

Land Between: Owens Valley, California, 1800 to the Present

REBECCA FISH
Arizona State University

“The greater portion of this immense region, including Owen’s Valley, Death Valley, and the Sink of the Mohave, the area of which is nearly one fifth that of the entire State, is usually regarded as desert, not because of any lack in soil, but for want of rain, and rivers available for irrigation. Very little of it, however, is desert in the eyes of a bee.”

- John Muir, *The Mountains of California*, 1894

THE OWENS VALLEY LANDSCAPE

Owens Valley stretches for 100 miles above Owens Lake in southeastern California and is flanked by two magnificent mountain ranges, the Sierra Nevada to the west, and the White and Inyo mountains to the east. Separated by only this narrow ribbon valley, proximity magnifies the ranges’ contrasting character. Rising more than 10,000 feet out of the valley, snow-peaked and austere, the granite Sierra evoke



Fig. 1. Sierra range⁰



Fig. 2. Inyo range

feelings of power. Mountains stand in a jagged row like God's disciples, each one a giant lost in a crowd of giants. From a purely visual stand point, they are a tremendous backdrop, ever-present and immense. As nature's version of Saint Peter's Cathedral, their scale humbles the human activity at their feet. Yet like Saint Peter's since all is largeness, the mountains dwarf one another making them simultaneously monumental and approachable.

All the Sierra possess in grandeur and spectacle, elegantly clothed year round in snow, the Inyos have in humble nudity, laying brown and almost treeless east across the valley. They seem diminutive in comparison to the Sierra, yet stand over three quarters tall. Volcanic cones dominate the smooth and blackened range. Here the naked desert is at its best, tipped upwards for all to see. First-time visitors may drop their jaws at the Sierra, but it is the union of both ranges that turns initial awe into sustained admiration.

Tucked between these ranges lies the Owens Valley, what Mary Austin called "a land of lost rivers, with little in it to love."¹ The valley floor has undergone tremendous change since 1800, yet the constant presence of the mountains creates a sense of permanency.

VALLEY DWELLERS

Evidence suggests that people have lived in the valley for five to ten thousand years. This analysis is limited to people after 1800, because the events that occurred during this period still linger in today's land use policies, and people's preconceptions about the American West. Landscape and human history of the Owens Valley follow a pattern similar to what Frederick Jackson Turner described in 1893: "Stand at the Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the

cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—the frontier has passed by."² The frontier passed through Owens Valley but not in such an orderly fashion as Turner depicts. Most groups who lived in the valley overlapped occupation, causing conflicts that created the dynamic, sometimes violent, history.

NATIVE AMERICANS—PRE-1800 TO 1863

Owens Valley Paiute may be the first group of people to dwell in the valley. Their myths and legends recall ancient times when the land enjoyed a cooler wetter climate, when Ponderosa pines reached down towards the valley floor and the lake spread large like a blue jewel. By the 1800's the region had long since turned arid, but the Owens Valley still had one of the few perennial streams in the Great Basin region. In-stream flows and ground water were ample, and though the valley was dominantly desert, lush vegetation grew along water courses. Paiutes, like the settlers who came after them, were drawn to the water. They were semi-nomadic, making temporary settlements along streams and river banks while gathering a ripening plant or pinyon nut crop.³ They maintained territories based on ecological boundaries drawn by pinyon pine forests in the Inyo and White mountains, seed-rich bottomland, and large game habitat in the Sierra.

They gained spiritual strength from the natural environment through dream contacts with their powers, usually animals or places. Powers reflected an outstanding quality of an animal or object. Eagles granted speed, mist granted protection, and a mountain could give strength. Identifying personal power with an element in the environment seems to have given them a strong sense of connectedness to their surroundings. Physical configurations of places in the valley also carry importance, as evidenced in Paiute place names⁴.



Fig. 3. Place of power and scarcity

Mögahupinunwa'tu
 behind big decomposed rocks
 möga or mög'hu = granite or granite hills
 pinan = behind
 wa'tu = place

Po'dotuhadü
 place under the stick
 po'do = Stick Mountain
 tuhadü = place under

Tanova witü
 tanova = salt brush
 witü = place

Tsiguhu'matü
 tsigop = rabbit brush
 hu = creek
 witü = place

Wa'ko'po'witü
 Lone Pine Creek, where a large pine once stood
 wa'ko = pine
 po' = alone
 witü = place

Tonopah
 tonavi = greasewood
 paya'a = water

Pa'o''karanwa
 Birch Mountain
 pa'o = rocky
 karanwa = peak or boulder peak

A more direct illustration of how Paiutes interacted with the land is revealed through 1927-28 interviews with two Owens Valley Paiute. Jack Stewart, Hoavadunuki'i, lived a long life and enjoyed successes within his community. He attributes his respect and stature to his power, a mountain in the Sierra Nevada range.

