

Water Returning to River That Helped Build Los Angeles



LOS ANGELES, December 5, 2006 - In Los Angeles, William Mulholland is remembered as the visionary who helped transform L.A. from a dusty desert town into a metropolis by building a 240-mile aqueduct in 1913 that brought water from the Sierra Nevada to the city.

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In the Sierra Nevada's Owens Valley, though, he is bitterly regarded as the villain who stole farmers' water and drove them to ruin.

On Wednesday, after decades of legal battles, Los Angeles will make amends, in a modest way, for what Mulholland and L.A. did.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa will turn a valve and raise a steel gate to send water spilling once more into a 62-mile stretch of the Owens River, which was a rushing stream generations ago before the aqueduct diverted its flow and reduced it to a pathetic trickle.

The farmers and ranchers who were ruined by the Los Angeles Aqueduct are long gone, and there is little hope the water will ever turn all of the scrubby, rocky landscape green again. But businesses hope the revitalized river will breathe life into the area's struggling towns by attracting more tourists.

"The water we took from the Owens Valley was emblematic of an era of pioneers and trailblazers that felt they had almost a God-given right to the resources and land in the West," Villaraigosa said. "My focus will be in putting that period in perspective, acknowledging the broken promises of the last 90-some odd years and a vision for a better future."

The move is not expected to significantly affect Los Angeles' water supply or cost consumers anything extra. The water diverted represents only about 1/20th of the amount originally in the Owens. And at the end of the stretch of river, the redirected water will reach a storage pond, where four huge pumps will send it back into the aqueduct and on its way to Los Angeles.

Nevertheless, the diversion of the water has an unmistakable symbolic significance.

"It's been such a battle over every little thing for these projects," said former resident Karen Piper, author of "Left in the Dust," a book about the siphoning off of the valley's water. "Every drop of water that seems to go back was disputed."

Around Owens Valley, old-timers still grumble about the way Los Angeles snapped up nearly all the land and water rights - sometimes by bribery and political chicanery of the sort dramatized in the 1974 movie "Chinatown."

Locals whose cattle ranches and apricot and apple farms were threatened with ruin responded by dynamiting the aqueduct, committing other acts of sabotage and engaging in armed standoffs that altogether became known as California's Water Wars.

To this day, Mulholland, an engineer and the first superintendent of the city's water utility board, is seen as the bad guy in the drama. Last winter, a theater troupe in the Owens Valley produced a version of "A Christmas Carol" in which Scrooge was Mulholland, stealing the area's water. It got a standing ovation.

The redirection of the water will come as a result of more than 30 years of legal battles waged by Inyo County officials, residents and environmentalists.

The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power finally agreed in 1997 to restore the river by 2003 but repeatedly pushed that deadline back until a judge imposed fines of \$5,000 a day beginning last September. The judge said that if water did not flow by January 2007, Los Angeles would be barred from using a second aqueduct from the Owens Valley.

Earlier this year, the city's board of water and power commissioners visited the area for the first time ever.

"It was very intense," said H. David Nahai, who was elected president of the commission in October. "For the most part, we were welcomed with warmth and hospitality, but in some quarters we were greeted with a fair amount of skepticism."

Indeed, some Owens Valley residents see Wednesday's ceremony as nothing more than a publicity stunt.

Stan Matlick, 73, said his parents and grandparents struggled to irrigate their fields of alfalfa, corn and grain after the soil was drained of water nearly a century ago. Matlick said the water agreement isn't "worth the paper it's signed on," and he doubts the water will be enough to restore the river.

"I'll watch it on TV. I'm not going to go down and associate with them," said Matlick, who is fiercely proud that his property is not owned by the federal, state or Los Angeles city governments, which control more than 98 percent of all the land in Inyo County.

Eighty-three-year-old Catherine Mulholland, who wrote about her grandfather in the book "William Mulholland and the Rise of Los Angeles," is more measured about the restoration.

"I would like to think it has some power as a symbolic act and produces some help to the natural environment," she said. "But I also keep at the back of my mind, I'm aware that it's not an ultimate solution at restoring what was."

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