

Interview of Mona Osborne Water for Los Angeles Interviewed by Andrew D.
Basiago
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Restrictions on this Interview

None.

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1. Transcript

1.1. Tape Number: I, Side One (May 14, 1986)

Basiago

Mona Osborne, you are somewhat unique because your personal history almost goes back to the entire history of the Owens Valley. You witnessed or participated in many of the important historical events and controversies that have surrounded Los Angeles's attempt to acquire water from the valley. How did your personal history with the Owens Valley begin?

Osborne

My father was a railroad man and he was the railroad agent over at the railroad station, Kearsarge. We came here from Nevada. I'm a native of Nevada. We came here in 1913 when I was three years old.

Basiago

Which was the year the [first Los Angeles] Aqueduct was finished and went on line.

Osborne

We lived here, and I went to school here until after I graduated from high school. Then I went to business college in Reno [Reno Business College] and worked there for a while. Then I came back and I worked for the chemical company down on Owens Lake [Inyo Chemical Company]. I wasn't working, and then they asked me if I wanted to go to work for two or three weeks at the [Los Angeles City] Department of Water and Power, because that was when they were buying the town properties and they needed some temporary help. So I went to work for two weeks and stayed forty-one years.

Basiago

What are some of your childhood recollections of the Owens Valley in terms of what kind of agricultural land it was before the aqueduct?

Osborne

We came to school across the valley five miles, and when I was in the first grade we came in horse and buggy. Owens River at that time was full of water;

there was a wooden bridge across and we used to stop and go fishing. Then I had a great aunt who lived in Bishop, and we used to make trips to Bishop. Back in those days you didn't travel around very much. To go to Bishop was an all-day trip. During summer vacations my sister and I would get on the narrow-gauge railroad and go back to Nevada to spend vacations with our grandparents. At that time one of my uncles was an agent at Laws, and there were a lot of alfalfa ranches in the Laws vicinity, which the records show. At Laws there were, I don't know, quite a few warehouses where they shipped the different materials in and they shipped out alfalfa. They used to ship alfalfa from the station here too. Most of the agricultural area was around the immediate vicinity of Bishop and south of Bishop. Then there was not as much, but some, around the town of Big Pine and a few spots in between. As I recall, there might have been a little agricultural area here east of Independence. And out at the fort in the Independence area there were some ranches; down in Lone Pine there were a few. So those were the main agricultural areas in the valley. The biggest part of it, on the floor of the valley, was native pasture and salt grass. At that time the water table was higher and there were rose bushes and iris and willows, because there was some slough areas in the floor of the valley. I don't know whether you've heard of the Rickey Land and Cattle Company, which had a big area there. Well, that was all just native, what we called native pasture. Whatever grew there was what was used for grazing. It was not cultivated or planted. Large areas of the valley were that way.

Basiago

You said not planted?

Osborne

No, just the native grasses that came out.

Basiago

Was that the gentleman who became a Los Angeles businessman and brought the Dodgers to L.A.?

Osborne

No, I don't think it's the same one.

Basiago

So this was the--

Osborne

It was Rickey Land and Cattle Company. Where they came from originally, I don't know.

Basiago

You mentioned alfalfa was grown around Bishop. What other cash crops were being grown?

Osborne

Southeast of Bishop there were a lot of small farms. They grew corn and grain and alfalfa, and then some of those smaller areas were truck gardens and fruits and berries. The biggest, for the most part, was alfalfa. If you drive up in that area you will see a lot of concrete silos that they built where they ground up the corn or maize for cattle feed.

Basiago

A few of the critics of the impact that the Department of Water and Power had on the Owens Valley have described it as a land of milk and honey. You're suggesting that, having known it, it was something much less than that.

Osborne

Well, it wasn't particularly rich, it was just a typical small farming area. I think that when most of these people sold to the city they--like all the other small farmers in those days--usually had a mortgage on the land with the bank and they financed their operations. It was a beautiful place and a lot greener than it is now.

Basiago

Were there a lot of orchards?

Osborne

The biggest orchard-- There were some small orchards up around Bishop. The largest orchard area was down at what they called Manzanar. Are you familiar with that?

Basiago

Where they placed the Japanese relocation center [Manzanar Relocation Center]?

Osborne

Yes, a corporation that was the Owens Valley Improvement Company. I think it was backed by some people from-- I think they were English. They subdivided this large area down at Manzanar and sold it to people for small orchard operations. They grew delicious apples, which were fantastic, and other fruits, and they had a school down there and a store and a packing plant and a post office. When I was a freshman in high school, there were about forty students who came to the high school from Manzanar. There were small tracts and a lot of families, and also down there were some of the original homesteaders who had come out and homesteaded this area. So this was in operation, and unfortunately in this country we get late frost, which finishes off your fruit crop, you know. They would make it one year, but maybe the next year they would lose their whole crop. Then when the city decided to go ahead and buy up the rest of it, that's when they started and they bought up everything down in Manzanar. And the people all moved away.

Basiago

It sounds like you were in your teens, then, in the 1920s.

Osborne

When I was a freshman in high school that was when the people were still down in Manzanar. I think that in the late twenties was when the city purchased that big area. Dates now, you know, they're gone.

Basiago

What day were you born and what year did you graduate high school? I'm trying to put this in perspective.

Osborne

August 14, 1910, and, let's see, I graduated-- I'll have to figure this up.
[laughter]

Basiago

Nineteen twenty-seven. So as you were growing up as a teenager, then, you probably witnessed or participated in some of the most heated incidents up here, probably the seizure of the Alabama Gates.

Osborne

Well, yes-- You know in those days the communications weren't like they are nowadays. People had automobiles, but we didn't do too much traveling. There was all this excitement, and then the quarrel between the city and the ranchers and that. I was too young, you know. After all, a high school student in the roaring twenties was not going to be exactly oriented, or terrifically interested, in civil strife. But there was the air of excitement about it, as you can imagine. "Oh, they've blown up the aqueduct, and they've taken over Alabama Gates." It was all very exciting. I remember after work, we all piled into the car and drove down there. You have seen pictures, haven't you, of the people there? Well, that was just exactly the way it was. They were all there, and the water was flowing down the gates and out onto the flats, into the river and Owens Lake.

Basiago

Do you remember some of the people who were involved in the seizure? Were they the leading men and women of the valley?

Osborne

Most of this organization of the farmers were from Bishop, because they were the most involved. There weren't as many people [from here], with there not being ranches around here and Lone Pine. The people of Big Pine and Bishop were the ones that were really involved and responsible for the controversy, because they were the ones that had a lot to lose. So most of those people--the people that came down here--came from Bishop and Big Pine.

Basiago

Was it a very festive atmosphere with the seizure going on at the gates?

Osborne

Oh, yes, they had tables set out and they had food. It wasn't like nowadays where there would be guns and violence and screaming and hollering. It wasn't that type of a demonstration.

Basiago

And the farmers were unarmed?

Osborne

That's right. They just went down and waltzed in and opened the gates and let the water go down the hill. The local law, of course, was totally unprepared to cope with a situation like this. Here's the sheriff's best friends, who have come down and opened the gates and are spilling all this water--they didn't exactly know what to do. I don't think the city knew what to do either. The sheriff-- I've forgotten, was it [Charles] Collins?

Basiago

Collins.

Osborne

Collins, yes.

Basiago

Were they armed when they came out to confront the men?

Osborne

I suppose. In those days the sheriff didn't go around with a revolver on his hip. They just didn't operate that way. I really don't know, because, as I say, the main thing I remember was the excitement of it, not the fine points of it.

Basiago

What did you do personally? Were you serving refreshments?

Osborne

No, we just came down to see what was going on. We weren't involved, we were just observers. A lot of people drove down from all over the valley, you know, to see what this was, what was going on.

Basiago

How big was the crowd of people that opened the gates?

Osborne

Oh, it was a long time ago. I would say maybe at most a hundred, but people were scattered all around the area there. I think there were people coming and going constantly, too. Mrs. Osborne added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript. [After the gates were closed, the department set up searchlights and stationed armed guards along the aqueduct at Alabama Gates. Cars on the highway were picked up with lights and followed until they were out of sight. This arrangement was later discontinued.]

Basiago

What about the dynamitings? Do you recall--?

Osborne

Yes, it seems like they all would occur on the weekend, and we would go to school on Monday and-- "Oh, they blew up the aqueduct, Jawbone Siphon, or something, the night before."

Basiago

Why do you think it happened on the weekend? Were these workingmen or businessmen?

Osborne

I don't know. Maybe my memory isn't correct, but it seemed to me that usually we found out about it when we went to school Monday.

Basiago

Maybe strategy to keep the repair--

Osborne

Well, I suppose on the weekend-- [tape recorder off]

Basiago

While the aqueduct was being dynamited, the Alabama Gates and the other siphons were being opened up and the water was being poured back into the Owens Lake? [tape recorder off]

Osborne

Just down the hill to the river at Alabama Gates and into the lake or onto the flats at the siphons.

Basiago

What was the word in town, let's say, among those who weren't participating, if you can recall? In other words, pretty quickly after this, the department publicist started to portray these actions as extortion attempts. For instance, I have an article here from the twenties describing the situation as a small group of persons in Owens Valley, aided and abetted by certain outside interests, being the active forces in this campaign. Their goals being twofold: to force the city to buy at exorbitant prices ranchland in the valley still held in private ownership and, two, to compel the city to pay them many additional millions of dollars as reparations for alleged injury to business interests in the valley resulting from the city's land purchases in that region. This, of course, covers the later period when the valley businessmen were demanding reparations. Was there any connection, these acts of protest, to any kind of attempt on the part of the Bishop farmers to abet their cause, to sell out at a higher price?

