SPRING 2025 NEWSLETTER

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Friends of the Eastern California Museum

IF I AM NOT ON THE JOB, YOU CAN FIND ME AT THE AQUEDUCT: THE ALABAMA GATES OCCUPATION

by Mike Sherk

Featured this month...

COVER STORY

the conclusion of Mike Sherk's "If I Am Not on the Job, You can find me at the Aqueduct" story

CURATOR'S CORNER

a sneak peek into some of the museum's new acquisitions

....and also a look back at our recent event and a look ahead to an exciting field trip opportunity coming up!

Part II, continued from the Fall/Winter Newsletter

The morning of Monday November 17, 1924 marked 24 hours since exasperated Inyo County residents commandeered the Alabama Gates spillway and drained the Los Angeles Aqueduct. By this time the story had begun making front page headlines across the nation.

Owens Valley Herald editor Harry Glasscock acted as the occupants' spokesman, and his statements were carried by the Associated Press. Glasscock was present at the gatehouse throughout the event, and his wife Eva printed that week's edition of the Owens Valley Herald in his absence. Eva was credited as the head of the camp's cooking operation "in khaki britches and mountain boots." She reminded a reporter that the women at the aqueduct also "have kiddies to take care of and feed and send to school."

Increasing numbers of men, women, and children began showing up to back the occupiers, many dressed in their finest clothes. Bishop's Baptist minister Rev. E.E. Schoffler was present, noting that "most of my congregation is here." In the evenings, citizens gathered around campfires where they slept on the ground or in tents, and hand-crank record players echoed opera music off the hillside as darkness fell.

Estimates suggest a substantial number of Owens Valley residents were present. One report stated that by day three, 700 people were there–approximately 10% of Inyo County's entire population. The same day, newspapers across the nation featured a syndicated editorial by longtime Inyo Register publisher Willie Chalfant, stating that the protesters' actions accurately represented the feelings of the "whole valley." Chalfant's proclamation was in direct response to statements made by the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (DWP), which painted participants as radical "ranchers" who did not represent the majority of Inyo residents.

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Curator's Corner

by Heather Todd

Earlier this year, I asked Museum Services Administrator Shawn Lum if we ought to restrict incoming donations in anticipation of prioritizing the long-awaited "Re-imagine the Eastern California Museum" grant project. We ultimately decided that based on the number of past annual donations, we wouldn't need to take such a drastic step... Can you guess where this is going?

I am happy (and surprised) to announce that we have had an avalanche of donations in the first quarter of 2025! Here are just a few that have made their way into the museum's collections:

An unissued stock certificate for the Porter Gold & Silver Mining Company, established in 1863 in Butte County, CA. Sharp-eyed readers might recognize the name "Porter" and recall that the very same John Livingstone Porter was the Superintendent of Mines at Cerro Gordo in the 1860s-1870s.

Jeffrey Burbank donated a number of wonderful items he has collected over the years, including a first edition, autographed copy of "The Flock," by Mary Austin, an 1894 lithograph of Owens Lake that had been published in Harper's Weekly, and a delightful movie poster for "The Parson of Panamint," which was a 1941 Paramount Pictures film starring Charlie Ruggles, Ellen Drew, and Phillip Terry.

Curator's Corner...continued

The Morgan Family donated a large Ed Thistlethwaite painting of the 20 mule team hauling Borax wagons. This painting was purchased from the artist by the Morgan children as a gift for their parents, Robert Bruce and Grace Morgan, in 1952. It remained in the family for over 70 years, and will now join the five other Thistlethwaite paintings in the museum's collections.

Former Museum Director Bill Michael donated a photo album from circa 1910 containing views of Benton, Owenyo, Owens Lake, the Sierra Nevada, and the Southern Pacific Railroad. However, the bulk of the photos are a treasure trove of never-before-seen snapshots of the Reward Mine (mill, tramway, bunkhouses, office, etc.), located east of Manzanar in the Inyo Mountains.

Friday, May 30

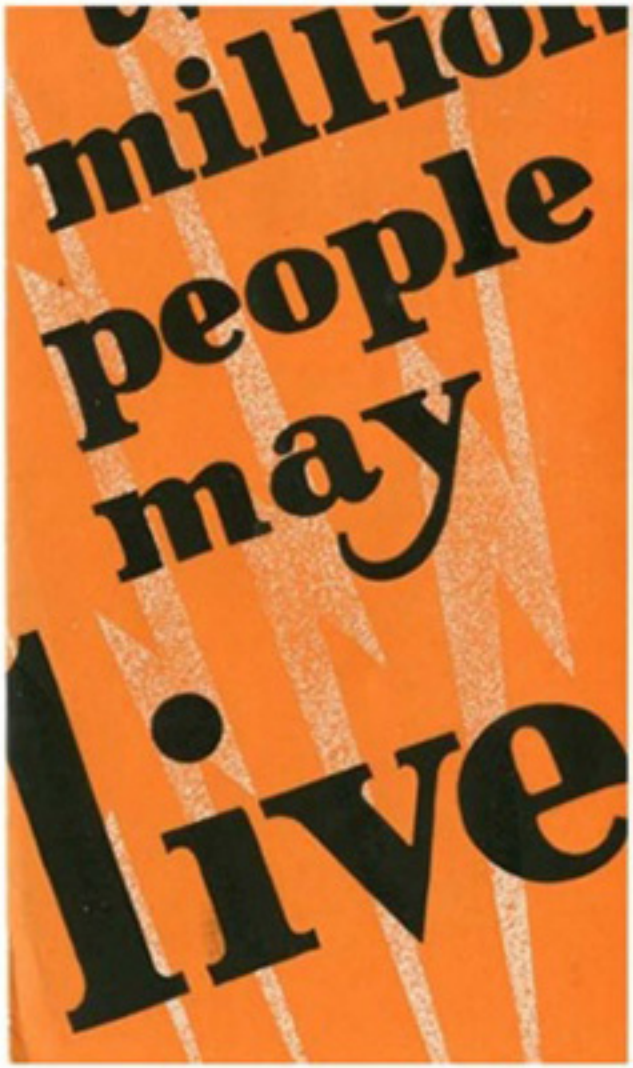
A JOURNEY THROUGH NEVADA'S PAST: Guided Tours of Stewart Indian School Cultural Center & Museum and the Marjorie Russell Clothing and Textile Research Center, both in Carson City.

