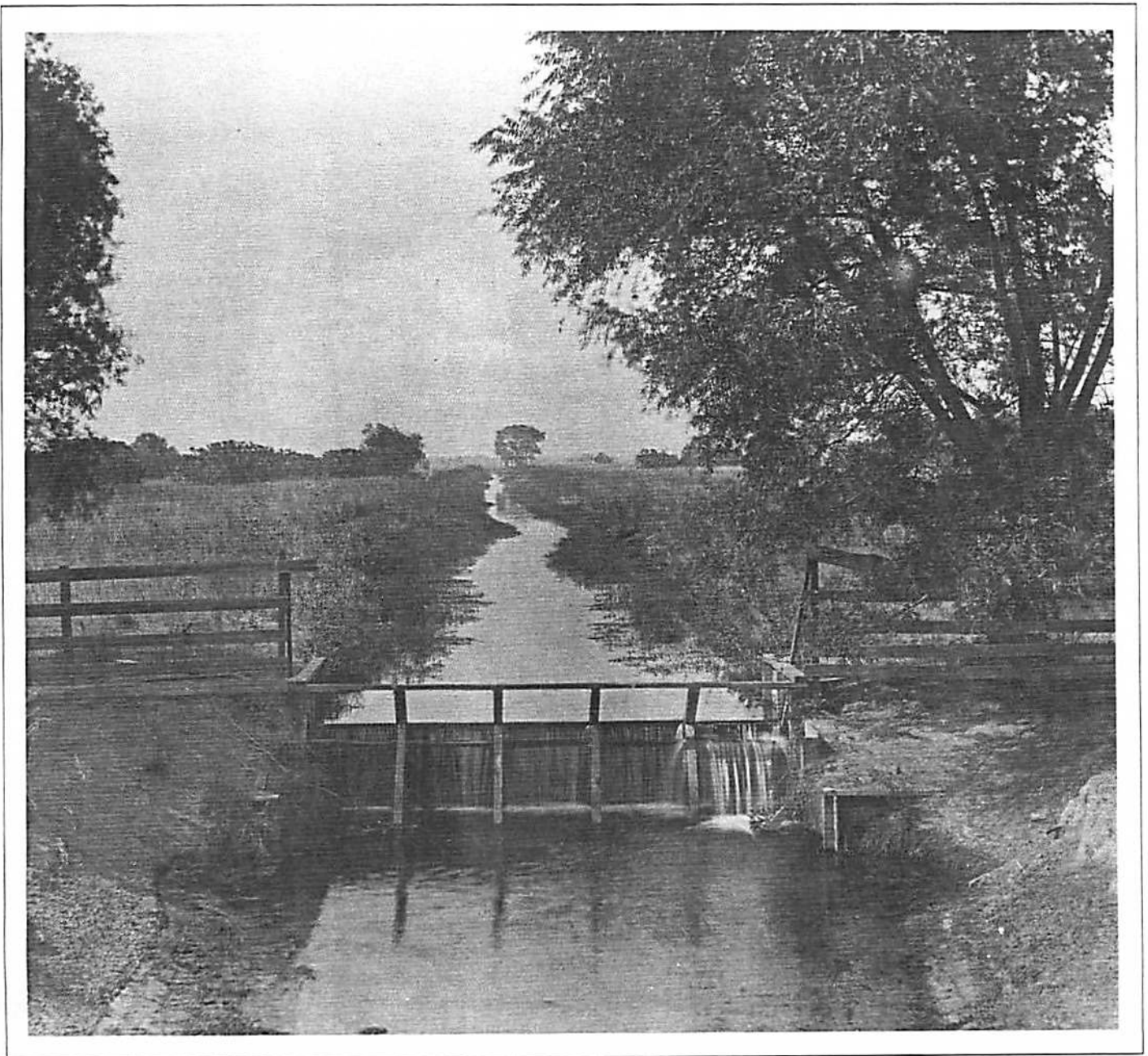

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Landscape as Legend: Carleton E. Watkins in Kern County, California

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Abstract: *Carleton E. Watkins was a pioneer photographer who documented the farms and ranches of Kern County, California, in 1888. His work, reflecting a sense of order and harmony and depicting a utopia of endless promise, can be seen as the expression of a powerful landscape legend by which settlers were able to comprehend a new region and put it to use. With this legend, settlers confronted an unknown, hostile, and arid region, took possession of it, and turned it into a garden. The visual portrait that Watkins gives us, combined with its accompanying text, allows us to understand and appreciate the geography, economy, and emerging social structure of the region as factors that shaped its unique landscape history.*

Note: *All of the photographs that accompany this paper were taken by the photographer Carleton E. Watkins, and all are reproduced courtesy of the Division of Prints and Photographs, Library of Congress. Each photograph is identified by the number that Watkins assigned to it.*

Once it seemed that there would always be plenty of water for Fred Starrh to irrigate the rich soil in Kern County on the western slopes of California's Central Valley. Come February, he would normally plow and irrigate for the cotton crop and water the alfalfa. But the state system of dams and reservoirs on which he has long depended cut off water to him and thousands of other farmers on Monday as drought tightened its grip on California.

— *The New York Times*,
February 6, 1991

The lure of the West in the 19th century was the lure of the land. Abundant, open, cheap, or free land represented opportunity to farmers and entrepreneurs seeking an independent existence, and it was inextricably associated at the time with the Jeffersonian ideals of individual industry, self-reliance, and land-linked identity. In the days when the continent was largely unsettled, even unexplored, Americans looked to the West to find freedom and to escape the constraint and congestion of urban living. Migration, motivated both by hope and by

fear, led to the settlement of the western lands; the lure of the West was for some the attraction of the unknown and for others the rejection of the familiar. Easterners and newly arrived immigrants were inspired by what Henry Nash Smith has called the "myth of the garden" (Smith 1950). They set out on arduous journeys into wilderness territory, often informed of what lay ahead by little more than legend.

Writers, artists, and photographers generated legends, as did political leaders who saw the advantages of continuous unified settlement and religious leaders who headed west in search of Eden. Legends, like mental maps, are devices by which individuals come to comprehend unknown territory. Unlike myths, legends focus on human beings, real or imagined, and on definite localities, rather than on gods or supernatural beings in vague or imaginary settings. Like myths, legends can offer explanations for inexplicable climate or terrain, or rationales for different sorts of human behavior, the desirable as well as the baffling. As allegories or parables, they can direct the imagination to meanings hidden in ordinary life. If settlers were inspired by a myth of paradise on earth, they were actually led westward by ever-embellished legends of a utopian land-

scape of harmony and fertility—legends formulated by explorers and other itinerant observers, by painters, and by photographers whose work was widely circulated as stereographs, reproduced by woodcut in magazines, and later in the 1870s and 1880s, published in periodicals and promotional albums.