Osborne

You have to understand, I was young then and not really into this situation. It seems to me it was just a protest. I don't think they felt like they were getting fair treatment. Also, the farmers up here, I think, were being used by certain people. If you've read all that, you know there's a lot of angles.

Basiago

This comes up. You see the--

Osborne

Personally I'm not familiar with it, but from what I've read and what I've observed, more or less, here was this situation where the city comes in and they, let's admit, they were sort of underhanded. They went in and got somebody to sell, you know, so that they could break into a certain area, and then that was used as leverage to get the rest of them to sell. Their operations weren't exactly--

Basiago

Mayor [Fred] Eaton's--

Osborne

They were a little bit dishonest and underhanded.

Basiago

Yeah, Mayor Eaton's survey of the river for the riparian rights and J.B. [Joseph Barlow] Lippincott's investigation of the whole area were done for the Federal Bureau of Reclamation. It's the stated position of the department that these gentlemen allowed the valley residents to believe they were federal agents.

Osborne

Oh, yes, it reads like the talk about robber barons and all the rest of it. I suppose back in those days that's the way that people operated. There weren't laws and agencies to protect people's rights, and so they just decided--[William] Mulholland decided--that this was the place they were going to get their water. Unfortunately, a lot of the people that were involved in it at that time, why, they were just going to get it, period. "We don't care what we have to do." So I suppose that you can have sympathy for the farmers because-- Maybe if they had been open about the whole thing and just said, "Look, we need the water, and we'll pay you a fair price for your land." But they didn't operate that way. They went around and they got local people to act as, sort of as--what do I want to say?--that they were actually working for the city, but let the farmers think that they were involved, you know, they were--

Basiago

Agents?

Osborne

Yeah. They weren't just working for the farmers. I suppose that--just like in modern times--if people get riled up enough they resort to a little violence. I think it was only a small percentage of the people that were actually in favor of blowing up the aqueduct and so forth. Had you taken a poll of all of the people involved, I'm sure it would have been a minority. But there were these undercover agents of the city, and some other people that came that were involved in it and--

Basiago

Did you ever learn of anybody that was found out to be an agent? What was the situation there?

Osborne

There was one fellow from Big Pine, from what I've read-- As I say, I don't know this firsthand. I really--

Basiago

Was it the lawyer by the name of [L.C.] Hall?

Osborne

That's the one I was thinking of, and they probably had other ones too.

Basiago

There's always been a controversy about how the city purchased the land, what strategy they used to drive ownership from the private to the public. Was there--?

Osborne

What they had up here when they originally settled this area, the source of water was the Owens River. These people would homestead this land, and then in each area they would get together to build a canal to take the water out of the river and bring it to their lands, and then divide it up. There were, I don't know, quite a few canal companies. Under this situation, they were issued stock and each farmer was entitled to so much water. So they built all these canals up there in the Bishop area, and there were a few in the south part of the valley. And it worked well. I mean, they had a few spats between farmers, "Somebody was using more water than they should." But it seemed to work well. Well, then when the city came up and wanted to acquire all this, I think what they did in some cases was they scooted around the edges and got maybe one farmer that was on the Owens River canal to sell out. That gave them an opening wedge. This was one way they operated. As far as the prices that they paid, they had the farms appraised with the buildings and so forth on them, but I don't know-- I've never made it a point. I had all the records in the office over there. As to whether the first ones that sold out got a premium price or not, that I don't know.

Basiago

Were the agricultural prospects of those farther up the canal diminished because water was being drawn off at its source? How did the sale of someone near you suggest that you were being pressured also to sell? How did that work?

Osborne

I don't know how-- They would go in and buy out the farmer and they would get his stock.

Basiago

I see.

Osborne

So then they would get a majority of the stock and they would have control of the water. Because when they would buy, they would have a deed to the land together with x number of shares in the Owens River canal.

Basiago

It's been suggested that what was happening is that properties were being bought up in a checkerboard fashion. Do you remember anything being said of the city using pumping stations to dry out the--?

Osborne

I don't believe they were pumping at that time.

Basiago

How about later? Did you ever hear of any use of pumps to siphon water away from people who were holding out?

Osborne

No, I never did.

Basiago

That's been suggested.

Osborne

See, most of the deep-water pumps were in the south end of the [Owens] Valley, Chalfant Valley and the Laws area, and not so much-- Well, the Bishop area ranchers got an injunction to stop pumping in the Bishop area. They couldn't pump the Bishop Cone. You probably read about that. But, no, I don't think that happened. I really don't.

Basiago

So let's talk about the transition the valley society went through. There seem to be three periods here: a period marked by primarily agrarian people, many of whom had either settled the land or were--

Osborne

Most of them original homesteaders.

Basiago

Right, the original homesteaders. Then there was a period of water war, where some were leaving, some were selling out to the city, and others were staying and fighting for their ranchland. What are your memories of this great transition that the valley went through, in terms of how various people were reacting to the pressures? How did it affect your family and friends?

Osborne

It didn't affect my family, of course. But when they started buying the ranchers out, as I say, most of the people had mortgages. That's the way the farmers operated, you know. They borrow for their expenses and then pay it off at harvesttime. Unfortunately, at the time that they were buying most of these

ranches out, it was about that time the Inyo County [First National] Bank failed. Are you familiar with that?

Basiago

Mark Q. and Wilfred W. Watterson's bank.

Osborne

Yes. A lot of these people had sold their ranches to the department. All of a sudden, a small-time farmer has, say, \$60,000. Well, that was a lot of money back in those days. Some of them took the money and bought farmland over in the San Joaquin Valley. Some of them weren't quite sure what they wanted to do. In a lot of cases the city would rent-- When they first started purchasing ranches, they would rent the ranch back to them. They could stay there because the city didn't have complete control. So they would sell and then the people would lease it from the city. That worked out all right as long as they were allowed water. And then on some of them where they had no lessees, why, the buildings and everything just deteriorated. Then we had a time where someone was going around and setting fire to a lot of the houses. A lot of the houses were moved into the towns. The city sold the houses, and a house-moving firm came up from Southern California and they moved these residences. Each town has some of the old ranch houses in it. But to begin with, as I say, they rented back to the owners until they more or less got complete control. Then there was no water available, so they became vacant. A lot of the people moved away. Some of them moved into the towns, and some of them are today leasing the property that they sold to the city--some of the older families. They are still, like Cashbaugh and Partridge and some of the other old pioneer families that sold to the department, today they are leasing the land from them. Even before they allowed any water for irrigation, there were large areas that were leased to the cattlemen for dry grazing--what they call dry grazing. So some of the farmers that had just had their money in the bank over a period of years, I think, they probably-- When the receivers closed up shop, I'm not too sure, but I think that they settled on probably about fifty cents on the dollar or something like that.

Basiago

After the bank failure?

Osborne

Yeah. They appointed a receiver for the Inyo County bank and the other bank in Bishop, and it went on for years, like those things do. They had to liquidate all the Watterson holdings and apportion it out. I think the people that had all their money in there probably just wound up with about fifty cents on the dollar, but I'm not too positive about that.

Basiago

Now you're speaking of Mark Q. and Wilfred Watterson's alleged embezzlement of the money that the ranch owners had been paid by the department. How were they treated in the valley? Were they ultimately vilified?

Osborne

No, they weren't.

Basiago

That's odd.

Osborne

I think they primarily tried to help the people. I don't think they were so much criminally minded as they were-- You know, they just tried to hang on. And they spent a lot of the money unwisely and got caught up in it, but I never did feel that they actually made off with a whole bunch of money.

Basiago

So you're saying that was the--

Osborne

And I think a lot of the people in the valley didn't have any animosity toward them. They went to jail and they served their time.

Basiago

So they weren't viewed as embezzlers per se.

Osborne

I don't think so. By some people probably yes, but on the whole I just don't think so.

Basiago

It seems to be a situation where they had allowed the holdings of the bank to go into the red. Now they were overextended--

Osborne

It was poor management. I don't think it was criminal intent really.

Basiago

Did they settle back here?

Osborne

There were Wattersons around here.

Basiago

Are their descendants here?

Osborne

No, they didn't-- There were Wattersons here. I was trying to think. I don't know whether there are any of them around here now or not. I really don't know. I think they did move away. There were two sets of Wattersons up here that were remotely related. One of my great-aunts was a Watterson, she married a Watterson. But they were probably sixty-fourth cousins. I don't know what, but the same name. They all came from the Isle of Man in England.

Basiago

How was your family living on the land, let's say from 1913 on?

Osborne

We just lived at the railroad station. We didn't live on the farmland or anything. We just came to school here in Independence.

Basiago

What were your parents doing? What were they working at?

Osborne

My mother was a housewife, and my father was an agent of the railroad station.

Basiago

So when did you first go to work for the Department of Water and Power?

Osborne

When I was a sophomore in high school. At that time, I believe, they were buying a lot of the ranch properties and recording all of the deeds and the documents. The recorder's office got swamped, so they hired me as a typist for the summer vacation. Then I went to work in February of '31 in the right-of-way and land section. E. [Elmer] A. Porter was the man in charge at that time, and that was when they were buying the town properties and some of the ranch properties that were left. They had a crew of appraisers up here, and I worked under his secretary as an escrow clerk.

