



THE WATER'S IN!

BY JUANITA BROOKS

You who live in cities and need only turn a tap to have all the clear water you need will wonder at my theme. You have probably accepted water as one of the free gifts of nature, like sunshine or air, or as one of the essentials, like electricity, which comes to you for a small monthly fee. You who live on farms where there is plenty of rainfall will scarcely understand either. But all who live in the arid lands of the West will appreciate the significance of the words, "The water's in!"

In my childhood that shout was the most welcome news we ever heard. We children would gather on the banks of the town canal to watch the water's arrival and to throw in sticks and boards. Some of the most daring would get into the ditch and wait until the first little waves, darting into the low places, licked at their bare toes, then run on again. A few would stand still until it came up above their ankles before they clambered out over the high bank. The water, which meant life to us, seemed almost like a living thing as it crawled down the big ditch, nosing its way along with the slithering motion of a snake.

I look back on a childhood punctuated by long dry spells. Our little town of Bunkerville, in the southernmost corner of Nevada, was surrounded by desert. We had nine months of fine, pleasant weather and three of heat. And when I say heat, I mean the kind that thickens the whites of eggs left in the coop and that makes the lizards, scurrying from the shelter of one little bush to another,

flip over on their backs and blow their toes. Hence water was precious. Even the children knew how precious. As far back as I can remember, the whole routine of my chores was determined by whether or not the water was in the ditch.

When it was, my duty was to fill the barrels from the little stream which ran along the sidewalk. We always had our drinking barrel, swathed in burlap, set under the cottonwood tree to keep cool. It must be filled each morning before six o'clock in the summer and seven in the winter, as those were the hours when the cattle were turned out to drink. The lye barrel had to be filled only once a week, right after wash day. This was to keep the barrel from drying out and falling apart; it also gave plenty of time for the mud to settle. The boiled cottonwood ashes which we added to soften the water could be put in any time.

When the water was out we had to drive all the cattle to the river twice a day. We always milked first so that the calves might go along too. Since the horses could travel faster, they were driven ahead by boys on horseback, while younger children followed the cows. A two-mile trek to the river, and then only water thick with silt, a long walk back to stand in the corral all day and wait for another trip at night.

To supply the home as well as the pigs and chickens, we must use the wagon. Three or four fifty-gallon barrels were loaded into it, some with heads in and corks of whittled cottonwood sticks, some

open-headed ones covered with canvas or oilcloth held secure by an extra hoop to save the splashings.

To what economies were we forced! Water was literally measured by the drop! You must never dip a full cup from the barrel; you should take only a little bit, just what you could drink. If you were handed a full cup you drank what you wanted and gave the rest back for the host to dispose of. Usually he handed it to the next person, or poured it carefully into a bucket kept for waste water, to be given later to the chickens. To throw it out carelessly was a serious breach which always called forth a protest.

The Saturday bath water had an interesting history. Forced to serve more than one person, it must be used to wash out socks or overalls or to wipe up the floor before it was finally poured into the hollow round a discouraged rosebush or young tree.

Of course the inconvenience to which we were put was nothing compared to the fact that our gardens and fields were dry. The whole male population must unite in an effort to get the water in, to repair the ditch or rebuild the dam. The water-master told each what he should bring, brush or rock, and the next morning would see a long train of wagons wending its way to the dam, the topheavy loads of brush balancing along, the wagon boxes of large rocks testing the horses' strength.

The men who worked in the water received a higher wage, or rather a higher credit, for no one was paid. But they figured that if it was worth two dollars and a half to haul brush and rock, it was worth three dollars to wallow in the water all day placing them, the brush in first, weighted down by heavy stones. After a week, or two or three, the dam would be mended and the water would be in again.

Such water as it was! Always muddy, sometimes it seemed fully one-fourth silt. Not for hours did it become clear. Usually we just dipped it up and gave it its time; but we learned that a tablespoon

of milk would separate a flaky, red precipitate, or a bit of the inner pulp of the cactus would settle it quickly without affecting the taste.