This is not to suggest that all such legends are or were deliberate fabrications, like advertisements for prime farmland that turns out to be rocky coastline or swamp, but rather to emphasize that those whose words and pictures provided the data of the day were storytellers with many points of view. Depending on the outlook of each narrator, terrain assumed a particular personality, appearing forbidding or attractive, or, if both, sublime. As related by Henry Nash Smith, the story of the Great American Desert is an example of a landscape encounter that generated contradictory legends. Travelers such as Francis Parkman saw nothing but barren wasteland in the Platte River valley of Nebraska in 1849, but as a result of knowledge provided by the Hayden survey and the

effects of the advancing frontier, the same region was cited for its agricultural potential less than thirty years later (Smith 1950, p. 211).

While historians most often cite literary sources for Jeffersonian thought or for later versions of his pastoral ideal, a wealth of visual source material is also available and equally essential to understanding landscape and its role as legend. What separates landscape art from other sorts of art is its preoccupation with place. Before all else, a landscape is a reference to place, whether imaginary or real, and by extension through the artist, to a particular vision of place. Hudson River painters of the nineteenth century produced memorable images of the barely settled eastern frontier region of mountains, lakes, and splendid waterfalls. As they sought to capture the timelessness of an Arcadian ideal, the landscape itself was changing rapidly. Artists such as Thomas Cole and Asher Durand sought to find a middle ground between the fearsome wild nature of the frontier and the newly evolving industrial scene. Technological change promised much to society, yet at the same time provoked a sense of loss of something precious to the American identity, its affinity for the pastoral, and its perceived unity with nature. This ambivalence is seen in George Inness's *The Lackawanna Valley* (1855), for example, and in the works of Emerson and Thoreau, and later in the works of Henry Adams and Mark Twain.

By the nineteenth century, painters had established an extensive vocabulary of conventions for presenting and describing landscape, but it was photography that gave a radically new dimension to those interested in capturing and holding on to images of the world around them. Following experimentation in the 1820s, the photographic process was first announced in 1839 and then evolved rapidly through technological innovation. It was only a short time before photographers were able to move beyond the confines of the photographic studio to make photographs of countryside and cityscape. The first such efforts were daguerreotypes, irreproducible images captured on metal plates. But

by the mid-1850s, photographers could produce multiple paper prints from a single glass negative and thus introduce their work to an ever-widening and enthusiastic audience. Painters like Frederic Church and Albert Bierstadt saw their fortunes fall as the public lost interest in the exquisitely detailed grand landscapes that had made them famous. It is more than likely that the rage for photography contributed to this change in taste—for, after all, once it became possible to photograph a scene, its painted likeness, though in color, seemed obsolete and somehow “less real.”

Carleton E. Watkins: Pioneer Photographer

Oliver Wendell Holmes was among the most ardent fans of the new art of photography, which he praised, for example, in essays published in *The Atlantic Monthly* (Holmes 1859, 1863). He was particularly enthusiastic about the work of one American photographer whose views of Yosemite were immensely popular in the East. The photographer was Carleton E. Watkins, a pioneer who made his way west in 1851. Both Holmes and Emerson requested Yosemite views from Watkins, who first photographed the almost inaccessible valley in 1861. Over the next decades, Watkins used his camera to stake claim to the California landscape and the larger western landscape from British Columbia to Mexico. Thus he contributed in a major way to the creation of the landscape legend of the promise and plenty awaiting all who traveled west to visit or settle in California.

The thirty mammoth plate views (18" × 22" negatives) and the stereos that he took at Yosemite constitute Watkins's best-known work. They were widely recognized even in his day and were sought after by such figures as Holmes, who was enchanted by the immediacy of the Yosemite stereographs; by Harvard botanist Asa Gray, who prized the tree portraits for their scientific value; and by Frederick Law Olmsted, who sent photographs from California to his partner, architect and landscape designer Calvert Vaux in New York (Holmes 1859; Palmquist 1989, p. 215; and Olmsted 1990, p. 434). When Congress passed legislation ceding Yosemite to the State of California as a preserve in 1864, it

established a precedent for all of the national parks that followed. As Watkins's biographer Peter Palmquist notes, the Watkins photographs, widely exhibited and circulated in Washington, clearly influenced the vote in favor of the wilderness preserve (Palmquist 1983, p. 199).

The San Francisco earthquake destroyed Watkins's entire studio in 1906, and much of the record of his work was lost. Thus his name was associated almost exclusively with work best known at the time, the Yosemite views, while other work fell into obscurity. An important group of Watkins photographs, far less known though no less remarkable, are the views of the landscape of California's Kern County, which he photographed in 1888. Over time, some of these photographs found their way into collections at the Henry E. Huntington Library in San Marino, California, the Kern County Museum and the Beale Memorial Library in Bakersfield, the California Historical Society in San Francisco, and the Library of Congress. Others were stored in a brick butcher shop on the Bellevue Ranch just outside Bakersfield and were only discovered there by a local historian in the early 1980s (Heredia 1989).¹

It is from a study of the photographs at the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress that this paper has evolved.² That collection is titled “Photographic Views of Kern County, California,” and consists of 415 photographs, 6½" × 8½", plus four maps. Originals are mounted on illustration board with captions. Evidence suggests that these photographs, though numbered in sequence, are taken from several separate albums or represent several commissions. At least four different Watkins identification labels are found on the photographs.

The landscape in Watkins's photographs is one that attempts to reconcile future and past. It is the middle ground to which Leo Marx turns in his literary-based study of American culture and to which other scholars have turned in search for clues to American self-awareness, character, and expression (Marx 1964). The pastoral ideal defined by Marx in *The Machine in the Garden* is not the wilder-

ness of Yosemite, but the newly cultivated farmland of Kern County.

Critical Interest in Watkins

Widespread enthusiasm for nineteenth-century American landscape painting has produced a number of major exhibitions in recent years, including *American Light: The Luminist Movement 1850–1870* (1980), *Paintings of Fitz Hugh Lane* (1988), *American Paradise, The World of the Hudson River School* (1987–1988), *Frederic Edwin Church* (1989), and the exhibition of the works of Albert Bierstadt (1991).³ It is no coincidence that this landscape enthusiasm also sparked a renewed interest in nineteenth-century photographs.

Carleton E. Watkins, Photographer of the American West, an exhibition organized by Peter Palmquist for the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth and seen there and at major art museums in Boston, St. Louis, and Oakland in 1983–1984, is evidence of a particular scholarly and critical interest in Watkins and his work. In her foreword to the volume that grew out of that exhibition, Martha A. Sandweiss makes a strong and convincing case for Watkins's extraordinary talent. Her argument rebuts art historians, such as Weston Naef, who have looked at Watkins from a narrower perspective, and also critics, such as Rosalind Krauss, who has argued that photographs that were never intended to be hung on walls and admired as art cannot retroactively be transformed into artistic statements (Krauss 1982).

