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Water

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Water

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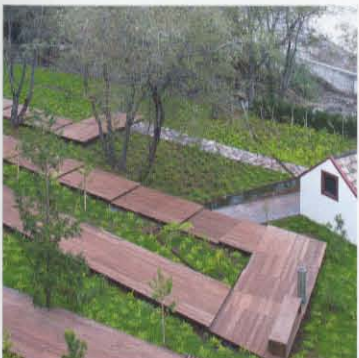
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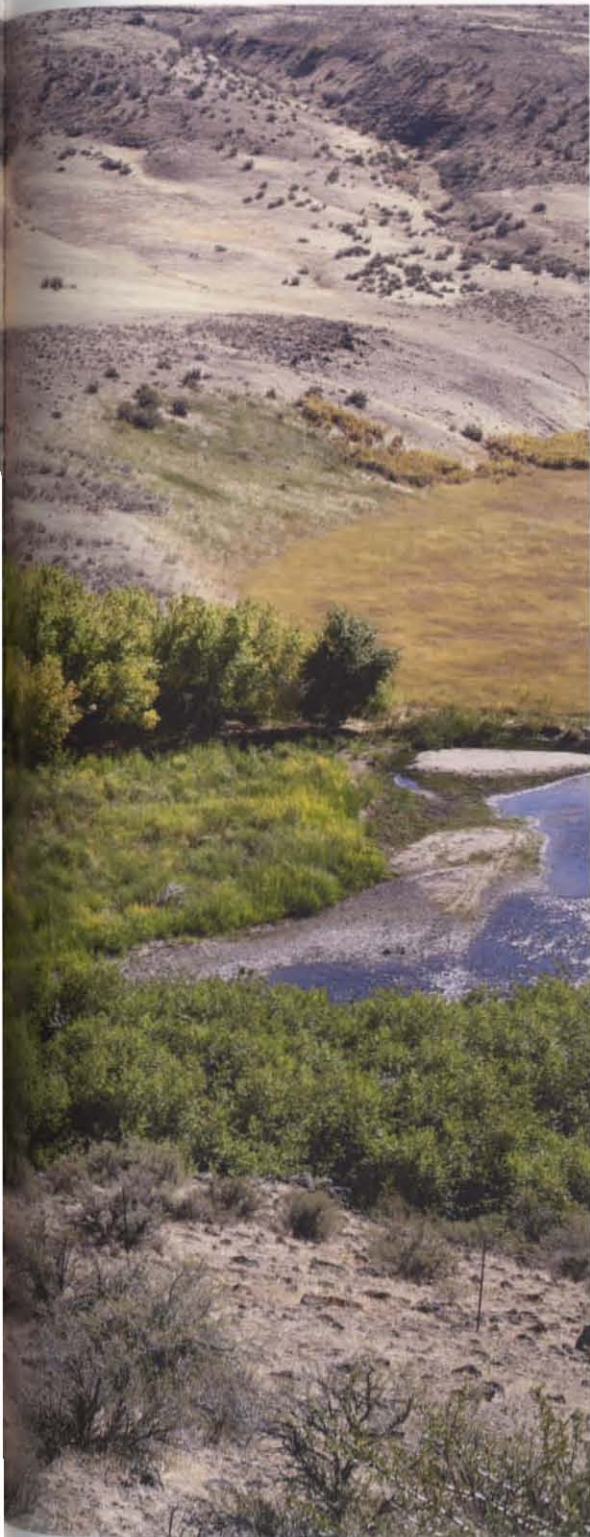
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"Without water, the West is nothing." (Allen Brown, farmer);
Squaw Creek, Gem County, Idaho, 25 September 2006





Anne Whiston Spirn (text, colour photos)
Dorothea Lange (historical photos)

THE CONQUEST OF ARID AMERICA

Photographer Dorothea Lange recorded in 1939 the transformation of sagebrush desert in Oregon into farmland by irrigation. More than 60 years later Anne Whiston Spirn revisited the places.