Worse than the silt was the mineral dissolved in the water which gave it such a peculiar taste and earned for it the title, "Virgin Bloat." My father ran the mail for twelve years, and it used to amuse us to see the reaction of the passengers when they had their first drink. After the forty-mile ride over the desert in a buckboard, they arrived hot, dusty, and thirsty. Eagerly they reached for the cup; invariably they took one swallow, hesitated, looked round as if they thought someone were playing a trick on them. Some said they weren't thirsty. Others asked what was the matter. Everyone declared that it tasted like a mild dose of Epsom salts.

Time and again a schoolteacher, tempted by the wages paid in Nevada, came to town, stayed a few days, and went back. They usually blamed the water, though I think the September heat and the fall crop of flies and mosquitoes contributed to the decision. But—to mix Pope a little—those who stayed tasted at first with loathing, kept sipping out of pure necessity, and finally drank deep and declared it good. I remember that one teacher thought the mineral in the water was responsible for the fact that his students were extra large and healthy—the mineral and the warm sunshine.

We solved part of our problems later by digging large cisterns to store the water in. Now we always had plenty for culinary use, and it was clear. But it never lost that taste of mineral. And it did not keep our crops from being so often dry.

II

Our water came to us through a canal six miles long, a canal subject to "breaks." It seems strange that here in the midst of the desert, with scarcely six inches of rainfall a year, the chief danger to our ditch was from hill floods.

Only enough water falls in that region to maintain a scant growth of yucca, cactus, creosote, and rabbit brush, yet we often had sudden storms that sent flash floods down every arroyo and draw. And they played havoc with our ditch.

"It sure does take a lot of preparation to get a rain here," one old man said. "It clouds up every day for a week; it grumbles and growls and rolls, and then clears up again. But when it does come it's a hell-bender." And so it often was, sudden and tumultuous, the water hitting the ground, bouncing back, and running off.

Sometimes when the skies were clear over town, we could see a storm on the mountain to the south. In about an hour a distant roar would tell us the floods were coming. Everyone went out to see them, boys on horseback, people afoot or in wagons. The water would hurry along, covered with a yellow foam which we called "Indian soap," into the ditch, over it, through the streets, across the fields, seeking the river.

In less than an hour it would all be over and nothing to show for it except gullies washed out, mud and rocks in the streets, and strips through the fields covered with silt. But the ditch! It would be riddled and the places between breaks filled. I remember that once the water-master reported that it was broken in fifty-two places.

But most of our trouble was caused by the river. I have no notion why it was ever named "Virgin" in the first place. No name could be less fitting, for not only was it always muddy, but it was full of deceit and treachery. We lived about thirty-five miles above the point where it joined forces with the Colorado—a distance lessened now by the creation of Lake Mead. As the last settlement on its course, we were a sort of climax to its cussedness; we felt the force of all its combined creeks and springs and washes.

I came to know that river as I would a person. Twice each day I waded through it, down and back, to take the cows to the pasture. Most of the time it

was a quiet, meandering stream, completely friendly. I could splash along through it without lifting my dress. Boys could not find a place deep enough to swim; when they lay down, it would scarcely cover them. But at high-water time when the snows far up on its sources melted, or when there was a flood, it was something to be respected and feared, full of quicksand and whirlpools. In its winding course it would gather strength and cut into one bank, only to swing back and slash at the other.

One flood stands out in my memory. It is still spoken of as "The Noah." In the darkness that precedes the dawn someone banged at our door and called, "There's a flood coming; the biggest in history. If you've got any cattle on the river bottom you'd better move them."

Before sunrise the whole town had gathered on the river bank. Wagons were lined up well back on higher ground. Children ran here and there, followed by their mothers' warning voices. Boys on horseback trotted up and down.