Perhaps the commercial provenance of Watkins's work has tainted it in the eyes of some art critics, or perhaps it is the lack of an elevated theme, or simply a lack of familiarity.⁴ For whatever reasons, critics have tended to pinpoint the apex of Watkins's professional life as the time when he worked in Yosemite and to see the ensuing years of hard work and constant travel in terms of gradual, if inevitable, decline. The most explicit statement of this thesis can be found in Weston Naef's *Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860–1885* (1975) and restated by him in his essay, "New Eyes, Luminism and Photography" (1980). Naef cites Watkins's 1861

Yosemite photographs as "the first to present nature from a deliberately assumed artistic posture" (Naef 1975, p. 79). But he sees Watkins's career as a continuing conflict between his role as a photographic illustrator and his role as an artist deeply in love with nature (p. 87). He describes Watkins's move away from pure landscape photography as a diversion and speaks of his later work of the 1880s as focusing on "lesser subjects" (p. 89). Naef writes,

The natural professional atrophy of his later years, compounded by the loss of his lifework, caused Watkins' career to remain in essential eclipse compared to the significance of his accomplishment and compared to the world-wide fame achieved by Muybridge and Jackson, both of whose careers might have been different had Watkins not broken ground for them (p. 90).

Other writers echo Naef's comments. In his essay, Daniel Wolf (1983) draws heavily on the Naef material and offers a short biography of Watkins in which his professional life peaks at Yosemite in the 1860s and declines thereafter. His numerous photographic assignments, including his major effort to document the agricultural transformation of Kern County in 1888, are described merely as "travels" by writers such as Wolf.

Watkins's later work represents far more than such critics would suggest. Though some draw an artificial distinction between his "commercial" work and his supposedly "artistic" output, no such distinction existed for him. The fact that he was commissioned to do much of this work for railroads and for land companies surely suggests a willingness to satisfy client interests, but it would be wrong to imagine that the Yosemite views were any less commercial, especially since he made such a major effort to market these photographs from his San Francisco gallery, or that the Kern views were necessarily less artistic. Whatever aesthetic values he brought to his work, and we know next to nothing of his conscious judgments in these matters because he wrote little, his underlying need was to earn a living by producing images that pleased the public and satisfied himself as well. The fact that he was often on the verge of economic col-

lapse and even lost his studio and its inventory to a competitor in 1876 is evidence of his precarious existence both as artist and businessman, but there is no evidence to suggest that he approached his different subjects with a different eye or an altered sensibility. It is personal preference for a sacred over a profane landscape that causes some critics to shun photographs of the working landscape. Agricultural historian Richard Steven Street was the first to recognize the value of the Kern photographs as cultural artifacts (Street 1983, p. 18). Landscape historians and geographers can discover in the Kern series a cultural significance that has escaped earlier art historians and collectors.

Moving from East to West

Watkins's story begins in the East. He was born in 1829 in the town of Oneonta, New York, which is located on the Susquehanna River in an area of prosperous dairy farms at the edge of the Catskill Mountains. Even then, the area was recognized for its picturesque vistas, storybook scenes of tidy farms nestled among green hills that so appealed to Americans in a society then trying to reconcile the beginnings of industrialization with its agrarian ideology.

While the farmlands west of Oneonta were reminiscent of the English landscape, close to the hearts of many early settlers who had only recently emigrated from England, Scotland, and Ireland, the mountains, glades, and waterfalls to the east represented something new, exciting, fearsome, and magnificent to Americans who traveled the Catskill region in search of the sublime. As early as 1800, travelers wrote about the astonishing appeal of the wild landscape of New York State, a sharp contrast to the harmony of settled and cultivated farmland, which had played such a key role in shaping the American agrarian philosophy. As urban centers began to grow large and complicated, people looked to the natural world for some sort of new vision through which they might reconcile tensions in the culture.

It was to this region that artists came in the early years of the nineteenth century to experience the

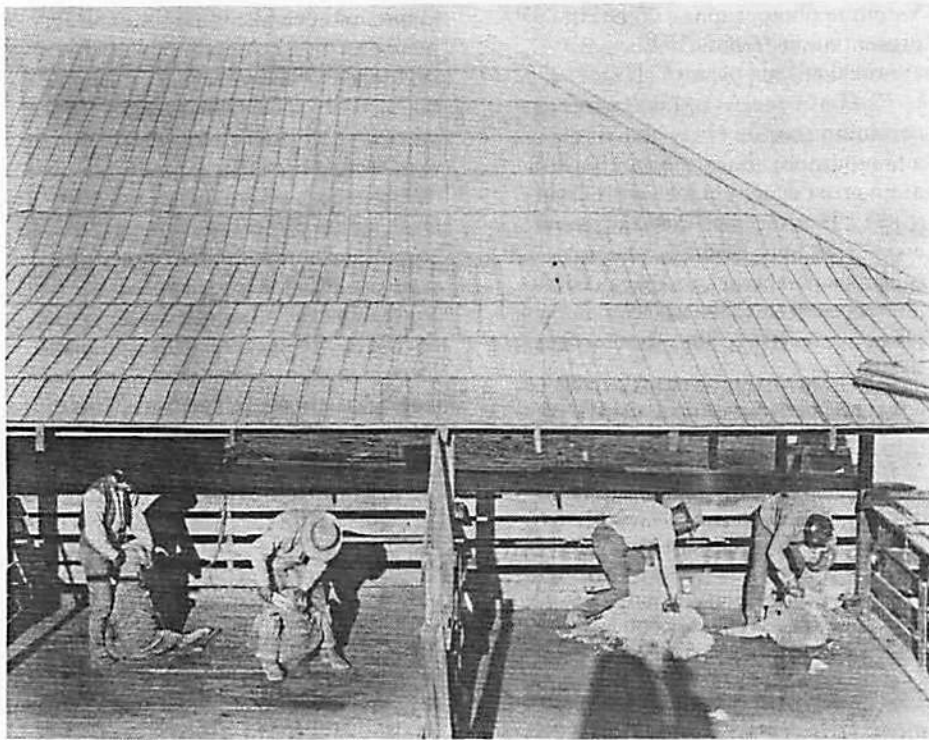


Figure 2. Sheep shearing in the stalls, San Emigdio Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 308.

combination of awe and beauty that is associated with sublimity. Among the most famous of nineteenth-century images is Durand's painting "Kindred Spirits" (1849), which shows Cole, Durand's teacher, and William Cullen Bryant conversing on a rocky ledge with Kaaterskill Falls plunging into a deep ravine behind them. In the years when Watkins was growing up in Oneonta, Cole was frequently traveling up the Hudson to paint the dramatic scenery at Kaaterskill Falls, and James Fenimore Cooper was immortalizing its beauty in his novels and stories. As Naomi Bliven notes, "Even to viewers who cannot identify them by name, the falls are an ineradicable image of the American wilderness." That wilderness, she says, expressed to early nineteenth-century artists the aesthetic of the sublime and served "as a metaphor for our uncorrupted young nation" (Bliven 1987, p. 43). But the scale and intensity of the eastern landscape experience paled when compared with that of the newly discovered West. And photography arrived just in time to offer an entirely new medium through which explorers and adventurers could tell the story of the new and wondrous landscape.