"When I was still a young man, I saw Birch Mountain in a dream. It said to me: "You will always be well and strong. Nothing can hurt you and you will live to an old age." After this Birch Mountain came and spoke to me whenever I was in trouble and told me that I would be all right. That is why nothing has happened to me and why I am so old now."⁵

Throughout his life he found strength from Birch Mountain. His mountain also aided him in hunting. For the Paiute, being a good hunter was a measure of male success. From his viewpoint, success, stature, and community respect was granted him by his power.

Sam Newland led a different life. Unlike Stewart, he never dreamed of a power which he claims caused his poor performance in hunting, dancing, gaming, and gambling—all important measures of masculinity for Paiute. "I never did dream of a power. I played games with the boys sometimes but had very little success."⁶ Having no power granted him from place, he continually felt incomplete and inadequate. It would seem people become more than themselves

when they are intimately linked to their environment through powers.

Paiutes perceived the Owens Valley as a place of scarcity. By 1800, due to climatic changes the Valley had no timber forests, highly alkaline soil, and offered little for Paiutes to exploit. Unlike Native Americans of the plains who relied on bison as a primary food source, they depended on diverse sources of food and shelter which integrated them firmly into the natural ecosystem. They kept their numbers small and lived a self-sustaining existence. Their land use practices were founded on sensitive land ethics. Thus until the end of the 19th century, human beings had only subtle input on landscape transformations taking place in the Owens Valley.

Paiute impact on the land was not one of vigorous change, but rather of retarding natural succession in order to maintain stable food sources. Their influence was more evident after traditional hunting and gathering methods declined and