Suddenly the cry rang out, "She's a-coming!" People crowded to the edge of the slope, climbed into their wagons and on to the spring seats and, shading their eyes with their hands, looked to the east. Like a great wall fully four feet high it came, black, the front of it like an enormous steam roller in its motion. It stretched across the wide stream bed, the water in front of it a pink trickle. The sandy island where in summer we built castles and towns, the marshy bottoms which sheltered blackbirds, ducks, and mud-hens were completely obliterated, wiped out as a picture might be by one stroke of a gigantic brush. Where before was color and variety was now only a swirling, black blur. The crowd stood speechless until it had passed.

We watched the water move toward the west as far as we could see, then looking up-stream again, we saw one swell come, then another and another, each one raising the water line on the bank. Far out, great waves rolled, carrying trees as lightly as straw and lifting and

ducking the ridge of a barn along. Near the cove where I stood all kinds of flotsam passed: pumpkins, apples, a wooden churn, a limp little calf. Someone up the stream had lost everything, his store of hay and food, his cattle, his home. Well, we shouldn't be hit as hard as that, but we should be without water for a long time.

After a few days the men must ride out looking for cattle embedded in the mud; for the whole river bottom would be one quivering mass into which they sank deeper with every struggle. Some no doubt went under completely and were killed at once, but many were caught like flies on fly-paper, to die of starvation if they were not helped out. My father always came home from these trips exhausted, and as we children took off his shoes or pulled at his chaps he would tell us how many cattle he had saved. Sometimes as many as fifteen were set free in a day.

I remember one cow that I found in the sand just a few yards from the trail I always followed. How could I have missed her for so long? The sand had settled and hardened round her until it was as if she were in a cast, with only her head and neck and the line of her back out. She must have got in soon after the flood had passed, she was in so deep. Now she was reduced to skin and bones, with scarce a spark of life left in her.

Here she was dying of thirst with the water running less than three feet away. I wanted to give her a drink, but I had no dish, not even a hat. My hands would not hold enough. Finally I dipped up a lapful and by hurrying was able to give her several swallows. At the second trip though my gingham dress split, letting the water out in a great spurt round my feet. Perhaps it was just as well not to give her too much at first, I argued. Then I pulled some lucerne from a nearby field.

She did not belong to us, but I gave my father no peace until he got the owner and came down. They would have killed her if I had not coaxed and cried

so. They dug round her with shovels, pried under her with poles, and pulled, one at her head and one at her tail. She was so weak that the owner told me I could have her if I thought I could save her.

For days I carried her food and water. When she still had not got strength enough to stand, father decided to take her home. He brought the wagon down, backed it up to her, dug under the hind wheels until they were up to the hubs, and loaded her on. At home we lifted her to her feet for a while each day by means of straps round her body and pulleys. This gave her a chance to straighten her legs out. By increasing the time she was up each day, we soon had her so that she could stand alone. How proud I was when she became our best milk cow!

Another activity which followed every flood was the hauling of driftwood from the sand knolls in the river bed. This came later, as we must wait until it was safe to go out with wagons. The wood was easier to handle too after it had dried out a little. "There is no great loss without some small gain," for in this barren land wood was scarce, and the floods brought us much of our fuel.

The one immediate task, which overshadowed all others in importance and required the united effort of every man in town, was getting the water back into the ditch. Like ants after their home has been kicked apart, the men toiled to repair the damage, hauling brush and rock and building at the rate of a few yards a day. In the meantime the town would be as dry as the desert round it.

III

For seventy-four years now this struggle has gone on. The people cannot conquer the river; it cannot shake them from its bank. It is like an endless war wherein first one side and then the other is victorious. The relationship is exactly as it was when the first settlers arrived.

I wish there were some way to know how many loads of brush and rock that stream has taken in the past seventy-four years; the number of man-hours of work that have been spent in it. Six times in my memory we have changed the dam site in the hope of finding one that would be permanent. Times without number it has been washed out. This does not take into account the miles of breakers built to protect the land, breakers which looked formidable enough until a flood washed around them and scooped them out.