When he left his family in Oneonta, Watkins was not a photographer, nor was he trained as an artist or as a photographic assistant like his contemporary, the photographer William Henry Jackson.⁵ He emigrated as part of a large but non-organized migration of Oneontans to the San Francisco-Sacramento area, the only thickly settled area of California at that time.⁶ It is significant that Watkins traveled to the coast not overland, but by steamer via Panama. It is also significant that his traveling companion was Collis P. Huntington, future financier of the Central Pacific Railroad, which linked California to the East.⁷

Although evidence is sketchy, it appears that Huntington traveled to San Francisco for the first time in 1849, also via the Panama route. He then returned home to Oneonta, possibly to purchase manufactured supplies for his hardware business, and made the journey once again in 1851.⁸ It was on this trip that Watkins traveled with him. The significance of the traveling arrangement lies in the fact that Huntington was already a booster for the West. He had been there and mapped out the potential that he saw there for himself. No doubt his companionship gave Watkins a positive view of de-

velopment and change, a view that underlies his later photographic work.

Huntington, a Connecticut native, was an occasional guest at the hotel run by Watkins's family in Oneonta. The friendship between the two men started in New York and spanned more than sixty years. Watkins even named his only son "Collis" in honor of Collis Huntington. Though the association with Huntington did not spare Watkins from financial worry, it did provide him with periodic assistance, with entrée into San Francisco's artistic social set, and with an introduction to the influential local families from whom he received commissions. California Governor Leland Stanford, one of Huntington's railroad partners, supported the work of the photographer Eadweard Muybridge in the 1870s to learn more about animal movement; he was specifically interested in the motion of race horses. It appears that Huntington provided similar, though less publicized, patronage to Watkins.⁹ He made it possible for Watkins to

travel free of charge on his railroads and provided him with a traveling photographic car for his major expeditions. He also provided some assistance to Watkins at times of business crisis, which plagued his professional life.

Before the railroad, the overland journey west was arduous and demoralizing—often shattering the expectations of the optimistic pioneers who set out from St. Louis or Council Bluffs by wagon train. But the trip by way of the isthmus was different. It took people directly from the cities of the East to the single city of the West. Aside from the short crossing of the isthmus itself, where travelers came in close contact with the lush tropical scenery, the wide and seemingly inhospitable expanse of the American continent was something for them only to contemplate, not to endure. Still the trip by sea was dangerous, the steamships unreliable and ill-equipped. The dangers and difficulties of both routes, overland and sea, combined to heighten demand for the comparative comfort and security of a direct rail link between the two coasts. Investing all of his own assets and joined by three principal partners, Huntington was the man later largely responsible for making the arrangements by which the federal government

subsidized the construction of the transcontinental railroad project.

After arriving in California, Watkins's first job was in Huntington's Sacramento hardware store. After that, he worked as a carpenter for another Oneontan, George Murray, first in Sacramento, and then in Murray's San Francisco bookstore. By 1854, he found himself working as a photographic assistant in a daguerrean studio, probably one of the branch studios belonging to Robert H. Vance in Marysville or Sacramento, one of many such studios that had opened in the San Francisco area to serve the needs of settlers anxious to send home to the East respectable images of themselves, their homes, and their businesses. Of the photographers working there, Vance was the first to produce numerous daguerreotypes of the cityscape, the gold fields, and the outdoor landscape in general.¹⁰

San Francisco was a boom town when Watkins arrived, largely because of the recent discovery of gold in the mountains less than 100 miles away. From a population of 459 in 1847, it had grown to 34,000 in 1852, and it nearly doubled again in the next ten years. Watkins seized a piece of a profitable market and gradually prepared to launch his own photographic business. His earliest recorded commission concerned the production of documentary photographic evidence for use in a courtroom battle involving the Guadalupe quicksilver mine. Watkins testified in court that his goal in selecting his vantage point and in framing his pictures was to "give the best view" (Palmquist 1983, p. 9). Palmquist, a professional photographer himself, has likened Watkins's methodology to an "inventory," a systematic and efficient effort to capture the local scene. He points to the way that Watkins elevated his perspective by shooting from the top of his photographic wagon, thus eliminating the foreground, as evidence of his effort to create a sense of immediacy for viewers.¹¹ The idea of a photographic inventory is analogous to that of the scientific surveys sponsored by state and federal governments to list and categorize the elements of the western terrain as a way of taking control and anticipating use.

In all of his work, Watkins showed a reverence for the land. Whether working in association with the California State Geological Survey, the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey, or the Southern Pacific Railroad, whether traveling with Clarence King to Mt. Shasta, documenting the Comstock mining region, or photographing the private estates and ranches of wealthy San Francisco families, Watkins showed a singular skill at finding the essence of regional beauty—the easy undulation of the hills, the extreme flatness of the bottom land, the contrast of sun-flooded open range and shaded oases, the clearness of the morning air and the dustiness of the afternoon with its heavy heat, the handsome new buildings, healthy-looking stock, superb fruits and vegetables, and the sparkle and vibrancy of the water.

All of his work, one way or another, contributed to the same legend, one that revealed optimism and order in the landscape. Further, the legend featured among its themes the felicity of traditional domestic life and the efficiency of modern organizational management. In his many photographs of ranches, farms, and towns, Watkins documented western settlement as a harmonious process. In the Kern series, he managed to depict "improvement" as a positive and orderly process, one marked by achievement and gain rather than destruction and loss.

Exploring Kern County

Watkins photographed Kern County in 1888 for the largest land company in the region, the Kern County Land Company, which later issued the photographs in large folios or albums. For this work, he used the new dry-plate process, which gave him far more flexibility than had been possible with wet plates. With the new process, he could carry pre-coated plates and expose them at any time and then pack them away for eventual processing and printing at his studio. As a result, he was able to work with less cumbersome equipment and shoot many more photographs than he could earlier. The tonal range of the photographs is distinguished by a slightly purple cast, the result of the gold chloride wash used on the albumen prints.



Figure 3. Location of Kern County, California (drawing by the author).