Basiago

Let's focus on the land purchases. I have a letter from John [Clinton] Porter, the mayor of Los Angeles, pledging the city of Los Angeles's commitment to a fair purchase price. Here's a letter dated June 11, 1930, which I guess was the summer before you were hired: he was pledging that in terms of the land leasing, the city would take a bottom-line approach in which for every dollar invested the city of Los Angeles must receive in return a dollar's worth of value. "By the same token, for every dollar invested by the city for lands and town properties, we insist one hundred cents must go into the hands of the actual owners and not in the pockets of speculators and option brokers." What are your feelings about his statements? Is that what was going on?

Osborne

No, this is the first time that I ever heard of brokers and real estate agents, because the sales were directly with the people. The purchases were directly with the people that owned the houses and owned the businesses.

Basiago

Yeah, well, this was-- He wanted to prevent that from happening, so apparently this might have been effective.

Osborne

It didn't happen. No, they didn't buy from any brokers. It was individual sales with the property owners.

Basiago

What kind of monetary amount were the owners getting? Were they happy with the amount they were getting at that time?

Osborne

I believe that the city approved an increment: in certain towns they took the appraised value of the property and then there was a certain percentage added. They made the appraisal of the properties. C. [Cloice] D. Carll was the chief appraiser. The people were unhappy with it, and then they negotiated where they added these reparations, or whatever you want to call it, an increment to-- I can't remember what the percentages were. It seems to me like it was 25 percent in one town. I'm sorry I can't remember the-- Mrs. Osborne added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript. [At this time there was also an arrangement whereby an owner could sell the water rights on town property for 25 percent of the appraisal. Some owners opted for this deal.]

Basiago

So that was even an added--

Osborne

Yes. They would take the appraisal and then they would add this percentage.

Basiago

So considering that these lands had been in family ownership for perhaps several generations, it was a tiny profit, then.

Osborne

Probably, yes, but the prices were really very reasonable. I mean, back in those days we didn't have inflation or anything like that. When we started selling the property back, later, lots were worth less than \$1,000 and houses worth \$2,500, \$3,000, \$4,000. They were reasonably priced. When they went out to appraise them to purchase them, they even paid them for their roses in their gardens. I mean, there was a value thrown in for landscaping. I can recall, though, at that time there were some complaints about neighbors and different people in the area: "This man got a thousand dollars more for his property than I did over here." Well, I don't know whether this actually went on or not. I don't know. Some of them look a little bit-- When you look at the prices and you're familiar with the property, you would say they look a little bit shaky. But I don't know whether that actually happened or not, whether the appraisers got carried away on some of them and they really gave them more than someone who had a comparable property. There were rumors of this.

Basiago

So at this point, of the people coming through your office at this time, how many seemed very pleased, how many were rather neutral, how many seemed somewhat angry?

Osborne

I don't recall of anyone-- I was just a clerk in the office at that time and didn't have direct contact with the people that were selling their property. After they added this percentage, I don't recall of anyone coming in there and being irate or anything like that. I think that most people were satisfied with what they got.

Basiago

Were there various ranchers being converted into various types of other employment for the department? Were there people you knew who found a new career with the department?

Osborne

A few, but really the department didn't have that big of a force to absorb too many people.

Basiago

Now, how were the rental prices assessed? In other words, the city, as you say, seems--

Osborne

All of a sudden the city has all of these businesses and all of these houses in the towns, as well as the ranches.

Basiago

And has paid generous prices to keep the people satisfied and happy. How did they turn around and in turn rent them back?

Osborne

The first time, right after they purchased them, I wasn't involved, because I became a secretary. I can't remember. I don't know, maybe it was the land division which handled all of this type of thing. I don't recall the system of establishing rental rates. I really don't.

Basiago

I haven't been able to find any literature on it, and it seems that if the rates were too high, the people would have--

Osborne

I have to think about that a little bit. As I say, I worked when they were buying them, and then later on I went into the commercial section. That was what happened. I left and went into the commercial section.

Basiago

What did you do there?

Osborne

I was a secretary to the man that was the commercial director and chief cashier. So when they established the rental rates on these properties, I was not involved, and frankly I don't recall how they did it. But there wasn't any controversy. I don't think anyone complained about the rental rates. They probably were very reasonable. I don't know how they set the rates on farms

either, I really don't. Because, as I say, for a time I got out of that and went into another part of the operation.

Basiago

I was thinking that if the rents were too high, the people would become dissatisfied again and--

Osborne

I don't think anyone did, because if anything, they were probably low. Then they had a special rate for employees. Employee rents were low.

Basiago

They had a reduced rate?

Osborne

Yeah, for a while. Then the bosses all got free rent for a while, and then that came to a screeching halt and everybody paid normal rent.

Basiago

Why was that instituted? To encourage valley people to become employees?

Osborne

I don't know. Back in those days, you know, if you were a boss you got a free house and free water and electricity. I mean, it was just perks.

Basiago

I thought it might have been something to compel the valley people to become part of the department.

Osborne

Oh, no. It was just standard procedure.

Basiago

How long did that go on? Do you remember?

Osborne

Well, let's see. I went and worked in the commercial section, and then eventually Mr. Porter was sent back to L.A. I think that was when they established what they called the-- They rearranged the whole thing. That was when [Ezra F.] Scattergood became general manager. Back in those days the power people didn't like the water people. So when Mr. Scattergood became the chief, then there was a big change and the bosses were all shifted around. Mr. Porter was sent back down to Los Angeles, and they reorganized this and they set up one-- Prior to that time, each little section up here was under its own head. There was a commercial director; E.A. Porter was head of the right-of-way and land; the engineers were separate. They were all separate entities that reported to bosses in Los Angeles. Well, then when Mr. Scattergood came in, they put T. [Thomas] R. Silvius up here as district agent and gave him control of land, commercial, the whole thing. Now I've lost your question. I was trying to lead up to it.

Basiago

We were wondering for how long some department people got a free rent.

Osborne

Well, I think it changed before Silvius came up here. I think that someone said that it was illegal for free rents and this, that, and the other thing. And then everybody started paying rent, and someone set the rental rates on the free housing.

Basiago

Would you say that when E.F. Scattergood came aboard as general manager, the department went through a transition from the original water pioneers who had founded the department to a more or less modern bureaucracy? You mentioned the division heads were changed around?

Osborne

Oh, there were a lot of changes at that time.

Basiago

Were there any other changes that you remember that occurred at that time?

Osborne

There were a lot of changes down in Los Angeles. As I say, they put their own man in charge up here, and the man who was the commercial director was sent back to Los Angeles. Porter was sent back to Los Angeles. I can't remember who was in engineering. Maybe they stayed put.

1.2. Tape Number: I, Side Two (May 14, 1986)

Basiago

What are some things that you recall about the people that you worked with during your early years with the department when it was making that transition to E.F. Scattergood's leadership? You mentioned T.R. Silvius. Where did he come from?

Osborne

He had worked for Scattergood in connection with the dam, the Metropolitan Water District [of Southern California].

Basiago

What dam?

Osborne

In some kind of an office, an office manager capacity. I don't know just exactly what it was. Then the man who became head of engineering was S. [Sidney] L. Parratt, and he had done a lot of the original survey for Metropolitan across the desert down there.

Basiago

You're speaking of the Boulder Dam [Hoover Dam]?

Osborne

Yeah, and he had done a lot of the surveying down on the desert and was put in charge of the engineering up here. Those are the only two.

Basiago

So these gentlemen were no longer associates of Mulholland and Lippincott then. They were--

Osborne

This was much later.

Basiago

This is already in the thirties, then.

Osborne

Yeah, this was much later. No, I don't think they ever had any connections with them. Then, of course, when Water came back into Power, well, then all of those people left. [laughter] Well, Parratt didn't leave, he became the district engineer. But Silvius was ousted. This was in the early forties.

Basiago

Moving back in time again to the period when there was a controversy about the removal of the water by the city, would you say that some of the ranchers were more or less agrarian-type people who were just resisting modernization? What were some of their motivations? Some obviously had a real productive agricultural operation that they stood to lose. Were others more or less marginal farmers who were just against the city people or something?

Osborne

Well, I suppose this animosity just sort of snowballed up here. There were a lot of bitter people and it took a long time for that bitterness to wear off in the valley. Later on, the city--when the Inyo Associates [was organized]--decided to sell the land back. The city made overtures to sort of clean up their image. There was bitterness. I think that you never would entirely eradicate the bitterness, because look at the-- It's come up again with the environmental controversy and the deep-well pumping; why, it surfaces again, you know. Some of these people are children of people that were involved in the original controversy, of course. There's a lot of these old families and their descendants that are still living in the valley.

Basiago

Let's continue on our conversation about your career with the department, as opposed to valley issues. So you were working as a secretary up here. What was the next thing you did for the department?

Osborne

After I left the commercial division, then I became a secretary to T.R. Silvius, who was the district agent. Then S.L. Parratt, Bob [Robert V.] Phillips, Duane Georgeson, Paul Lane, and [Ronald] McCoy. Those were all district engineers after the water system gained control of the department.

Basiago

Sounds like the division office was a breeding ground for future general managers. Was that a coincidence?