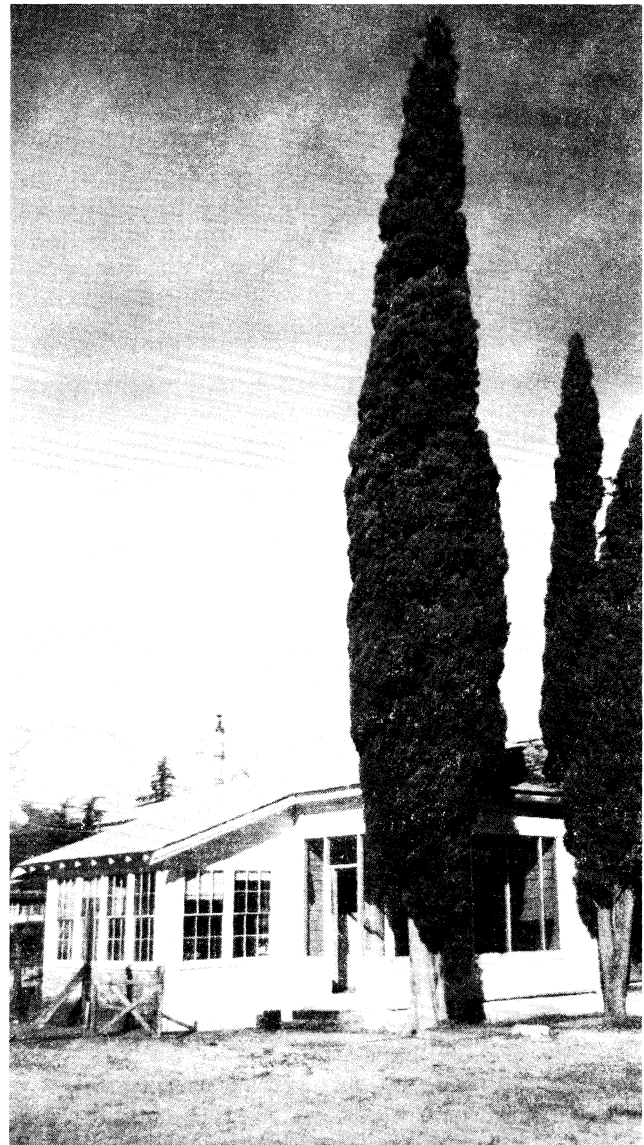


Fig. 4. Bringing the familiar: Settler wood frame house and Italian cypress

natural succession progressed. For example, farther north near mammoth lakes, Paiute and Mono Native Americans once harvested the Pandora moth larva and caterpillars from the Jeffrey pines. Defoliation began as pupal moths fed on pine needles when collecting diminished due to conflicts with settlers and the government. In the Valley region, irrigation, diversion of streams to catch fish, and brush burning during deer hunting were the three practices that had the greatest human impact on the Owens Valley ecology.

STOCKMEN AND FARMERS—1863 TO 1913

In 1861, cattlemen led the first drive through the Owens Valley. This act marked the beginning of the end for the Paiute way of life. Cattlemen saw this vast valley dotted with lush meadows of bunch grass as an untapped source of fodder for their cattle and wealth for themselves. It lay seemingly virgin to the eyes and minds of cattlemen who were accustomed to seeing more cultivated and tame landscapes, yet every acre, every shrub, grass, and animal in the valley and mountains that could be used was already being used. Because the arid land limited plant and animal life, Paiute survival hung in delicate balance. Cattle disrupted the balance by feeding on bunch grass and other traditionally harvested plants. They trampled soil, and dirtied streams with dung and urine. The Paiute protested and by 1862 conflicts became violent. In the simplest analysis, Paiute/settler conflicts were a matter of two groups looking at the same piece of the earth and seeing two entirely different places.

Land battles in the Owens Valley were similar to those in other parts of the United States between groups of Native Americans and settlers. Settlers came with an agenda for land use based on what they, sight unseen, believed to be true of the Owens Valley. Land and Indians were seen by the settlers through a dense curtain of preconception. Perhaps because they had little foundation of truth on which to build a clear vision of reality, they relied more on experiences of others elsewhere to fill the void made by the unknown. Paiutes, however, were not in unknown territory. What they failed to understand was the landscape of the 19th century pioneer mind.

Many pioneers came with their heads full of stories of wealth and glory to be had in the valley. Despite one deprecatory report deeming the region “worthless to the white man, both in soil and climate.”⁷, valley literature boasted unimaginable richness and challenge.

“The tremendous mining interests, stock raising, lumbering, agriculture, and the vast areas of fertile land which the government is reclaiming through its great irrigation projects, affords a field so attractive, so varied, so rich in prospects, so inexhaustible in its resources, that the home-seeker, the investor or the capitalist will never tire of its exploitation.”⁸

The lure of wealth was strong and packed many wagons west,

but not so strong as the promise of freedom. People in droves set out west “the Great West, where men were free, felt free, where land was plentiful”⁹ hoping to win personal freedom through land ownership. Coming from the East where rain was more abundant and carrying with them a common belief that rain follows the plow, these young settlers often found themselves left literally high and dry in the Owens Valley. Early families settled on or near Paiute camps along water courses but latecomers had to take dry land on the bajadas below the Sierra mountains. It was better, even noble, to take a free government homestead of desert scrub than to purchase a tract of tamed bottomland. The process of struggle with the land was believed to make settlers more American.

“Later settlers had to take land without water; but with thousands of swings of their picks and millions of shovelfuls of dirt, they carried water farther and farther from streams onto the parched land. With the land fertile, and a maze of canals and ditches brimming with water, the 4,500 Valley settlers were turning sagebrush desert into a pastoral paradise of orchards and hayfields.”¹⁰

By transforming the landscape, they transformed themselves; controlling the land gave them strength and independence, and importing familiar landscape elements and designs maintained their ties to the larger nation. This personal metamorphosis brought on by transformation of land has been called the process of Americanization:

“In first being overwhelmed by nature, and then in overwhelming it, the pioneer underwent a process which “Americanized” him. It freed him from dependence upon Europe. The frontier transformed his old ways into new American ways, and subduing nature became the American’s manifest destiny.”¹¹

Subduing nature included subduing the Paiute. Upon entering the valley, settlers saw roaming Native Americans who didn’t appear to appreciate the land for its full value. Paiute nomadic customs seemed temporary to the settlers who failed to understand that moving about the valley was a time-honored method of assuring permanence. Most settlers did not believe the Paiute used the land since hunting and gathering left little mark on the landscape and there were no visible ownership boundaries. The wild land and wild people needed to be controlled to make way for settlement. For the expanding young American country, there was very little room for compromise and compassion in this particular perception. Once both land and people were subdued, settlers began the next phase of Americanization—construction of the familiar.