Each photograph in the series is accompanied by an effusively worded caption extolling the phenomenal virtues of California's newly settled Central Valley as the equivalent of Garden of Eden revisited. The captions are, in fact, a major part of the Kern series because they reveal, in a wealth of detail, a portrait of the region to which the photographs can only allude.¹²

What sort of lure might a barren landscape hold (Figure 1)? Watkins provides the setting and allows us to explore its ostensible emptiness in our minds. He offers us many possibilities. While there is no one way to interpret this photograph or any other in the series, the photographs do convey a particular message about a particular place. Watkins's role is thus to set the scene, to provide a visual image, at times evocative, like this one, and at other times more straightforward (Figure 2). It is the caption writer who tells us that the seemingly inhospitable terrain in the first photograph is a ranch, a former Mexican land grant southwest of Bakersfield. In addition to being "a choice region for the genuine hunter," it boasts a fig grove and "orange trees, pomegranates, deciduous fruit trees and walnut trees, a fine garden and beautiful flower beds about the residence, covering in all some seven or eight acres. The view from the mesa or plateau on which the place stands is

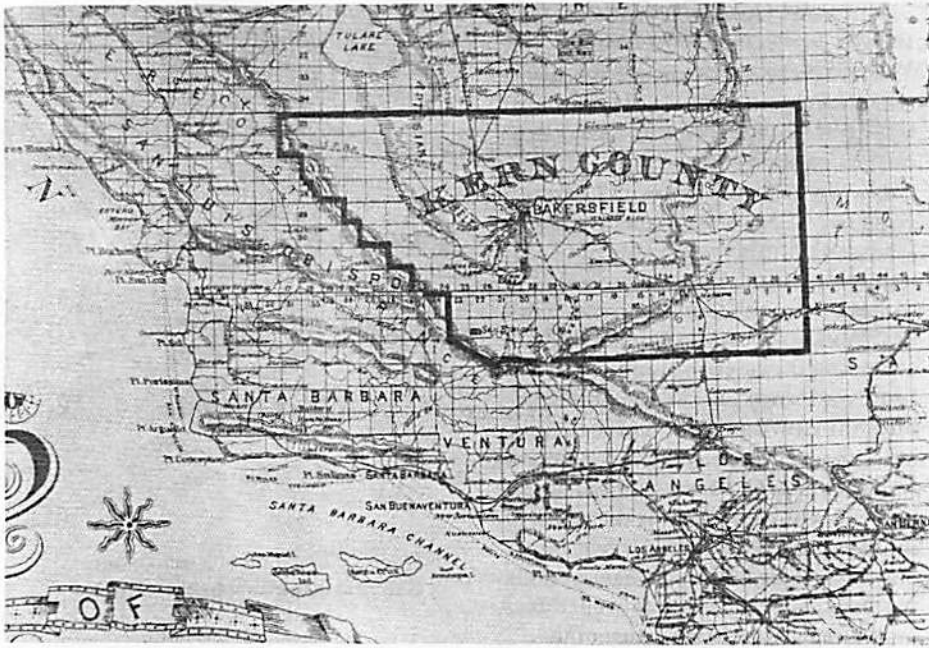


Figure 4. Kern County, portion of map in Watkins collection. Courtesy of Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

magnificent." Overall, he says, the cliffs, trees, unseen wild animals, and "dimly seen" cultivated fields combine to "make a very picturesque scene." It is debatable whether Watkins has actually depicted a "picturesque" scene. It becomes picturesque as a result of the additional information alluding to things only "dimly seen" or not seen at all.

Evidence points to S. N. Reed as the author of the many captions. He wrote them sometime in 1889.¹³ He worked for the Land Department of J. B. Haggin in Kern County, and Haggin was a Director of the Kern County Land Company, which had its corporate offices in San Francisco. While it has been suggested that the captions may have preceded the photographs, it is also evident from his correspondence that Reed worked closely with the actual photographs in writing the captions. As a promotional writer, he found in the visual material every possible clue to support the legend of promise and plenty essential to the future prosperity of the Kern County Land Company.

But it must be recalled that this was the frontier, and life there was neither easy nor necessarily harmonious. The countryside in the region struck the first white pioneers as forbidding.

To understand the photographs and the captions, as well as the legend that allowed settlers to see opportunity in this terrain, it is important to know something of the region itself. Kern County is the southernmost and the largest county in California's Central Valley, a flat valley shaped like a cucumber, tucked between the modest mountains of the Coast Range on the west, the Tehachapi on the south, and the giants of the Sierra Nevada on the east (Figure 3). The county takes its name from the Kern River, which flows across it in a westward direction down from Mt. Whitney, the highest peak in the Sierras.¹⁴ The Kern region was first explored by white men in 1834, when Joseph Walker blazed a trail across the Sierras, then moved south through the San Joaquin Valley and along the Kern River (Federal Writers' Project 1939, p. 450). In 1863, William H. Brewer and his men, part of the California Geological Survey team, crossed from the Mojave Desert through Walker's Pass in the Sierras down into the great valley, and then moved slowly up the valley, across the Kern River, through the canyons of King's River, and along through the groves of Big Trees near Mariposa to Yosemite, which had been first "dis-

covered" by American explorers in 1833 (Goetzmann 1966, p. 368).

Settlers from Missouri and Arkansas were among the first to arrive and put the land to grazing, its only apparent use. Other explorers and entrepreneurs followed and mapped routes for railroads and canals. When Brewer first traversed the terrain that came to be known as Kern County, he found an inhospitable, arid emptiness—a wild, flat region, home to scattered groups of Indians who lived off the land without cultivating it, subsisting largely on a diet of acorns from the splendid oaks that dotted the landscape (Preston 1981, p. 34).

The explorers who preceded Watkins in Kern County wrote reports filled with scientific data and prepared maps that made the region accessible to settlers for the first time. Unlike Watkins, many of the explorers were highly educated. Specializing in agricultural chemistry, Brewer possessed a sound academic background and the outlook of a serious scientist intent on discovering, identifying, classifying, and describing the array of natural phenomena unique to the landscape of the West. Travel writers followed the explorers and the railroads, publishing articles in magazines, periodicals, and newspapers to guide prospective tourists and settlers. Charles Nordhoff toured the region and published his enthusiastic accounts in 1874 (Nordhoff 1874). Hired by the railroad companies to travel and write about the region, he was among the first to appreciate and promote the region as a tourist destination, which it became only after the transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869.

In the 1870s, rail connections were brought to the Central Valley, linking San Francisco to Bakersfield and beyond (Figure 4). Though today associated with the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area, the Bakersfield region of Kern County was settled as a distant satellite of San Francisco, the western railroad hub. Los Angeles was just beginning its growth at that time. Reproduced from Nordhoff's book, a bird's-eye view of the transcontinental route between Chicago and the West underscores the importance of San Francisco, which appears under a halo on the horizon, just to the left of the setting sun (Figure 5).

