed, and it had broken and also had broken the other ditch which was completed...and since then I have often passed up and down the river and know that the turning out of their streams did affect the river a great deal; and I have known it to break the Anaheim, the Yorba and our dams” (Gardner 6). Since the Semi-Tropic users were well aware that their dam was upstream from Anaheim’s dam, they naturally resorted to blaming those who were even farther upstream—the people of Riverside. Clearly, none of the parties involved in irrigation practices were willing to compromise for a sustainable solution as it may have come at the expense of their agricultural production and aspirations for wealth accumulation and urban development.

Litigation, Destruction, and Threats of Violence

With tensions mounting, the suit filed by the Anaheim Water Company was finally brought to court in 1880—a case that would drag on for almost two years (Brigandi 26). The drought-stricken Anaheim residents could not wait two years for more water, however, and they decided to take action by destroying the Semi-Tropic diversion gate (Gardner 7). A.U.W. Co. then bought the rights to an upstream diversion dam, thus taking the lion’s share of river flow and consequently leaving the now-thirsty Semi-Tropic Water Company users on the south side of the river dissatisfied. Therefore, in May of 1881, the Zanjero—or ditch master—and the Superintendent of the Semi-Tropic Water Company embarked on a dangerous mission. The two men, Henri Gardner and J.C. Travis, set out on “[o]ne dark, foggy night” to lay claim to what they believed was their fair share of the Santa Ana River’s water flow (Gardner 8). The events of this historic evening—as recalled by Gardner himself—provide a glimpse at a crucial turning point in the lower Santa Ana River’s “water wars”:

After a long and anxious session the directors prepared a notice and Travis and myself started up the river to post it. We reached the point where our present division gate is located about 1 o’clock in the morning, and after posting the notice on a sycamore tree, lay down to sleep with our saddles for pillows and sweaty saddle blankets for covering,

while our tired horses stood nibbling at the water mote brush.

As representatives of the Semi-Tropic Water Company, the pair's objective on that May evening was to discreetly move their water diversion point further upstream in an attempt to gain the upper hand on their cross-river rivals. What followed was a period ruled by what Gardner described as "shotgun law" (Gardner 7). Anaheim responded to the actions of Gardner and Travis by destroying the gate of the newly constructed dam. The gate was quickly rebuilt, however, and guarded by men armed with shotguns, yet the Anaheim residents were persistent. This time, Anaheim responded by constructing yet another diversion dam on the night of June 3, 1881 that was one hundred yards upstream from the last and guarded by armed riflemen. Semi-Tropic filed a court injunction to have the dam destroyed. Once the south-side users were informed that a judge approved their petition, "a hundred frantic men tore that dam to shreds and the waters returned their flow through the division gate" (Gardner 8). The chaos of this period is a testament to the value that the American settlers placed on the Santa Ana River and the rights to use its water; however, it is important to note that the feuding water companies were mainly concerned with exploiting the river for the sake of monetary interests.

The Verdict

On March 29, 1882, the Superior Court of Los Angeles County ruled in favor of the Anaheim Water Company and mandated that the Anaheim ditch was to remain full at all times and seasons of the year ("Anaheim Water Company v. Semi-Tropic Water Company" 66). This controversial ruling ended the tumultuous period of conflict and, perhaps more importantly, favored the concept of prior appropriation. At the time, both prior appropriation and riparian rights coexisted in California law, thus leaving courts and citizens alike with a convoluted understanding of how water could be controlled (Miller 10). According to the court, the fact that the Anaheim Water Company pre-dated the Semi-Tropic Water Company meant that the agreement between the L.A. Vineyard Society and Juan Ontiveras for a constantly full irrigation ditch held priority over the later Chapman Ditch. For those living on the south side of the river the ruling meant that their crops would be damaged or destroyed and their supply of drinking water would be severely diminished. Therefore, the defendants acted swiftly to appeal the ruling in the Supreme Court of California. Just over a year after the initial verdict was delivered in Los Angeles, the California Supreme Court overturned the orig-

inal decision in favor of the Semi-Tropic Water Company. This ruling prioritized the previously ignored riparian rights of those living on Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana over the appropriated rights of Anaheim as the rancho was founded some fifty years earlier than Anaheim. These conflicting rulings epitomized the contradictory nature of California water rights in the late nineteenth century and shed light on the high stakes of water ownership and usage. In the end, Anaheim Water and Semi-Tropic settled the issue outside the courtroom by agreeing to divide the surface and subsurface flow equally from a set location in Bed Rock Canyon (Brigandi 24–28).