It was late July up on Dead Ox Flat in eastern Oregon, just past sunrise. The air cool, no hint of the heat to come (43 Celsius by afternoon). Scent of sage. Sound of water gushing from siphon into canal. This land was desert in the nineteenth century when the wagons lumbered along the Oregon Trail not far from here, and Dead Ox Flat was still desert in 1939 when the great photographer, Dorothea Lange, photographed the Malheur Siphon, built in 1937 to bring the water that transformed sagebrush desert into fields of alfalfa, corn and sugar beets.

I look at this scene and imagine the whole irrigation system: from the Owyhee Reservoir about 65 kilometers to the south, its watershed reaching into Nevada, to the tail, the spill to the Snake River, about 50 kilometers north of here. The water flows from dam to farm: in canals, siphons and ditches, down drops and slides, through weirs. It wells up in bubblers, sprays from nozzles, pours from siphon tubes into furrows, seeps into soil. Today this system is managed by the Owyhee Irrigation District, but it was built by the US Bureau of Reclamation, one of many projects undertaken during the Great Depression by the federal government to create new farmland on which to resettle refugees from the Dust Bowl.

By 1939 hundreds of families were establishing farms on the Owyhee Project, and Lange was sent by the government to record these pioneers' progress. The farmers told her their stories, spoke of hopes and fears, and Lange made their portraits, photographed their homes and fields, and wrote reports of their daily lives: "The Wardlaw family sold their farm in northwest Arkansas and left on July 20, 1936, for southeastern Oregon. They had heard about the land from relatives who live in Idaho. They were one of the first families on the flat. They have half-grown sons, own forty acres [16 hectares]

The world's longest siphon, eight kilometers long,
2.5 meters in diameter, carries water to Dead Ox Flat.
Malheur County, Oregon, 16 October 1939



Malheur Butte and siphon seen from below Dead Ox Flat on the opposite side of the valley from Lange's 1939 photograph. Malheur County, Oregon, 27 July 2006



of land free and clear, four cows, garden, chickens, and live in a dugout basement house. They have no well yet ... Mr. Wardlaw says: 'I've learned to irrigate by main strength and awkwardness, and the neighbors told us.'

In 2006, more than sixty years later, I travelled to Eastern Oregon and met the families Lange had photographed in 1939. Glen Wardlaw remembers Lange's visit and how he and his parents took their farm "out of the sagebrush." His first job was to sow bluegrass seed along the ditch banks "so the ditch would have something to hold it. Many times, middle of the night, you'd take a lantern and check the ditch, because it would wash out. When we first plowed this land up, it was just like flour. And anywhere you stepped when it was wet, you'd sink in just as deep as it was plowed. If it was plowed eight inches, you'd sink in eight inches." Glen Wardlaw left the family farm as a young man. He has a doctoral degree in audiology and speech therapy. None of his children are farmers.

"It takes three generations to make a go of it," according to farmer Allen Brown. "The first generation is just scratching dirt, and the second, too. The third generation can make it, if they are still around. I'm standing on two generations' shoulders." Brown has no fourth generation to farm the 30 hectares along the Snake River his grandfather took out of sagebrush in 1904.



The Dazey place. Homedale District, Malheur County,
Oregon, 16 October 1939



Right: water gate on the Old Owyhee Ditch, the wheel
padlocked to prevent tampering. Ontario, Malheur County,
Oregon, 24 September 2006



"If I had a son who wanted to farm it, I'd run him off." Farming today is too tough. Allen's neighbor, Terry Oft, who took on his family farm after his father's death, breeds registered Angus bulls and sells them to ranchers as breeding stock, raises alfalfa for feed, onions as a cash crop. His strategy is to specialize and diversify. He's doing fine, but there is no one else in the family to take over the farm when he retires. "We're getting 1950s prices for commodities and we're paying today's prices for seed and equipment," explains one farmer on Dead Ox Flat. "It's hard to make a living on a farm smaller than 120 hectares. Those with 400 hectares or more, they're doing better." He just sold the farm his family homesteaded in the 1930s. Because the buyers are not farmers, he will continue to farm the land as a renter.