A Landscape Portrait

Only thirty-four years after Brewer made his initial reconnaissance, when Watkins made his own expedition to Kern County, it was no longer the dry and dusty terrain that the first visitors mistook for desert. Instead, it was becoming a virtual garden, made fertile through the technological intervention of irrigation. The canal companies that built the irrigation system and the land companies that promoted the sale of still vacant and unsettled land retained Watkins to document various legal claims and to support their business interests.

Watkins photographed ranches, farms, dairies, irrigation projects including canals and artesian wells, towns, mines, houses, buildings, animals, and people. His views are panoramic, close-up, and in between, and he often photographed the same scene from all three perspectives, offering his client the choice of which to include in an album. In interpreting these photographs, it is useful to consider the *aesthetic component*, the *content* (literal, suggested, and that which is significant by its absence), and also the *context*. The role of the photographer, the history, geography, and cultural events that help us to decipher the meaning of the work and, through it, the meaning of the region are all a part of the context. The captions are of particular importance in relation to context because the photographs were presented to the public with captions. The viewer's own perspective on the material further adds to its context.

Aesthetic evaluation has to do with formal structure, composition, balance, contrast of dark and light, texture, tone, and related criteria by which art historians have traditionally evaluated prints and by which they now assess photographs as art. While this examination of the Kern series includes photographs significant for their pictorial attributes, it focuses less on formal analysis than on content and context.

Views of the Lakeside Ranch illustrate the pastoral beauty of the Kern region. In Figure 6, the scene is composed in a pictorial way to dramatize the silhouettes of the tall and slender poplars. It is reminiscent of French Impressionist landscapes, such

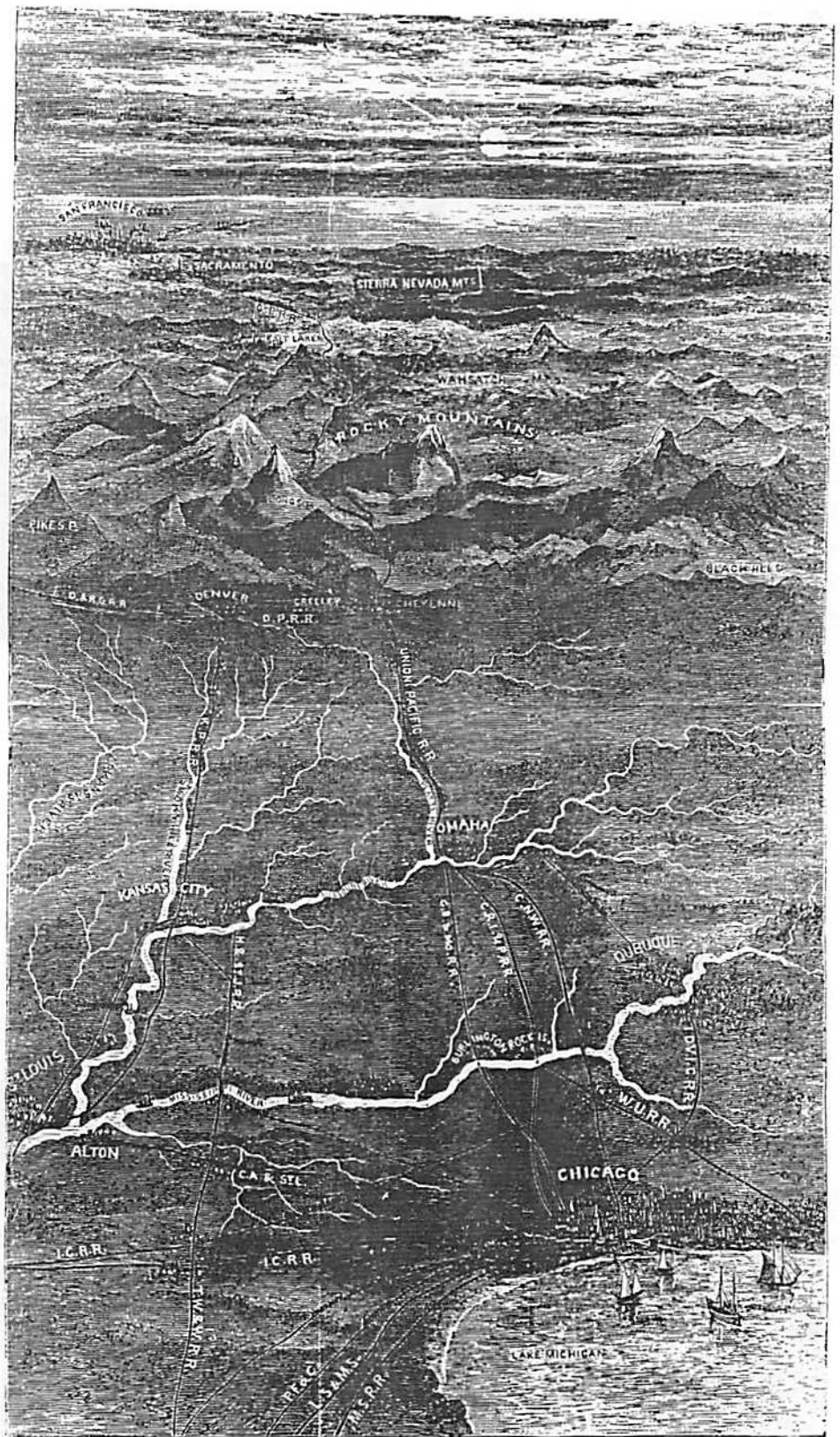


Figure 5. Bird's-eye view of the West, illustration in Nordhoff (1874).