Draping the strange with the familiar is a common method of making oneself feel at home. Owens Valley town form and architecture mirrored what existed in the East and more settled regions of California. In early times when lumber was difficult to acquire people built adobe houses. The 1872 earthquake in the Valley demolished some adobe structures

and frightened people away from this unfamiliar building material and back to wood frame construction. Transportation had improved by then which allowed building materials and plants to be brought in from the East. One old-timer recalls:

“In later years, when lumber was more readily available a lovely ranch house was built much on the same plans as the Engel home in Minnesota, where Mrs. Kispert was born and raised. Fruit tree seedlings and grape cuttings were sent from Minnesota and planted on the Kispert ranch, giving them a nice vineyard and orchard.”¹²

Fences up, streets laid out, fields plowed, order established—all marks on the land to say “this is rural America.”

The Paiute who had only a few years before known every rock, plant, creek, and animal in the valley, now found themselves in a strange land. Their territory was lost and with it their ability to live by their traditional means and customs. Staying in one place, building a permanent community village to inhabit year round went against their relationship with the land. They lost their connection to place and with it their power and integrity.

“View your staunch, coppercolored American in the midst of a village, or town, where he stands confused among the mazy ways of civilization, and you see a child, timid, suspicious, curious. There you will find the Indian at his worst, out of place, out of harmony, a strange discord among humanity. The days of pine nuts and beetles have passed for them. The new regime means farm work, day labor, wood sawing, and all sorts of odd jobs which the white man has invented. The Indian does these, not because he loves work, but he has learned the potency of money, and he must work to get money.”¹³

At this point the landscape becomes imbedded in economics. Money, the age old American obsession, takes root in Owens Valley, crowding out anything that inhibits its prolific propagation. The spirit that must have hung over the valley during this transitional phase reminds me of the ominous words spoken in the film, *Field of Dreams*: “If you build it, they will come.” In 1863, the “they” were small farmers coming to the valley. The valley was considered an ideal place for the farmer, except that it was want of a market for their goods. The missing market became manifest by large strikes near Tonopah, Nevada.

As mining boomed in Nevada, farmers began to move into the valley, slowly nudging out cattle and sheep. General requirements for success for the pioneer farmer, as described by Turner, “fertile and favorably situated soils, salt springs, mines, and army posts,”¹⁴ were well satisfied in the Owens Valley. One element Turner neglected to add to his list was an ample and sustained supply of fresh water. From his Easterner perspective, the arid frontier of 1863 acted more as a barrier to California and Nevada gold and silver than as

viable land for settlement. He did not foresee the immense transformation of the West beyond the 100th meridian, a transformation brought on by massive federal irrigation and flood control projects governed by the United States Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps of Engineers during the early 1900’s.

The Bureau of Reclamation and Army Corps are not only responsible for changing the landscape in the West, but also for changing people’s attitude toward water. Their collective institutional conscious believed all water left unused by human beings was wasted. Settlers in the valley turned to them for help in transforming their desert into a productive farming community. An advertisement professed “a recent reclamation project has under consideration the recovery of 100,000 acres which is now desert, dry, but waiting only for water to spring into a wealth of green fields, rich vineyards and orchards.”¹⁵

In 1913 the settler’s hopes were dashed by the very governmental body they depended on for help. The crime? . . . Under utilizing the lands most valuable resource, water. Gifford Pinchot’s powerful words “the greatest use for the greatest good for the most people for the longest time” wrapped into a familiar noose, the same noose settlers had used to wring the life out of the Paiutes. From Roosevelt’s seat in the Oval office, the Owens river water did not produce enough wealth for enough American citizens when left to irrigate farms within the valley. He believed Los Angeles had more need and potential for greater prosperity than this remote valley hidden behind the giant Sierra Nevada: “the opposition of the few settlers in Owens Valley (whose interest is genuine, but whose interest must unfortunately be



Fig. 5. Wrestling water from a dry land

disregarded in view of the infinitely greater interest served by putting water in Los Angeles)"¹⁶ Roosevelt's words mark a significant point in Owens Valley land use history; from that time on, management decisions ceased to reflect solely the perceptions and preconceptions of valley residents. What people who had never visited the valley believed of the place began to impact the valley landscape. At this point its location in the Great American Desert became its tragic flaw.