It is no wonder that the town has not grown. Twenty families came within the first two years; there are not more than that now. After each major disaster some moved away—either sold their holdings at a sacrifice or pulled up and left them. I remember the Bunkers, the Joneses, the Lees, the Coxes, the Abbots, and the Earls, to mention only a few. Following a town farewell party, their wagons piled high with household goods, they would set their faces toward some place where they would not have to spend so much time "working water-ditch."

Hundreds of young people have left, gone away to school or to get work, and failed to come back. Of Uncle Tom's twenty-two who grew up across the street from us only four remain; of my father's ten, not one. Had it not been so this would have been a good-sized town from its own increase. Vital statistics over a ten-year period show an average of nine and three-tenths births and only one death a year.

Bunkerville is not essentially different with regard to population increase from scores of other little towns throughout Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and New Mexico. Wherever Mormon colonists were sent out during Brigham Young's time the initial company often contained as many as the land could support, so that many of the towns are no larger to-day than when they were founded. Some day someone may compute the cost of rearing and educating the thousands of young people who have gone out to build

up other sections. From a town as small as this people have filtered throughout the West; some have gone into Eastern cities. A few have achieved national recognition.

Those who have remained have managed to get along; they have built new homes and many of them have cars. The schoolhouses here are surprisingly good for a town so small, and since Nevada pays good wages to teachers, they have been able to maintain a high standard of instruction. When the depression hit the country these people were hardly affected at all. Always poor, they had as much as they ever had. The depression was an advantage to them in fact, for a CCC camp was stationed at Bunkerville for the winter months.

Through the work of this camp water was brought from a mountain spring twelve miles away to a spot on the desert slope where a piece of land was fenced for study under a government project. Later it was brought down within three miles of town, where, with the aid of the Mormon Church, a rock tank was built to serve as a reservoir. From the first the settlers had dreamed of a time when they could have mountain water, when they would no longer have to drink "Virgin Bloat"; now they have mountain water, not in their homes, available by the mere turning of a tap, but stored in a tank at the edge of town. From here they can fill their barrels or haul it to their cisterns. That might seem inconvenient to others, but to them it is so much better than anything they have ever had that they are grateful.

The CCC boys completed another valuable project for them. It really grew out of one of the mountain floods, which this time proved to be a blessing in disguise. They had all been working on the dam. On the very night when they had it finished and the water turned into the ditch, they saw a storm on the mountain. On their way home they were stopped by floods down the washes. Here in an hour all their work was set at

naught, for the full six-mile length of the ditch must be cleaned before water could reach town. This resulted in a project for building spillways from the washes over the ditch, so that the flood waters will pass over and leave the ditch unharmed.

Best of all, electric power has been brought to town from Boulder Dam. For months the townspeople had been preparing, getting their homes wired and their lights installed. They did not know exactly when the power would be turned on. One night Lem Leavitt tried his. Glory be! They went on! He was so excited that he jumped on his old gray mare and galloped through the streets calling at the top of his voice, "The power's on! The power's on!"

In an instant all the coal-oil lamps were scrapped. A new way of life was opened. It was almost pathetic to see the delight of some of those grown old; my grandmother, in her eighty-sixth year, was like a child with a new toy. The lights and radio she could enjoy, but when her children or grandchildren made her gifts of a toaster, a waffle-iron,

a small water heater, and an electric bed pad, she put them all carefully away and never uses them. It is not only that she is a little afraid of what they might do, it is that her life pattern has been so complete without them that she cannot fit them in.

With Highway 91 coming past the door, transportation is no longer a problem. Las Vegas is three hours instead of three days away; even Los Angeles is a market. The problem now is to raise enough to sell. Life is more comfortable. But it is not yet secure. With their water supply for their crops so uncertain, with so much of their time and energy consumed by the river, the townspeople can know no real prosperity.

"We need the river to try us," one old man said. "If we didn't have something like that we might get soft."

Well, it continues to "try" them. Last year the dam went out three times between January and May, and once again in the late summer. To-day, as in 1877, their best fortune is to have the canal full; the best news they hear after a dry spell is still the words, "The water's in."