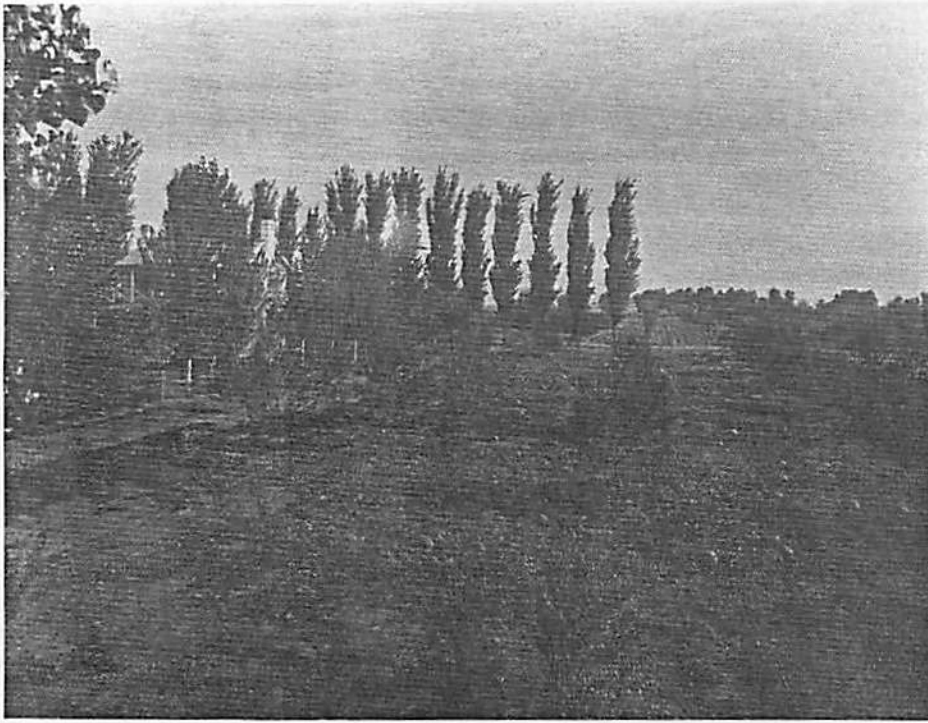


Figure 6. The superintendent's home, orchard, and garden, Lakeside Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 96.

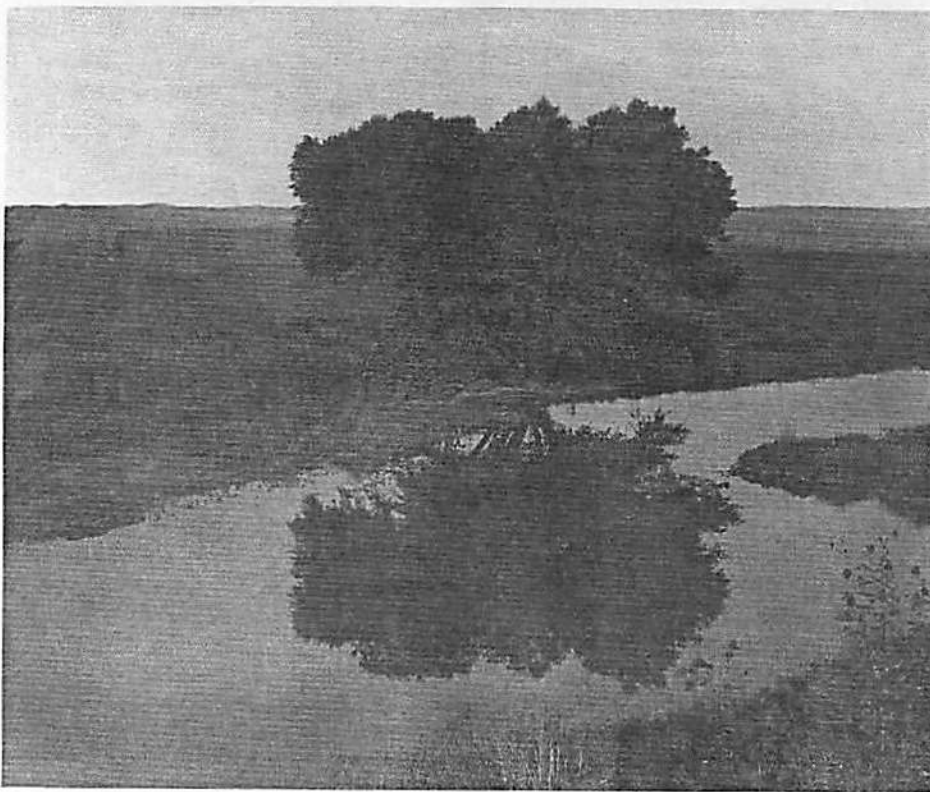


Figure 7. In the alfalfa fields, Buena Vista Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 651.

as Monet's 1891 series of poplars. Watkins's scene also provides as much information as possible about the farm itself. Watermelons ripen in the foreground, and 'George's Late Cling' peaches ripen on the foreground trees, which average about twenty-five pounds of fruit per tree (*Photo No. 96* caption). The caption with this photo tells us that the tall and distinctive trees were only two years old when set out in 1880, which makes them ten years old at the time they were photographed. The caption notes further that the ranch covers 10,080 acres and includes dwellings, barns, shops, fenced alfalfa fields (requiring 35 miles of fencing), orchards, and gardens. The distinction between farm and garden is noteworthy.

Despite the claim of ample water, irrigation, whether from distant water by canal or from on-site artesian wells, required labor and investment capital. As a result, crops that required little irrigation and little labor were preferred. Lakeside Ranch planted alfalfa as its principal crop because it needed only once-a-year irrigation, often less. Other cash crops included wheat, barley, oats, and corn, which had grown to a height of 19 feet. The fields associated with the garden, by comparison, produced giant sweet potatoes (between 16 and 27 pounds each!), pumpkins, beets, peaches, pears, apricots, plums, apples, English walnuts, almonds, and grapes. Success with the mulberry, the caption notes, even promised future success in silk culture. In words that portend much for the future organization of the land, the caption ends with this note: "The wonderful productiveness of this land assures cultivation in all branches, but in the present scarcity of labor, grass growing and grazing on a large scale are positively compulsory."

Even at that time, given the water situation and the distribution of land by section, the need for large-scale operations was apparent. Land might have been cheap but water had to be purchased. The Lakeside Ranch caption says: "Land well checked and prepared, costs two cents per acre to irrigate, but otherwise twenty cents." Though it goes on to say that water is "abundantly furnished" by three different canals and five deep artesian wells, and that surface water at eight

feet lessened the overall need for irrigation, it acknowledges the need for hired labor, dependence on a privately managed water system, and pressure to amalgamate land into larger units for productive use. The only fact the writer fails to note is that the “abundant supply” of water might some day dry up. Jefferson’s free and independent farmer figures little in this landscape.

There is no finer example of a canal landscape in the Kern series than the view of the Kern Island Canal on the Greenfields Ranch (see cover). It is a lyrical and precise aesthetic statement. The strong centrality viewed from an elevated perspective takes the viewer plunging into the middle distance and off toward the horizon where water meets sky. This is a man-made landscape—man and technology united in improvement of nature and the pursuit of the infinite potential there to be gained.

According to its caption, this “pretty” scene depicts a drop in the Kern Island Canal where the canal passes through “as rich a body of alluvial soil as can be found anywhere in the world.” As evidence for this claim, the writer points to “the rank growth of vegetation shown along the canal” and the prolific peanut crop at the Greenfields Ranch. Drops such as this provided significant water power. Dams were also used to lessen erosion and control water level in the canal. Where possible, drops were built where fences crossed the canal in order to use the drop as part of the fence, as shown. Again for this property, the writer distinguishes between the ranch, which raises stock and cultivates 7,000 acres of alfalfa, and its 40-acre garden, which produces fruit, nuts, and flowers. From 50 to 75 men and 50 horses worked this ranch, not including the personnel attached to the Kern Island Dairy, which operated under separate management on a section of ranch property.