Osborne

No, the structure of the department up here encompasses practically everything that the department in Los Angeles has: engineering, water service, electric service, real estate. Every facet of it was on a smaller scale here. So anyone that came up here and served as a district engineer had a small taste of all the activities of the department, plus a lot of experience in PR. So I don't know if it was intentional or not. It would be a good training ground for people who were going to go higher up the ladder.

Basiago

Let's jump back a little bit. What did you do at the commercial division?

Osborne

I was secretary to the commercial director [C.E. Outcalt].

Basiago

What was the office doing?

Osborne

That was the billing and the bookkeeping and the warehouse records. I mean, the commercial division involved billing for rents, water, and lights, all the bookkeeping, warehousing, and payroll.

Basiago

What would happen if someone fell behind on their rent or their utility bill? Was there any credit?

Osborne

At one time, before they sold-- Let's see, I have to try and figure it out. I may be wrong in some of this continuity. At one time we had--I believe this was when I was still working in the commercial section--a lot of people who were behind in their rent (I mean not just one month). And the department was naturally reluctant to just go and put them out in the street. The situation worsened, so finally they sent an attorney up, Rex [B.] Goodcell. Are you familiar with him?

Basiago

Yeah.

Osborne

He came up here and that was his job, to more or less prepare papers and try and get the delinquent accounts straightened out.

Basiago

What year was this?

Osborne

I don't remember. I'm sorry.

Basiago

Was this during the Depression?

Osborne

Well, let's see. This was in the early thirties. I think probably the fact that the city had purchased all of the town's businesses, a lot of the businesses, there just wasn't-- The tourist traffic hadn't been developed at that time, and it was just hard times. The ranches were no longer functioning. So there was unemployment, and the people just-- Yes, it probably was a result of the Depression.

Basiago

So how did Mr. Goodcell administer compliance?

Osborne

I did some work with him on this and prepared some papers and one thing or another. I don't believe we ever put anyone out on the street. There was just enough pressure to get them to move out, or something, but we never did really exert hardship on any tenants. It had reached the point where something had to be done, you know. It just couldn't go on forever.

Basiago

Was the department accepting partial payments and that sort of thing?

Osborne

Yes, they would, and try and help them get their act together so they could either move out or go someplace where there was a job, and that sort of thing. I don't know if you realize it or not, but at one time up here-- maybe you haven't heard about it--they actually furnished a nurse and fed the Indians. Did you know that?

Basiago

No, I didn't know about that.

Osborne

They had a man that was in charge of the program, and they hired a registered nurse. They would purchase food and deliver orders of groceries to the Indians, because there were no jobs for them either. The nurse would go around and dispense common remedies. Just a visiting nurse, a sort of medical assistance for them. Mrs. Osborne added the following bracketed section during her review of the transcript. [Later the department negotiated a land exchange which resulted in the department getting title to squattered Indian parcels. Areas adjacent to Bishop, Big Pine, and Lone Pine with guaranteed water rights were deeded to the federal government for relocation of the Indians.]

Basiago

During this period when you were working for the commercial division, and later for the district office, were the things that you were doing more than typing things up, or did you have more expected of you?

Osborne

No, just as a secretary. When I worked for Mr. Parratt, we also handled rights-of-way and license agreements for use of city property, and that was part of my job. Then when we went into-- Oh, before, when I was working for Mr. Silvius, that was when they decided to sell the property back at public auction. Not at public auction, at private sales. Then I got another office, and that is what I did exclusively. Silvius and an engineer by the name of P. [Paul] E. Rich were the ones that went out and appraised all the properties. The prices were approved by the [Board of] Water and Power Commissioners. Then they sent another man up here to assist on that, by the name of John F. Neel, and the two of us negotiated all of the sales. I did all the escrow work and the collection of the money and all that sort of thing. That went on until we got into the controversy about selling a business out from underneath Mr. King here in Independence. Have you read about that? And that resulted in the state passing legislation which put an end to our negotiated sales of town property.

Basiago

I'm curious about this program to sell back the property. It was done in private sales versus auctions. What was the deal there?

Osborne

Private sales. This was the result of negotiations with the Inyo Associates, that they would sell the property in the towns back so the people would have some stability for their businesses and some feeling of permanence. It was also the public relations thing, and, after all, the city really didn't have much use for all these properties. They could save on taxes also. They were negotiated individual sales. The appraised price was approved by the board, and then we would go out and the people would contact us, "I want to buy my house," and so forth. Well, we sold for cash, or we sold on five-year contracts with a monthly payment at 6 percent interest and they had to carry fire insurance. There were very few of them that defaulted. The record of collections was fantastic. I think we sold about a million and a half dollars' worth of property that way.

Basiago

How were they getting by on their land?

Osborne

What do you mean?

Basiago

Where were they coming up with the cash from? This was before the tourist industry.

Osborne

Well, most people, I suppose, had jobs and saved up money, you know. The prices were like-- The best lot in Bishop sold for \$400, and houses ran from

\$2,500 up to maybe \$4,000 for a fancy one. Prices at that time were very low. They were thrifty people, and they could get the down payment and then pay it off, just like you would nowadays pay off your mortgage. People that had jobs or businesses.

Basiago

I was just wondering what jobs they were engaged in.

Osborne

Working for the state, working for the county, working for the city, working for private businesses that were operated. Just the same situation that exists right now.

Basiago

Was there a big mineral industry here?

Osborne

No, there never was. Way back a long, long time ago they had operating mines in this area. It never contributed any great amount to the economy.

Basiago

You mentioned working on the rights-of-way. Did you run into Sam [Samuel W.] Yorty around that time? That's how he began his career, negotiating rights-of-way.

Osborne

No, I don't think I ever met him. I don't think he ever came up to the valley. A lot of the rest of them did. They used to have parties come up, you know, with the VIPs. Another facet of this was when the unions first came into the department. This was during World War II. They set up what they called the water and electric division here in the valley. They had an office. E. [Edward] F. Leahy, who had quite a big job originally but had been put on the back shelf, was put in charge of this. The people who worked for him were the ones that did all the organizing for the union up here. I don't know if you're familiar with it. They had the big meeting down in Los Angeles in one of the great big halls. They hauled us all down there, and H. [Harvey] A. Van Norman spoke to all the employees.

Basiago

No, why don't you tell me about that one. I haven't come across that. When was this?

Osborne

This was during the war. Remember, some of the Power employees went on strike during the war. The first union that came in was the electrical workers union [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers]. They didn't meet with too much favor with the people, other than the ones that worked for Power. So this was going on, this union trying to get a toehold in the department, and as I say, they hauled us all down to Los Angeles to go to this big meeting where

H.A. Van Norman-- They didn't want the union in and didn't feel it had any part in a municipal setup. Eventually they did get some members. I never joined. As a matter of fact, I was very rude to the organizer that came around and approached me.

Basiago

What were the pros and cons of joining, and why did it turn you off?

Osborne

Oh, well, just the usual thing. They would do this and they would get you a raise in pay and all this sort of thing. Most of these people that were on strike were making-- It was during the war. They were making overtime and everything else. And I was just particularly resentful that morning, because my husband was in the South Pacific and I hadn't heard from him for six weeks. It was the wrong time for somebody to come and ask me to join the union. They got some members, but I don't think it was very widespread. I don't know how powerful they are now. I think some of the people have joined the architects union too since then. But that was the first time that the union ever came in. That was the beginning of the electrical workers union.

Basiago

Was it your feeling that all these people from the States were sacrificing their lives or time overseas, and that this was kind of opportunism in the situation?

Osborne

I don't know. I couldn't see somebody going on strike in wartime. I suppose I'm idealistic and superpatriotic, or something, and personally involved with having my husband out there. And then these people going on strike and trying to get more money. I just thought it was terrible.

Basiago

Let's talk about the Inyo Associates. What do you remember about the formation of that group and about Father John [J.] Crowley?

Osborne

I think Father Crowley was probably the motivator of that. I was not involved in that in any way and not too familiar with it. But I think that the department wanted to make some moves to get rid of some of the bitterness and try and help the people out here in the valley that were having a hard time with the Depression and one thing and another. I believe that Father Crowley was one of the chief motivators and organizers of this. They elected people up and down the valley to represent the different towns, and they would meet with the city and try and come up with some things that they could do to better the lot of the people. As I say, out of that came the idea of selling the towns back, and then they agreed to allow some irrigation water on some of the land. And this did alleviate a lot of the old, inbred bitterness towards the city. And there for a

while things went along and the department was cooperating and it was a nice time, you know, with no problems and everybody working together.

Basiago

So you think he had great success at that time?

Osborne

Yes, it was successful at that time, but it sort of deteriorated. I think it's still in existence, but it lost its steam along the line.

Basiago

Do you think he was operating out of his own benevolent view of human relations?

Osborne

Oh, yes.

Basiago

Or was he working for the department, let's say?

Osborne

No, no.

Basiago

He was an independent operator.

Osborne

He was a humanitarian individual and interested in the people, did a lot of good things for people and was well liked. He was a Catholic priest, but non-Catholics had great respect for him too, because he was just a good man. I don't think he had any ulterior motives other than to just try and help the situation up here.

Basiago

When did you first meet him?

Osborne

Oh, when all this came up. I didn't have a very personal relationship with him, but he was in the office a lot.

Basiago

What would he come in to talk about?

Osborne

You know, all of these things that were going on. They were trying to work out these programs to better the situation in the valley.

Basiago

What was his personal style like? I can't find anything on that.