The Significance of Anaheim v. Semi-Tropic

The case that pitted the Anaheim Union Water Company against the Semi-Tropic Water Company was a central component in the transformative period from the 1850s to the 1880s that redefined the nature of the Santa Ana River. Although fought between rival water companies, Anaheim v. Semi-Tropic was essentially a conflict between the people of Anaheim and the people in the growing towns of Orange, Santa Ana, and Tustin—or as Henri Gardner later wrote, it was "Anaheim against the world" (Gardner 5). The importance of this conflict rests on two competing ideologies in regards to water rights claims, which came to a head among American settlers, ultimately ushering in the beginning of the early American settlement of the region. This case also illuminates American motives for agricultural and economic development as a result of what historian Norris Hundley termed, "the values of a society mesmerized by a myth of superabundance," in his comprehensive work on the history of water in California (Hundley 67). American settlers in the mid- to late-nineteenth century lower Santa Ana River Valley sought to exploit the land for financial gain through agricultural production in a far more intensive way than the previous Mexican rancheros had. It was the court case of 1880—and the ensuing appeal and reversal of the verdict in the California Supreme Court in 1884—that not only signaled the rise of American agricultural values in the region, but also legitimized American power within this emerging hydraulic society (Worster 51).² The resulting agricultural development led to economic gains for some landowners and the consequent urbanization of the lower Santa Ana River Valley, thus creating a need for the river's containment.

2. Hydraulic Society: A theory borrowed from the German scholar, Karl Wittfogel, which argues that ancient societies located in arid environments relied heavily on great rivers and, therefore, developed highly centralized and authoritarian political systems to manage water use. Worster took Wittfogel's theory a step further by applying it to the development of the American West.

This transformation of the river can be defined both literally and figuratively. In a literal sense, the intensification of agricultural production led to an increase in water use that ultimately caused the river's flow to radically decline and, in times of drought, not run at all. In a figurative sense, the decrease in flow led to a devaluation of the river's image as a natural wildlife- and ecosystem-supporting waterway, therefore opening the door for later damming and channeling with no regard for aesthetic or ecological concerns—a lasting legacy that is clearly present today (Gumprecht 115–119).

Conclusion

The concluding compromise of the “water wars” was the final nail in the coffin of the lower Santa Ana River's existence as a natural, perennial waterway. The equal diversion of enough water to fulfill the demands of Anaheim, Tustin, Santa Ana, and Orange left no more than a trickle of water to run past the water companies' irrigation dams. Therefore, the final ruling of 1884 did more than solve a water dispute between rival agricultural towns; it implicitly allowed for the equal appropriation of all of the river's flow from the upstream location of Bed Rock Canyon without regard for the remaining stretch of riverbed that ran to the sea. This prioritization of urban and agricultural water demands left the preexisting wildlife and natural ecosystem devastated (Grimshaw 367). Therefore, the ruling reinforced American ideologies of dominance over nature in the name of economic gain and “progress.”

The case of Anaheim v. Semi-Tropic case vividly illustrates the story of a “society mesmerized by the myth of superabundance,” establishing a foothold in a region of natural abundance and subsequently exploiting its resources for economic and material gain (Hundley 67). At the heart of the dispute, we find a microcosm of the nineteenth-century California water rights debate over the legitimacy of prior appropriation versus riparian doctrine. Ironically, in the lower Santa Ana River Valley, this debate was not fought between Mexicans and encroaching Americans, but rather among emerging American settlements that clung to the doctrine that favored their interests most. The result was intense conflict and debate; however, the only real loser was the river itself, for the actions and values of the American settlers in the region forever changed the river from a perennial waterway to a commodified resource. Therefore, it was overconsumption and blind development on behalf of the American settlers in the second half of the nineteenth century that ultimately altered the very essence of the Santa Ana River, leaving it forever transformed.

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