"The people outside of Inyo who know of this country at all know it as the land of Death Valley. Death Valley is synonymous with many unpleasant suggestions, and among these is the uncanny view of the great unpeopled waste, latent with mineral riches which the most daring fear to explore. Inaccessible, unredeemable, worthless—a mere unsightly blotch upon the fair face of California A land that was given up to horned toads, chuck-wallas and tarantulas, if it possessed a good water supply for Los Angeles, was deemed a proper place to despoil."¹⁷

LOS ANGELES INTERESTS—1913 TO PRESENT

Los Angeles' single-minded focus on water left the Valley broken, its identity as the land of milk and honey drained away with the river, leaving it faceless. Nature was given the challenge of a painter who's suddenly lost all hues of blue and green. The Valley seemed to evaporate before the settler's eyes, many of whom had spent their childhood swimming in the canals, running among shady orchards, and plucking giant sweet apples from trees. The land to them had always been rich, abundant, and green. Mary Austin's brown land became browner. Even Austin, who loved the arid valley, felt an irreparable loss when Los Angeles dried the

green farmland; she moved on as did many others. The following passages describe people's experiences as they watched their land return to desert:

"Our family knew Owens Valley in its primitive state. We saw it gradually fade from a paradise of wild game, stock raising, orchards, and fields of alfalfa to a hopeless desert. No one would suspect that those miles of brush wasteland were once beautiful Wild West farms nestled along the foot of the snow clad Sierras."

"One can deal with bereavement, anger, the terror of cataclysmic events, but to sit in the midst of a cherished dream and watch its gradual decay was like the anguish of a crucifixion that continued day after day without end and without hope. With each plant that withered, so did some of the zeal that they had brought to this mission field."¹⁸

For people born and raised in the valley who had only known joy and plenty from the land, the valley was dying before their eyes. From an ecological stand point, though, the valley was responding to the loss of irrigation; it wasn't dying so much as changing, establishing vegetation adapted to the arid region. Settlers, well-named for their habit of staying put, had built a bucolic Eden around themselves and rarely ventured beyond their farm fences to see that they in fact lived in a desert. Unlike the Paiute who moved through the land, their sedentary living allowed them to create a perception of the Valley as a verdant place, an image that was impossible to sustain without pouring water onto the dry land.

MANZANAR

Between Lone Pine and Independence, a 5,700 acre patch of land has enjoyed every scrap of human use discussed in this



Fig. 6. Manzanar cemetery monument

work. Paiutes, who called it Tüpüsi, meaning “ground nut place,”¹⁹ used to camp in its borders while gathering nuts. In later years settlers found it to be a rich area for apples, giving it its current name, Manzanar, a Spanish word for apple orchard. Los Angeles bought the property in the early 1900’s, letting the orchards die and the land return to desert. It was a typical tract of valley land with a typical land use history until 1942 when the government designated it as one of eleven Japanese American relocation camps.

The ringing silence and solitude found there today speak nothing of the confined bustle of 10,000 Japanese-Americans held during WWII. The barrack architecture was decidedly military laid out on a tight grid of streets, but little of that remains, as the buildings were sold to WWII Veterans and their new wives after the camp was dismantled. More striking is the careful placement of granite stones that reflect a gentle and human touch. Brought by special permit from Yosemite, they encircle trees, line walks, creating a gardenesque feeling even in the sparse remains.

Crumbling ruins convey incredible efforts made by Japanese Americans to continue their lives in spite of their confinement. They had gardens, orchards, schools, and

churches—all the ingredients of a small rural town—all except freedom to leave. Perhaps this is what makes their efforts seem noble and their ruins so poetic. They, like many Americans, tried to bring their landscape traditions into the desert. When surrounded by strangeness they cultivated familiarity, as noted by Ansel Adams when he visited in 1943:

“From the harsh soil they have extracted fine crops; they have made gardens glow in firebreaks and between the barracks. Out of the jostling, dusty confusion of the first bleak days in raw barracks they have modulated to a democratic internal society and praiseworthy personal adjustment to conditions beyond their control.”²⁰

This same reaction to the new, to drape it with the old, is a major contributor to ecological problems in the West. Yet here it feels justified, because the people of Manzanar had no other choice; they could not pack up and go home.