Osborne

Very friendly and outgoing. Humorous, yes. There have been a couple of books written about him I think, one that I know of.

Basiago

Do you think he carried his desires to create good feelings in the valley to the limit of his own personal energies?

Osborne

He was very involved, very involved.

Basiago

He was driven to the point of personal exhaustion. I read a few articles where he was really sacrificing his energy.

Osborne

Well, he did. He was a hard worker. He would drive clear over to Death Valley to hold mass, and that's how he was killed, in an automobile accident, you know. Very energetic and constantly on the move for things he believed in.

Basiago

One of the articles mentions that Father Crowley was loved by the people of Owens Valley, even by local members of the [Inyo] Masonic Lodge.

Osborne

Yeah, non-Catholics.

Basiago

What has been the role of the Masonic Lodge in the valley?

Osborne

None that I know of. They didn't participate in any political activities at all, to my knowledge.

Basiago

I thought they might have been connected with some of the more powerful businessmen.

Osborne

No, I don't think so, not from the lodge standpoint. As individuals, you know, different people had probably exerted influence, but not the lodge itself. I never heard of it being involved in anything.

Basiago

Let's talk about the Long Valley Dam. It's been said that had it been built originally by Mulholland, the valley wouldn't have been deprived of water that it needed. Do you have any recollections about that?

Osborne

Only what I've read. You probably are familiar with the fact that the federal reclamation district-- The farmers and the government here worked together to set up a reclamation district with the idea of building a dam to help the farmers so all the water wouldn't come down in the spring, a storage facility for the farmers. That's when the city intervened and brought out Lippincott and some of the other people that were involved, and put a stop to the original reclamation district plan and went ahead with what they wanted.

Basiago

Now when Crowley later negotiated finally for Long Valley Reservoir, were you at any of those hearings down in Los Angeles?

Osborne

No, no, I wasn't. I was just a little ol' secretary. [laughter]

Basiago

I thought the valley people might have gotten swept up in the excitement of Father Crowley confronting the board, asking that the dam finally be built to help the valley. So from the commercial division you worked into a job in the district office. What were you doing there?

Osborne

I was a secretary and then went into the escrow business and the land sale. Then back in as a secretary. The next thing was getting involved in tax litigation, which went on for about ten years. And then the lady that was in charge of the land section retired, and I took that job.

Basiago

We've talked about the land work you were doing there, with the rentals and everything, correct? The first period.

Osborne

When I first came to work I worked for the land division when they were buying the property. Then this job dealt with all of the rentals and the leases. Then when I became supervisor of the land section, I took with me from the other office the licenses and the easements and the taxes and just everything to do with land ownership.

Basiago

When you were leasing property, were there many outside commercial interests that came into the valley?

Osborne

No, very few. Oil companies, like Shell Oil, Union Oil, for bulk plants or something like that. Mainly just individuals.

Basiago

Let's explore this work you did in tax litigation. Were you working directly with Bob [Robert V.] Phillips at that time?

Osborne

Yes.

Basiago

What was at issue there? From that came the county--

Osborne

The county decided to tax the water rights, which had never been done before, in both counties. Well, Inyo County started first and then Mono County followed. Also, they were going to tax the Owens River Gorge power plants, which had never been taxed. In the meantime, in Independence the department

had built employee housing, which had been considered as nontaxable. But the big item was the tax on the water rights, which had never been done before. This meant a lot of money. So the management decided that there should be a protest. When we started out, Rex B. Goodcell was the attorney the first year, and we went to Sacramento and appeared before the state board of equalization, which has jurisdiction. So in connection with this, there were a lot of exhibits, maps, and so forth, to be prepared to present the case. Then a couple of times I testified over there too. So that was my job. I did a lot of that. And then after Rex Goodcell, I think Al[fred] Driscoll took over then, as far as being in charge of the operation. Well, first you had to appear before the local board of supervisors and present your protest.

Basiago

What position was the department taking? That it would pay only a part of what was asked?

Osborne

No, that it was illegal, that it was nontaxable. So this went on. Every year in the month of August we would be in Sacramento, and every year there were a lot more exhibits and maps and compiling of information that had to be done. It was quite a big job.

Basiago

You were trying to document, then, the county of origin. Is that the issue?

Osborne

Yes, documenting the original ownership of land. For instance, we prepared maps showing every original homestead in the two counties in the areas that were involved. We made up maps for 1905, 1908, 1913, and current. Every year they would go from another angle and have more information that was accumulated, but we never got very far. First time we went over to Sacramento, Alan Cranston, the famous senator, was a clerk for the state board of equalization.

Basiago

He must have been what, just about nineteen years old?

Osborne

No, no. I don't know how old he was. I was very unimpressed. Still am.

Basiago

He was an opponent then?

Osborne

No, he was a clerk for the state board of equalization at that time. But we'd go over every year in August and present our case. When we first went over there, I couldn't believe it. I was sort of naive. I figured that anyone that was on the state board of equalization-- You know, these were very important, learned

men. They were actually rude. One of them fell asleep, one of them left. That sort of thing.

Basiago

What was your first introduction to Alan Cranston? Sounds like you got a personal impression from him.

Osborne

Well, he was just part of the whole routine over there that turned me off, let's put it that way. Then in the later years we were treated with more courtesy than we were the first year. I couldn't believe it.

Basiago

What did they say? You mentioned they were falling asleep on you. How else were they rude?

Osborne

Well, just the whole thing. Obviously they could care less about our case. It was just a formality they had to go through. For somebody to sit up there and go to sleep, and one guy to just get up in the middle of somebody's testimony and leave the room, you know. I was very disenchanted. For a country girl, I was very disenchanted with state government at that point.

Basiago

Sounds like before Alan Cranston left to become a correspondent for UPI [United Press International] from Germany.

Osborne

Yeah, probably. All of this was very interesting though, intensely interesting. I always thought I was quite lucky to get involved in so many different facets of what went on, and I learned a lot.

Basiago

Do you remember working with Bob Phillips when he came up with the *Phillips formula*?

Osborne

Yes.

Basiago

What was going on there? What do you recall from that period?

Osborne

Well, as I say, every year we protested, and then eventually some of it got to the courts. Jack [John G.] Cowan, who was the head of the aqueduct division, was involved at the same time there with Bob Phillips. Then they came up with this idea of this formula which was worked out. I would like to have seen them just go ahead and fight the thing, too. I really think that they had a chance. Of course, I'm not an attorney or anything else, but I would like to have seen them just go ahead and take it all through the courts. I think maybe they could have

won. I'm strictly amateur, amateur opinion. But after putting so much hard work and everything in it, it was sort of disappointing.

Basiago

What you're saying is that the Phillips formula was, more or less, a compromise position, where it would reduce the money expected of the department.

Osborne

It reduced the money, but I thought it was a mistake to acknowledge taxability in the first place. But as I say, I'm not an attorney. Yeah, it settled the thing and got it out of all of it-- You know, the protests and everything else.

Basiago

What bothers you about the taxability? Do you think it was exploitation by the--?

Osborne

Well, they needed some more money, and this was a good place to get it. I'm really no expert on water law or anything like that. It still is a cloudy issue, but just like California water rights and water law, it's so complicated that I think everybody sort of backs off from it. I mean, let's not touch it, it's too involved, just like trying to get the income tax laws changed. I think it's just too complicated, too many things involved. And well, like Arizona winning all the water they won out of the Colorado River, every once in a while something comes up that changes it some more. I don't know what the future is. I think there are a lot of fights in the future, and I think that if Southern California starts to go after any more water in Northern California or in the Northwest, there's going to be one heck of a fight. How big? Where do you stop? But that's just a side issue.

Basiago

So your personal feelings are that--

Osborne

I don't think that one area should be allowed to just go and grab off someone else's resources. I don't think that's right.

Basiago

Do you think Los Angeles has about reached its limits, in terms of growth?

Osborne

Well, they can't handle what they have down there now. What's a good argument in favor of more? It's going to be a Third World area anyhow. It's fast becoming a Third World area. But I just don't think it's right to feel that just because you're big you can go and grab off somebody else's natural resources. I mean, when you peel away everything else and get down to the bottom of it, I'm not in favor of it.

Basiago

So that would apply to the Peripheral Canal.

Osborne

Yes, I voted against it. I just don't feel that this is right. You can't take all the water out of the rivers and not let them flow into the ocean. I mean, just to develop another great big city or something. No, I'm not in favor of it.

Basiago

Did these feelings develop during the Central Arizona [Project] controversy in the forties and fifties there? What was your position then? Were you pro-Los Angeles, in terms of versus the Phoenix-Tucson area?

Osborne

Well, let's face it. California doesn't contribute any water to the Colorado River, does it?

Basiago

No, it flows the other way, flows our way.

Osborne

All right. Go back to the place of origin. I think they're the ones that should have the water, not for somebody, just because they don't have any water, to come over and grab off someone else's. It's the same thing, I mean, as going up north, as going anywhere else. I'm definitely not in favor of it.

Basiago

Is this a position that you've developed as you've gotten older, or did you first work out--?

Osborne

I just never did feel it was quite right, never.

Basiago

That would then apply to the Owens River Aqueduct?

Osborne

I never did feel that it was quite the right thing to do. Of course, I guess I'm an idealist. I'm living in a dreamworld probably.