This unique experience is limited to a group of 20. See our Facebook page for more information or visit the FECM website at https://bit.ly/FECMWebsite!

Curator's Corner ...concluded

Mike Prather generously donated a huge number of historic books, maps, brochures, papers, postcards, and photos, including the early LADWP publication below. This collection is particularly strong in the areas of water issues, Owens Lake, Lone Pine, and Death Valley. While staff has finished the initial inventory of all items, cataloging and digitizing will take some time yet.

Stay tuned!



The Friends enjoyed hosting a well-attended event 4/29/25 at the Museum to kick off the annual Manzanar Pilgrimage.

Supply and the Bureau of Power and Light. The Water Bureau has built the world's longest municipal aqueduct to tap the pure snow waters of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, 250 miles to the north—and bring to Los Angeles enough water for 2,000,000 people. The Power Bureau has built and is operating successfully the largest municipally-owned electric utility in the United States. It must constantly extend its generating and distributing systems to meet the increasing needs of an ever growing population. The assets of these two great water and electric systems, owned by and operated for the benefit of the people, are more than $161,000,000.

Jawbone Siphon section of world-famous Los Angeles Aqueduct, 250 miles long.

An open section of the Aqueduct in Owens Valley, filled with snow water on its way to Los Angeles.

Snow covered peaks of Sierra Nevada Mountains viewed from Owens Valley, source of Los Angeles' water and power supplies.

The Municipal Power Bureau maintains 10,000 miles of overhead and 400 miles of underground lines to carry power and light service to its consumers. Its rates for service are lower than in any city of comparable size in the United States.

Distributing Station No. 18. Typical of the distributing centers where the Power Bureau has combined rare architectural beauty with economy and utility.

If I Am Not on the Job...

continued from cover

The Inyo Independent called the event a "representative gathering of both men and women from every part of the Valley, from the towns as well as the rural communities." The paper noted that the barbeque was "made up and served by the women, who, by the way, were 'on the job' with the men at all times." Bishop merchants provided the meat, bread, and groceries at no charge. Even Sheriff Charlie Collins was spotted socializing while "gnawing at a big chunk of barbequed meat."

Attendees later recalled the event as "a party," with singing and dancing accompanied by hand-cranked record players. Live music was performed by various outfits, including "an orchestra with several khaki-clad girls dragging drums and musical instruments with them." One such band featured Bishop resident Jack Foley—future namesake of the "foley artist" sound design position in Hollywood.

Tom Mix, Hollywood's first western movie superstar, was shooting Riders of the Purple Sage in Lone Pine at the time. Mix sent the film's crew (possibly cinematographer Daniel B. Clark) to photograph the opened gates. Although later reminiscences alleged Mix himself attended the occupation, no contemporary evidence backs up this claim.

After a group of influential LA bankers promised to "bring about some kind of an equitable settlement between the people of Owens Valley and the City of Los Angeles," the occupiers closed the gates at 2:40am on Thursday, November 20. A final celebratory barbecue lasted all of Thursday, where citizens "joined in community songs, and listened with moistened eyes to encouraging speeches from [Wilfred] Watterson and others." Attendance estimates for the final barbeque range from 800 to 1,500 people, and the occupiers' camp was finally broken down before sunset.

It soon became apparent that the "equitable settlement" assured by LA bankers had been an empty promise designed only to close the gates, as the city flatly ignored further proposals from Inyo representatives. Mulholland retaliated by posting private police along the aqueduct, and he drastically increased the number of Owens Valley property purchases by the city each year. A December 1924 report on the conflict by State Engineer Wilbur McClure advocated for better treatment of the Owens Valley, which Governor Richardson and Los Angeles both ignored.

The occupation of the Alabama Gates remains important as it represents the final time that residents of the Owens Valley held the upper hand over the City of Los Angeles–even if only for a brief, symbolic moment. It marked an effective public relations coup, as a wide number of American newspapers sympathized with the plight of Inyo's people to a national audience. The occupation was a peaceful protest where an entire community stood up for what they felt was right in the face of insurmountable odds–and did so with joy, musical instruments, and good barbeque.

Mike Sherk is a librarian and researcher living in Independence, California. An extended version of this article with references is available at the ECM.

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