Golf courses, begun in Scotland in a landscape natural for the sport, have become icons of human control over the environment. Manzanar’s golf links stood more in surrender



Fig. 7. Duke's grave

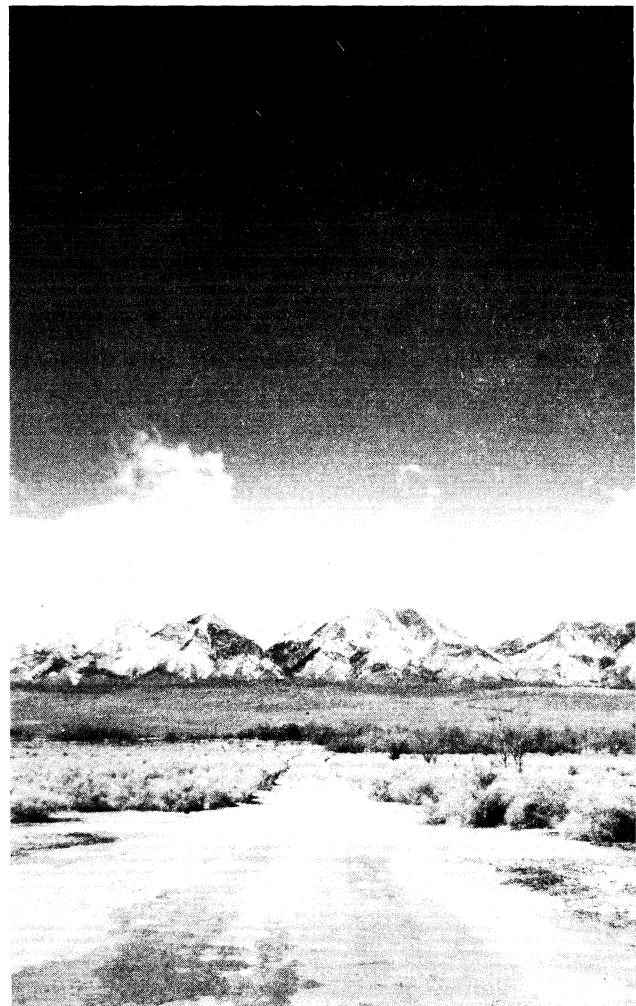


Fig. 8. Crumbling road in Manzanar

to the surrounding desert than in the defiance traditional of American desert courses. There was no grass; the greens were built up of sifted soil.²¹ Many of the Japanese Americans interned in Manzanar had owned land along the California coast and produced successful crops. They carried their skills to the desert and harvested enough produce to support their confined city, still the largest city in Owens Valley history. Like the settlers, a sense of strength came from working the land, making it produce what it would not and could not produce without human intervention. Again Adams observed, "there is nothing in the world, perhaps, as poignant as the emergence of crops from harsh and barren land."²²

Desert has reclaimed this land over the past 50 years. Today fruit trees bear signs of neglect in remnant orchards, asphalt roads are crumbling and vanishing into the sandy desert soil. Manzanar speaks now in wailing wind and calm silence; it talks of regeneration—of slowly letting natural processes of flood and wind till under this poor crop.

EPILOGUE

The Owens Valley landscape has transformed throughout history in response to human needs, desires, and expectations. It, like most of the American West, grows rich by human motion. It's a place left scarred with wandering ghosts, moaning for lost familiarity in the dry desert land. American dreams rust amongst saltbush and alkali dust blown up from the dying lake. Paiute bones long since buried in sand, drink moisture from idle diggers hands as they lay in patient slumber for a day to awaken and once more roam the brown hills for deer and pine nuts. Echoed laughter of Japanese American children whispers past ears turned red on a clear brisk morning in Manzanar. A thirsty Los Angeles sniffs hungrily up its aqueducts, yearning for more, always more, never feeling quenched. Even a few miners pick through picked over heaps of ore, knowing the days of big strikes have long since gone to dust. Mary Austin's land of little rain thunders full with haunting dreams and memories. They shower the desert valley floor with old bones, desiccating orchards, and graves for faithful dogs. A place brought to life in its dying, breathing deep in human touch and motion. A place to find ghosts, rusty nails and lost dreams.

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