Basiago

So I guess when you were working as a young woman for the--

Osborne

But aside from my personal feelings, that didn't interfere with my work, you know. I've had strong personal feelings about a lot of things the department did, but that didn't-- I was working for them, I was loyal. But I'm still entitled to my own opinion, as long as it doesn't interfere with my job, which I don't feel it ever did.

Basiago

What were some of the other things that the department did that you felt strongly about, that were wrong?

Osborne

The underground pumping. This is after I retired. I just didn't feel it was right either. They drilled a whole lot more wells, and I could see the effects of it on the land. I'm no water expert, but I know that when you exhaust aquifers, you never can get all the water back into them. It's an impossibility. Nowadays, the experts are telling us that we don't need to worry about air pollution, we better start worrying about what's happening to the water. I think they have a point. Back, I think it was in 1930, they pumped wells twenty-four hours a day. They pumped deep wells back in 1930. It affected the terrain and the plant life and so forth. They drained it down. As a matter of fact, some of the shallow private wells went dry. So I had seen what happened once, and it's going to happen again. I can't see any reason why Los Angeles should get any bigger than it is.

Basiago

When you say it can't handle what it has, you see all the traffic jams and--

Osborne

Well, the schools, the crime, the-- You know, when you get a great-- It isn't only Los Angeles, it's New York and everything. When you get a great big metropolitan area like that, it's unmanageable. It's not economical and it's unmanageable. It's too huge. There's no way that somebody sitting in city hall can make decisions for this mess, really. I don't see it.

Basiago

When you say it's becoming a Third World region, do you mean, probably beyond just ethnically, do you mean the state of life there?

Osborne

Ethnically, like in the schools and everything. The people coming from all over the world, and of course Southern California is dreamland. The proximity to Mexico, the number of Mexican people that are there, this is a big problem. I spend every winter in Mexico. I like Mexican people. My daughter and her husband have a home down there. I go down every winter, and I have lots of Mexican friends. It's a big problem, loaded with items.

Basiago

What's that, Mexico?

Osborne

This situation of them coming across from the border and everything.

Basiago

You've seen L.A. and Mexico now. Do you think that the employment problems and things should be solved there, not--?

Osborne

I'm inclined to agree with what I've read, the fact that employment and situations are so bad in Mexico. If they stopped everybody from coming across the border, I don't know whether they'd have a revolution or what. It's an explosive situation. They've made some progress in Mexico. When I compare

the way it is now with what it was, say, fifteen or twenty years ago, a lot of things are better. All of the kids have to go to school. They're better dressed. They have a better medical setup. But they have a long, long, long ways to go. And you forget that they're a different temperament than we are. They're not go-getters or anything. You forget their Spanish heritage and their Indian heritage, where those people are not like go-getter Americans. You can't make them all enthused and work fifteen hours a day, because that isn't the way it is. Their climate is such that it's too hot to do that anyhow. I found it very interesting. As I say, we have a lot of Mexican friends down there, and I ask a lot of questions and talk about things. Very interesting.

Basiago

You mentioned the department had a policy of providing food for Indians in the Owens Valley?

Osborne

Yes.

Basiago

What's been its policy over the years toward the Chicano community in East L.A.?

Osborne

I don't know.

Basiago

Did they ever attempt to embrace--?

Osborne

I don't know anything about that. I really don't know anything about the situation in Los Angeles.

Basiago

Since its headquarters are based in East L.A., I was wondering if they ever had any program to develop employment opportunities there.

Osborne

I have no idea.

1.3. Tape Number: II, Side One (May 14, 1986)

Basiago

I want to talk about underground pumping. How long has this been an issue in the valley? Because it does seem to be a fundamentally legitimate environmental issue.

Osborne

Yes, I--

Basiago

You would agree?

Osborne

They fought it. I mean, the department [Los Angeles City Department of Water and Power] maintained that underground pumping did not affect the environment. I haven't been directly involved in any of this, because it happened after I retired, this last big thing, you know, with the mitigation of items that they're doing now, like planting areas and putting more fishing water in the river. Back when they first started the underground pumping, about 1930, there was a certain amount of animosity about it, but there really wasn't anything that could be done. So they just pumped, although the Bishop people did obtain an injunction on the Bishop Cone. They owned the land and they pumped. But now I think the general public is more educated about what's right and what people's rights are, and so forth, than they were, say, back in 1930. I think that people are more aware of ecology and the fact that if you get in and work, you can turn things around, you can be heard. Thirty or forty years ago, the little people just figured, "Well, what's the use. There's nothing I can do. I can't fight it. They're going to do what they want to do anyhow." Well, now I feel this has changed to a certain extent because people are being heard. You can protest. You can change things more than any other time. And apparently, as I say, when the county first started protesting about the pumping and one thing and another, I thought like, "They can't do anything about it. The city will pay them off or they'll just stop. They'll get tired. They won't do anything about it." Well, it hasn't worked out that way. I was just as surprised as everybody else. I didn't think they could get much done. I really didn't. I was happily surprised when I found out that they were working on different programs, and so forth. I don't know how it's going to work out though. You can have all these nice little projects like planting alfalfa and everything else, but the crux of the matter is how many acre-feet of water are you going to take out of the valley. That's the whole thing. You can have these little nice things you're doing all around, but how much water is pumped out is what makes the difference.

Basiago

What are some of the projects that have come in this latter period where the department has been fostering some very good public relations in the valley? You mentioned alfalfa stands.

Osborne

Well, down the road between here and where Manzanar used to be, they're planting some areas there.

Basiago

That would be between Independence and--

Osborne

And Lone Pine. They're cleaning up the river, and they're going to put some water down there so it will be a warm-water fishery all year around. Before, they wouldn't turn any water into the river.

Basiago

What do you mean by turn?

Osborne

Turn water out at the aqueduct intake to run down the river. But they're going to put a certain amount in there to make a warm-water fishery. I really don't know too much about this, because as I say, I've been gone about half of every year. I really haven't kept up with local newspapers or anything like that. I'm not knowledgeable about these latest developments.

Basiago

One thing that's certainly true of the history of Southern California is that many people who got swept up in its urbanization also grew up on the land. Were there people in the department who were of an environmentalist bent and got blackballed for their views at all?

Osborne

Not that I know of.

Basiago

That kind of surprises me. No one spoke up, for instance, on issues like groundwater pumping?

Osborne

You see, most of the people that have been high up in the department, they all started in small jobs, and they've just worked for the department and the department has been their life. I don't, offhand, know of anyone who was a great environmentalist in the department. I can't think of anyone.

Basiago

Do you think that because of that aspect of personnel recruitment that the department sometimes is guilty of groupthink or maybe--?

Osborne

No, I don't think so.

Basiago

You think it still gets sound opinions on various decisions?

Osborne

I think so. I don't think that they've controlled hiring of people, whether they're an environmentalist or not, but I really am not in any position to make a positive statement either. Most of the people that have come up in the department, as I say, they've been there. They've started in smaller jobs and worked their way up and have been indoctrinated with the department's philosophies. At various times they've gone outside to get people for important jobs. Well, there was the one man that they went on the outside and got that

was chief engineer. He had never worked for the department. What was his name? He didn't work out too well. After that, they went back to taking from the ranks.

Basiago

Do you think it's a good thing, recruiting people through the ranks like that? Were there times when you saw that it failed as a policy, that some kind of outside input would have been more sound?

Osborne

Well, I don't know. Probably arguments both ways. Sometimes outside blood is a good thing, and sometimes it isn't. I think that one choice that they made where they did go outside was just a poor choice. I think they could have done better.

Basiago

You mentioned earlier that Senator [Charles] Brown was instrumental.

Osborne

Yes, in getting the Brown Act through. That was the one that stated that you couldn't hold secret meetings and the department couldn't sell property except to public auction. So that stopped our individual sales of town property dead in its tracks. Because there was a conflict between the city charter and the Brown Act. So the sale of property just came to a halt until later. They worked out where they could sell the property to public auction, which is what they do now.

Basiago

The original policy of private sales was something that was intended, I assume, to aid the interests of individual valley residents. So what was Brown's role?

Osborne

It was in accordance with the city charter. But then we had one sale on a drugstore building, down here on the main street of Independence, where the man that operated the business didn't want to buy it, and the city felt that they could just go ahead and sell it to somebody else as long as he had an opportunity to purchase it. This was the first instance that came up like this. Well, he got all stirred up and he went to the Inyo Associates and to the senate. Anyhow, he got in touch with the state senator and other people, and as a result they passed the Brown Act, which said that they had to stop the sales.

Basiago

So what was his personal interest in that?

Osborne

Who?

Basiago

Brown. You mentioned he had a ranch in the valley there.

Osborne

No, he was a senator from this area. He owned property down on the desert, but just as a representative of the people here, that's how he was involved and got this act through. So that put a stop to the individual sales, because the Brown Act was in conflict with the city charter.

Basiago

I wonder whether he was helping the department or the valley or both. The move toward public auctions, wouldn't that victimize the individual landowners?

Osborne

Public auction and then the only-- I'm not too familiar how this worked out, because I think at first we could only sell vacant land. We only sold vacant land. I don't know, because they've sold some business properties subject to leases. A lot of this happened since I retired, and I don't know the mechanics of it really.

Basiago

Perhaps public auctions would keep the prices down?

Osborne

No.

Basiago

No? Drive them up? They have gone up?

Osborne

Uh-huh. A lot of this property has been bought by other than local people.

Basiago

By who then?