For someone familiar with the farms of the eastern United States or Europe or those of eastern Oregon, the scale of many California farms is inconceivable. Property in California's Imperial Valley, for example, is in the hands of relatively few large landowners, many of them absentee. In the mid-1990s, one corporation based in Texas amassed 17,000 hectares of Imperial Valley farmland. A corporation such as this with diverse investments and the goal of realizing the greatest profit will be tempted to treat water as a commodity, especially when a thirsty city like San Diego will pay more for the water than could be reaped in farming the land. This is what happened in the 1990s. That story is told by William deBuys in *Salt Dreams: Land and Water in Low-down California*.

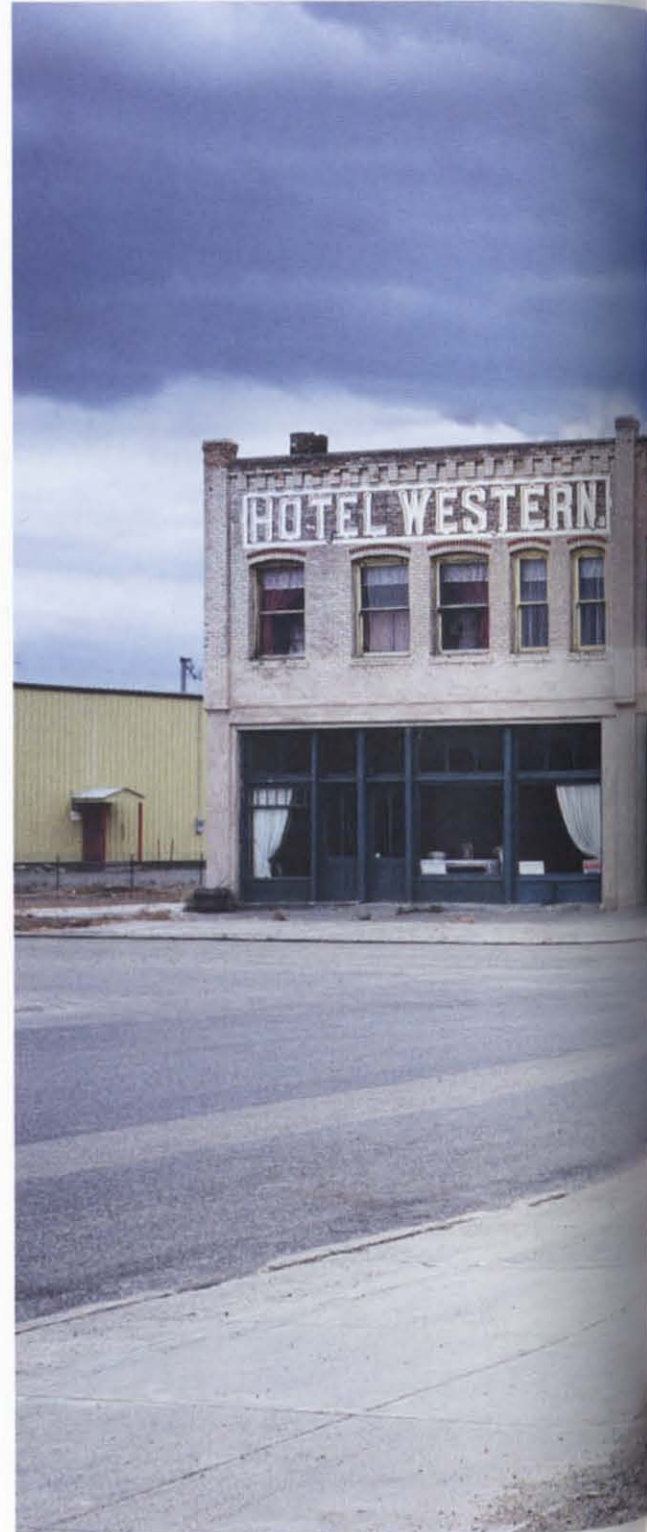
"Six years ago national irrigation was a dream; today, the dream has come true," William E. Smythe wrote in 1905 in the foreword to a revised edition of his 1899 book *The Conquest of Arid America*. Smythe's "dream come true" was the National Reclamation Act of 1902, which authorized the US Government to plan and construct "irrigation works for the storage, diversion and development of waters" and to establish prices at which irrigated lands would be sold. It limited the size of properties to be irrigated to 65 hectares for any one landowner, who was required to live on that land. By stipulating that larger farms were ineligible for water from federally funded irrigation projects, the law declared its intentions: to help individuals establish family farms and not to enrich large landowners at public expense. In the Imperial Valley and many other Western regions, this requirement was not enforced. In 1939, Lange photographed the Imperial Valley and wrote about the spread of "industrial agriculture" there.