Osborne

People from Southern California and all over. As an investment, I guess. People in Southern California probably bought it with an idea that when they retire they would come up here and live. There have been a few sales to local people. I would say better than half of them went to strangers.

Basiago

Any foreign nationals that have moved in?

Osborne

No. I understand that in Bishop some of the motels have been bought by people from Asia. I don't know. They're buying property up there like they are all over.

Basiago

Primarily what, Japan and Korea?

Osborne

No. More like from India and countries like that.

Basiago

I was wondering if you think there is still sentiment in the valley against strangers, since the history had been influenced by the Los Angeles crowd?

Osborne

I don't think so. Everybody calls people that don't live here flatlanders. Always called them flatlanders if they came from Southern California.

Basiago

Is there a name for the valley residents themselves?

Osborne

Natives.

Basiago

Natives. We talked at some great length about the land repurchasing program. Is it still going on?

Osborne

Yes, they still have public auctions of property about once a year. In a lot of cases they have removed the residences, probably the ones that are not in too good a condition or really old, and sold the lots. They've sold some of the houses. Some of the property had houses on it that they sold. I think they have a sale about once a year.

Basiago

You've been a resident of the Owens Valley all this time. How have you done in terms of real estate?

Osborne

Well, quite well.

Basiago

Prices have escalated significantly, I guess.

Osborne

Where my home is, on a 65' \times 100' lot, the city sold it for \$600.

Basiago

When was that?

Osborne

Probably in the late thirties, along in there. That was when we were negotiating individual sales. About 1956, we bought it for \$1,100. About five years ago, we bought the lot next to it, which is the same size except it's a corner lot, for \$6,000. I think the going price for a normal single lot in Independence is probably from \$6,000 up. My house was \$17,500, and the whole thing probably now is worth close to \$90,000. I mean, it's ridiculous.

Basiago

You mentioned the town of Independence where you live. Has it been more of a company town, versus the other towns and outposts along the Owens Valley?

Osborne

Oh, not too much. It was the headquarters for the department, but since I've retired, most of their people have been moved to Bishop. And Independence also is the county seat, so there are a lot of county employees here too, as well.

Basiago

Is there still a DWP building here?

Osborne

They built a new, smaller office building, yes. They have a commercial office and small warehouse, and they have their machine shop. But all of the administrative personnel now operates out of Bishop. Independence used to be the headquarters. They had a large office building which has been demolished, as it was no longer used.

Basiago

So from the thirties-- And there was a break there, but then again you started working in the land division. What other things were you working on during that time?

Osborne

In the thirties or subsequent to that?

Basiago

Subsequently.

Osborne

The last job that I had was in charge of the land section, which had all the leases and rentals and the taxes and the rights-of-way and the easements and the tax litigation and so forth. I mean, everything to do with the land under the district engineer.

Basiago

And you worked up until the early seventies.

Osborne

'Seventy-two I retired.

Basiago

The environmental protest in the Owens Valley was just starting to--

Osborne

Subsequent to that, yes.

Basiago

What are your views as a long-term veteran of the department, in terms of some of its overall policies? Can I throw some past you and see what you feel about them?

Osborne

Fine.

Basiago

Well, what do you think--? For instance, during the sixties (your last decade with the department) there was a real move toward fostering nuclear power.

What do you feel about nuclear energy?

Osborne

I'm wholeheartedly against nuclear power. It's a tiger-by-the-tail situation. We have something we don't know how to handle. I think it's a big mistake. I don't think it's economically feasible, and we should be devoting our energies to other possibilities, which I'm sure there are: solar, water, tides.

Basiago

Has the department ever embraced any of these energy pathways?

Osborne

Not that I know of. Originally it was mostly hydroelectric power plants that they put up here. Then they converted to steam plants. Along the way they built all those steam plants down there, and then of course, when the price of oil went up, that really hit them hard. On our electric bills there's an increment that they add, which if you-- The going rate for your electricity, if you say it's \$25, with the increment that they add it brings it up to \$50. It almost doubles your electric bill by an increment that's supposed to be based on the price of oil. I don't know exactly how it works, but it's not very nice when you're paying the bills. It just about doubles your power bill. Now, I guess, aren't they partners on a coal-burning plant that they built down there on the desert? What about the air pollution? I don't know about that either.

Basiago

So what are the pros and cons of these various forms of energy? Looking at it as a long-term veteran of the department, someone aware of the various policies of a big utility, what are some of the cons of nuclear power that make you feel so antagonistic toward it?

Osborne

It's too expensive and too dangerous. As I say, we have something we really don't know what to do with. We can't control it. Economically you can't control it. And from a safety standpoint you can't control it. I think that there's going to be more hazardous episodes in the future as nuclear power plants grow older and human error and different factors work into it. I think Chernobyl is just the beginning, frankly. Even if you never did have another episode like that, what are you going to do with them when they've outlived their lifetime of utility? What are you going to do with what you have left?

Basiago

During this last decade when you were with the department, in the sixties, the department was attempting to build the Bolsa Island nuclear power desalting plant and the Corral Canyon plant. Were you opposed to nuclear power at that time?

Osborne

I've always been opposed to it ever since they first started it. I just am against it. As I say, from the standpoint of safety and economics, I don't think it's the way to go. I think that there are other alternatives, and from a cost standpoint

they may seem prohibitive, but when you reach the point where you have no choice, it might not be such a bad idea. Of course, oil is a nonrenewable resource. I realize that we're not going to run out of oil tomorrow, probably in another generation even, but the day will come. I'm sure that we have enough know-how and talented people that can come up with some other safe method.

Basiago

Do you think there's a potential willingness on the part of the department to develop the alternative sources that you mentioned, like solar energy?

Osborne

I just get the feeling that they just don't-- I don't think they've attached much importance to it really. I don't know of any research that they're doing. They seem to go along with the standard coal burning, oil burning, atomic, and that's it.

Basiago

When you were working with the department, they were going full guns in terms of fostering centralized power-production facilities that rely on nonrenewable resources. Did you ever express your disdain for that with anybody in the department?

Osborne

No.

Basiago

Do you think generally, throughout your career, it would be difficult for the average employee to express a personal opinion on something like that? Would it be controversial?

Osborne

I think they'd think that you were a little out of line, yes. They had their suggestion plans and so forth in the department, but on the really big things, no, they wouldn't. I'm sure, reasonably sure. Nobody's sure of everything, one hundred percent.

Basiago

You mentioned earlier how the managers were always brought up through the ranks and very loyal and learned the department's position on various policies. Do you think the department--versus other companies or firms that you've heard of--has maybe been a little bit more regimented?

Osborne

I think so. I think they are regimented, and I think that they've been more or less endowed with the attitude that they are the city of Los Angeles and they are a big city and pretty well in control of what's going on. When you come right down to it, come to think of it, it's rather a narrow viewpoint, isn't it? It's a very narrow view: "We are the Department of Water and Power, and we're just not going to worry about this, that, or the other thing because we can pretty

much do as we please. We always have. What we're doing is--" Like the move to convert all those steam plants down there. Sure it was a big thing, but it all depends upon a nonrenewable resource, oil, which reaches the point where it's just economically through the roof. Not right now, but I'm sure this oil glut is a temporary situation. Looking at the long-range view, I think they're inclined to just go along with what we have and what we've always done, rather than really devoting any effort or funds or anything else to something to experiment which might result in a better way to do things.

Basiago

You know, it's funny, driving up Highway 17 and then 395 today, I was almost blown off the road many times by these great gusts of wind. I saw these large vistas, large western territory being pounded by solar energy. It's a very sunny day.

Osborne

Lots of solar energy.

Basiago

In the 250 miles from Los Angeles, where I began my journey, to your residence here in Independence, I thought of all the potential for wind and solar energy that the department could develop with the Owens Valley as its source.

Osborne

Like the windmills. Have you been down in--

Basiago

In the Tehachapi area?

Osborne

--down into Arizona and by Palm Springs, and so forth? The unfortunate thing, I think, about windmills is that it wasn't so much that people wanted to get involved in developing an alternate source of energy as it was for a tax write-off, which I understand is about ready to expire. Because people that invested got a tremendous write-off, and the windmill industry probably didn't develop the way that it should have. I mean, it's not very efficient. I read these articles about how everybody's going to lose their investment and that it's not feasible and so forth. But I think that it was started for the wrong reason, a tax write-off, rather than a really down-to-earth attempt to develop an alternate source of energy. So I realize that some very learned people have been experimenting with it. I don't know whether it's UCLA; there was one that had a project of some big windmill that they built in the Southwest someplace. But I think that any city, county, or whatever, that has a great energy demand, it would behoove them to devote a certain amount of energy to the question of what are we going to do when the oil runs out.

Basiago

Last thing I think we should talk about is the fact that right down the street here from your home in Independence is the Manzanar Relocation Center. What are some of your memories about the Japanese-American internment there?

Osborne

After the war started, the first thing they did, they came in and they enlarged the small airport at Bishop and they built one at Manzanar. They had a preflight training program going on where they used the high school facilities for preflight training for men that were going to be pilots. And then right after they got the airport finished down there, they decided that that was going to be the site for the relocation center for the Japanese. They had to lease the land from the city--it was all city-owned land--and make arrangements to build a reservoir and get a water supply from the streams that came down from the Sierras [Sierra Nevadas] and put in a sewer system which would not pollute the [first Los Angeles] Aqueduct. And then they would be buying electric energy from the department in quite large amounts. So all of this was negotiated. A minimal rental was charged for the site. I believe it was \$2,000 a year or a month, but it was minimal. They moved in-- I can't pinpoint the year. They moved in around the first of the year, cleared the land, and started construction of barracks buildings, which were wooden-frame structures with tar paper on the outside. They laid out a regular city, which included the barracks for living quarters (and so many families would live in each one of those), the mess halls where the people were fed, a hospital, a mortuary, schools, camp for the military police that were in charge--or the army or military police. They had guard towers at the corners of the area. It was just ordinary four-strand barbed-wire fence around the perimeter, and they had the guard towers with searchlights and armed soldiers that were stationed there twenty-four hours a day. The entrance was controlled. You had to have a pass from the military police in order to go inside of the compound. They had an administrative office, and there was a civilian director in charge of the whole camp, which was Ralph Merritt. It was a self-contained city, and I believe at one time there were ten thousand people there. They put in gardens and they raised pigs and chickens. They shipped a lot of food in. As a matter of fact, sometimes they had better food than we did, because we were on ration stamps since there were shortages of different articles of food. They later built an auditorium. They had all kinds of classes. They had an elementary school and a high school. They graduated classes from the schools. They had different classes in arts, karate-- Among the internees were professional people: doctors, lawyers, people that had good practices and had very lucrative businesses in Southern California. They brought them up from the city to the camp in March. It was the most miserable weather. It was cold. The wind was blowing. The sand was blowing because they cleared off the land down there. It must have looked like the end of the

earth to those people. Some of them were allowed to drive their automobiles. They would end up from wherever they came from in convoys. Others were brought by buses. When they got here, the automobiles were put in a compound. The people could only carry a minimum of luggage--they had to just leave everything. Then they were assigned quarters in the barracks. They volunteered for a number of duties. They had their own fire department and their own police department in the camp. As I say, it was run just like a small city of ten thousand people. The only thing that remains now is a guard building that was at the entrance, the auditorium, and the cemetery, which is up on the west side of the area that was involved. (Every year the Japanese people have a memorial service.) They had their own newspaper. I have a copy of one of the newspapers that they published. They had several of these camps. They only had one problem, one riot, at Manzanar. This was not too long after the camp was established. I think that one person was killed, but they weeded out the people that were responsible for it from all of the camps and centralized those people in the camp, I believe, at Tule Lake [Tule Lake Relocation Center]. After that, they had no problems down there. Eventually then, out of this camp, there were quite a few young men who volunteered and later became part of the all-Japanese unit that fought so bravely in Italy. I think they received more citations than any other unit in the army. And some of the people later were relocated to locations in the Middle West: Kansas, Iowa, and so forth. They allowed them to relocate there. As time went on, they loosened the regulations. They could go so many miles on the west up toward the mountains to fish and hike. But that was all the freedom they had. They couldn't come into the towns or anything. They could just hike a certain distance up west of the camp. They had some beautiful gardens down there that they put in. They just made the best of a really bad situation.

Basiago

From information you had, was it more a small town that had been set up overnight or more like a concentration camp?

Osborne

A little of both. It was all set up in units; they'd have a wide street and on either side would be the barracks building or the apartment buildings. Every once in a while there would be a mess hall to feed so many people. Then they had commissaries, and they had stores where people could buy things if they had any money. It was rough down there. Because here they were stuck out here, the worst time of the year weather-wise, the wind whistling around-- And those barracks weren't very weatherproof. They'd been thrown up in a hurry with green lumber. I guess when they decided to do this, it was just rush, rush, rush: they brought in a crew, and they built like mad. They were still building when they brought the first people in. It must have been very discouraging for them.

They must have felt like they'd just about reached the end of the earth, where your next step makes you fall off. The automobiles that they brought just stayed there out in the open until they all deteriorated. With the shortage of automobiles and everything during the war, it seemed like kind of a shame. But in the rush of warfare, I suppose there were a lot of mistakes made and things weren't too efficient. This was sort of a panic situation where they convinced themselves that they had to move these people. A lot of these people had been born and raised in this country. They were nisei and had no bad records and had no intention of doing harm to the United States. But just because they were Japanese-- I think they only got twenty-four hours' notice that they were going to be moved.

Basiago

Did you have any friends or classmates who were interned?

Osborne

No, I didn't know anyone personally.

Basiago

Did you ever visit the camp?

Osborne

Oh, yes.

Basiago

For what reasons?

Osborne

I went down there quite a few times with Mr. [Thomas R.] Silvius on inspection trips or on business of one kind or another.

Basiago

Of the water and sewage facility?

Osborne

Yes, or other things that came up.

Basiago

Such as what?

Osborne

Well, you know, they just had different things in the course of it. They'd have questions about something they wanted to do or something, just ordinary business.

Basiago

Civil engineering?

Osborne

Uh-huh.

Basiago

You mentioned that the department did some waterworks when the camp was being built.

Osborne

The department didn't. They constructed a reservoir up on the slope of the hills there for storage and then ran a regular water system complete with fire hydrants, and so forth, through the whole camp.

Basiago

Who built this?

Osborne

The army. And then they took the sewage across the highway, and a part of the facility this side of the aqueduct was the treatment tank. Then it was siphoned under the aqueduct to leach fields on the other side so the water in the aqueduct wouldn't be polluted. I think the department put the power lines in, and they served them with electricity. Then after the war and the place was closed, they auctioned off and sold all the furniture and the buildings down there and everything was demolished. The auditorium is still there.

Basiago

Do you see any parallels between the disenfranchisement of the Owens Valley settlers from their properties and the uprooting of the Japanese-Americans? Were there any similarities?

Osborne

No, I don't think so. I mean, this is a wartime situation. These people were-- There was no thought at that time of compensation. They had to walk off and leave businesses, homes, and everything, with no compensation. They just got twenty-four hours: "You're going to be sent to a camp." So I don't think there are any similarities between the two situations.

Basiago

Sam [Samuel B.] Nelson, who later became the general manager of the department, mentioned to me that the department provided advice to the government that the relocation should have occurred.

Osborne

In Los Angeles, you mean, from the city standpoint, they felt that they should be relocated because of security?

Basiago

Because of the vulnerability of the aqueduct. What was happening up here, regarding fears that Japanese-American saboteurs might undermine the aqueduct?

Osborne

Well, they thought that it might be done further down the road. I believe they kind of beefed up their patrols here, as far as the aqueduct was concerned. It was a possibility that there would be sabotage by some small group. But I don't know. I just have the feeling that everybody sort of hit the panic button, you know what I mean? They didn't do this to the German people. We have lots of

German people here in the United States. We were fighting them too. I never have quite been able to understand why such drastic measures were taken, particularly in view of the fact that there was only just a small percentage of them that caused trouble after they were interned, a very, very small percentage.

Basiago

What kind of trouble?

Osborne

Well, like the riots.

Basiago

Riots of the Japanese to protest the whole situation?

Osborne

Yeah. There were some of them that were radical, but a very small percentage.

Basiago

Do you mean radically pro-emperor?

Osborne

Pro-Japan, yes, pro-Japan. I don't know. As I say, it was a tragic situation. Those people down there living in those conditions, they did everything they could to make it better. Like I said, they all planted gardens and everything. But to have to live under those conditions, where you maybe only had so much room for your family, and eat in a mess hall and have to give up everything that you had before-- They couldn't help but have thought, "Well, what am I going to do when I get out of here?" Which meant that they just released them. They had to start over. I mean, they just had to start from bare rocks. They had nothing left.

1.4. Tape Number: II, Side Two (May 14, 1986)

Basiago

The Japanese internment is an example where the interests of the federal government apparently encroached rather violently on a group's civil rights. Perhaps a bad analogy, but an adequate one, would be where one region tends to seize the water of another region. What are some of your views, after working for the department for forty-one years, about the whole western water picture?

Osborne

Well, I think the situation now is a lot different from what it was when the city first came up to the Owens Valley. There's more of an awareness of other people's rights and other cities' rights. I think that right now, today, I don't think they ever could come up here today and do what they did without getting stopped. I think that people's attitudes towards big cities have changed, or not

particularly cities, [but] industry or anybody else coming in and just riding roughshod over people and taking resources. I don't believe people will stand for it anymore. I think as far as Southern California is concerned, I don't think they have any moral right to go up and take a resource from Northern California. They may need all that water that they have eventually. Why should they let somebody else come and take it? I think that if you want to establish a city, they picked the worst place in the world to put Los Angeles, right smack-dab in that big hunk of desert without any water to begin with. So I don't think that you are going to see water being transported long distances to satisfy the needs of a metropolitan area. I understand that this is not only a problem here, but some of the other states further east are talking about building tremendously long aqueducts and taking water from Washington and some of the other states and transporting it for their needs. There is going to be a lot of controversy and a lot of problems over water across the whole United States eventually.

Basiago

Do you think the building of the aqueduct and building up Los Angeles into such a big city was a good idea?

Osborne

Frankly, no. I think it's a very poor place for a city. Someday people will realize that there should be a limit on the size of a metropolitan area. It should be confined to something that's manageable, so that you're not compounding problems, you're not asking for more problems. There's a limit to how large an area city government can administer, as far as utilities, police protection, schools. When you get a great big area and give control of it to a handful of people, you get some awfully poor decisions. It's just too big to take care of that way. But no one's going to go in and tear down half the city of Los Angeles. I don't think that in the future that they will allow the removal of resources from one area to another just for growth. I don't think so.

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