Dorothea Lange, in the 1930s and 1940s, recorded a great American exodus from farm to city. Not long after that, the cities, too, were hemorrhaging population, and American society is feeling the effects of a later exodus: the post-World War II planting of suburbia on former farmlands. Subdivisions continue to crop up, way out in the countryside, one or two hours' commute from new residents' jobs. Many small towns are in trouble;



Sign on old bank building which today houses the office of the Bureau of Reclamation. Nyssa, Malheur County, Oregon, 14 October 1939

Right: Today many buildings in Nyssa are vacant, yet well maintained, like the Hotel Western. Nyssa, Malheur County, Oregon, 17 May 2005





Bottom: The Wardlaw couple at entrance of basement dugout home. Dead Ox Flat, Malheur County, Oregon, 15 October 1939

Right: Farmer Terry Oft and his mother, Betty. South of Ontario, Malheur County, Oregon, 28 July 2006



This essay is adapted from Anne Whiston Spirn's forthcoming book, "Daring to Look: Dorothea Lange's Photographs and Reports from the Field", which will be published by the University of Chicago Press in spring 2008. The book presents never-before-published photographs and field reports by Dorothea Lange. Her images and texts from several regions of a single year, 1939, portray America's massive upheaval and resettlement, private greed and environmental degradation, public miscalculations and efforts to restore hope. The book also recounts Whiston Spirn's journey to the places Lange photographed in 1939, reflects on what she found there, what has and has not changed over the intervening decades, and what significance Lange's work of 1939 holds for the present day. A grant from the Graham Foundation enabled Anne Whiston Spirn to travel to and photograph the places Lange had portrayed in 1939. Dorothea Lange's photographs are reproduced courtesy of the U. S. Library of Congress.

main street businesses are losing ground to chain stores outside downtown, like Wal-Mart, Kmart and Home Depot. In the American West, such national trends are complicated by conflicts over water rights and use, between farmers and non-farmers, farm and city, city and city. These are familiar stories to many Americans, but it is one thing to know them, another to visit hundreds of places, one after another, to experience the consequences first hand and appreciate the scope of change. The nation is being re-made on a vast scale.

"Without water, the West is nothing," one farmer told me. "They built a pipeline across Alaska. They could build a pipeline from here to Las Vegas. And there goes our water." To Allen Brown and Terry Oft, and fellow farmers in eastern Oregon, water is what nurtures their livelihood and way of life, once considered the bedrock of American society and culture. To Las Vegas and Phoenix and San Diego, cities of the arid West, water is what they must have to sustain a burgeoning population. To a corporation, especially one far removed from the source, water is a commodity to be bought and sold. To the nation, water and fertile land should be treasured resources, not goods to be sold to the highest bidder. Public investment in new infrastructure and settlement patterns must not be undertaken lightly, for they are the framework within which society evolves.