Watkins shows a single willow tree on the banks of the Buena Vista slough (Figure 7). Like the view of the poplars (Figure 6), it is a pictorial image that relates to painterly traditions and evokes a poetic stillness. It shows a stately and graceful willow reflected in the water below. The Buena Vista slough played a key role in a lawsuit that pitted competing

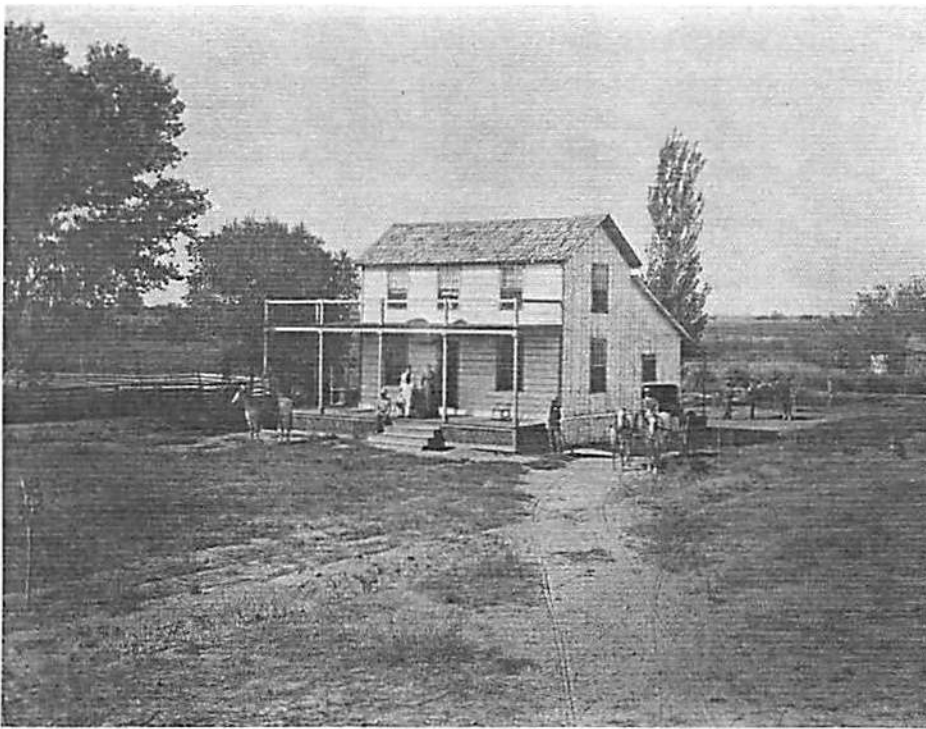


Figure 8. The residence, Keystone Farm. Watkins Photo No. 338.

ranchers and canal companies against each other in a bitter fight over water rights. Legal questions had to do with whether the slough had become an irrigation channel diverting Kern water to lands lying between Buena Vista Lake and Tulare Lake. This photograph was not taken in reference to that battle, but Watkins did take photographs that were used as documentary evidence in that case.¹⁵ Without this knowledge, it is unlikely that someone would see in this elegant tranquility a battleground of sorts.

Amid this arid landscape, trees represented domesticity, and exotic species in particular served as a metaphor for civilization. Rows of poplar and cottonwood marked the territory and defined its boundaries, as did the miles of new fencing. The trees created welcome shade and provided wood needed for fences and construction before the arrival of the railroad. The caption writer makes much of the trees at the modest 200-acre Keystone Farm (Figure 8). In describing the scene, he mentions the tall poplar and the two-year-old willow, as well as the farmhouse, the chicken house, and the 40-foot well. “At the left, in the foreground,” he notes, “a post set in the

ground has taken root and grown”—as if it were evidence of miraculous event.

At the Stockdale Ranch, Watkins captures the “beauty, elegance and luxuriance” of the lovely circular garden (Figure 9). This property was owned by the Tevis family, among the directors of the Kern County Land Company. Photographed from above, the garden dwarfs the people walking in it. Surrounded by a cedar hedge, it is planted with 200 rose varieties, calendula, carnations, poppies, gladioli, crape myrtle, lemon verbena, Japan-plum, wisteria, honeysuckle, cypress, pepper, arborvitae, and, nearby, a “fan palm thirty feet high with trunk thirteen and half feet in circumference.” Choosing a high vantage point, Watkins is able to give a view that amplifies the size and diversity of this ornamental and exotic garden, a testament to the settlers’ desire to domesticate the land and a strong statement about the effort to establish civilization on the frontier.

In terms of this photo series, civilization is represented, for example, by fabulous displays of fruits and vegetables (Figure 10). The Kern County exhibit depicts already commodified abundance, and even includes framed photographs of Watkins’s Yosemite views as evidence of already com-



Figure 9. The superintendent's residence, the circle, Stockdale Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 28.

modified scenery. Civilization is represented by photographs of well-built homes, ranches, and town buildings, shaded by newly planted trees and vines, and complemented by gardens. It is shown also in photographs of farm machinery and in captions that feature statistical summations showing evidence of "progress"—amounts of cultivated acreage, planting yields, numbers of churches, schools, teachers, and students, fraternal societies, businesses, and, above all, detailed facts about the irrigation system upon which all else depended.

Watkins shows fine examples of spacious and comfortable-looking homes, including the residence at the Crocker Ranch (Figure 11). We learn

from its caption that wells on the ranch furnish "a perpetual supply of pure water for stock and domestic purposes," while water for irrigation comes from the Kern River via two separate canals, the South Fork and Farmers'. He shows a different sort of structure in Bakersfield, a large warehouse near the Southern Pacific Company's railroad line (Figure 12). The brick warehouse is totally fire-proof. "This splendid and useful building," we are told, "well illustrates the character of development in Kern Valley." Bakersfield was the county seat and the focus of county life. In 1888, it had a population of 6500, 39 school districts, 1243 school children, 42

schools, and 42 teachers. (The 10 male teachers averaged \$80 a month; the 32 female teachers averaged \$65.) All of these data and more are to be found in the caption that accompanies this photograph. It is interesting to note that Bakersfield, little more than a rural village in the 1860s, already boasted "three good newspapers," a well-equipped fire department, a \$100,000 hotel, and a street railroad and omnibus connection to the railroad station, located in adjacent Sumner.

Other Bakersfield structures include a two-story brick building built in 1881 on the site of a store occupied by the same business since 1869 (Figure 13). The structure is important not only for its impressive size, construc-

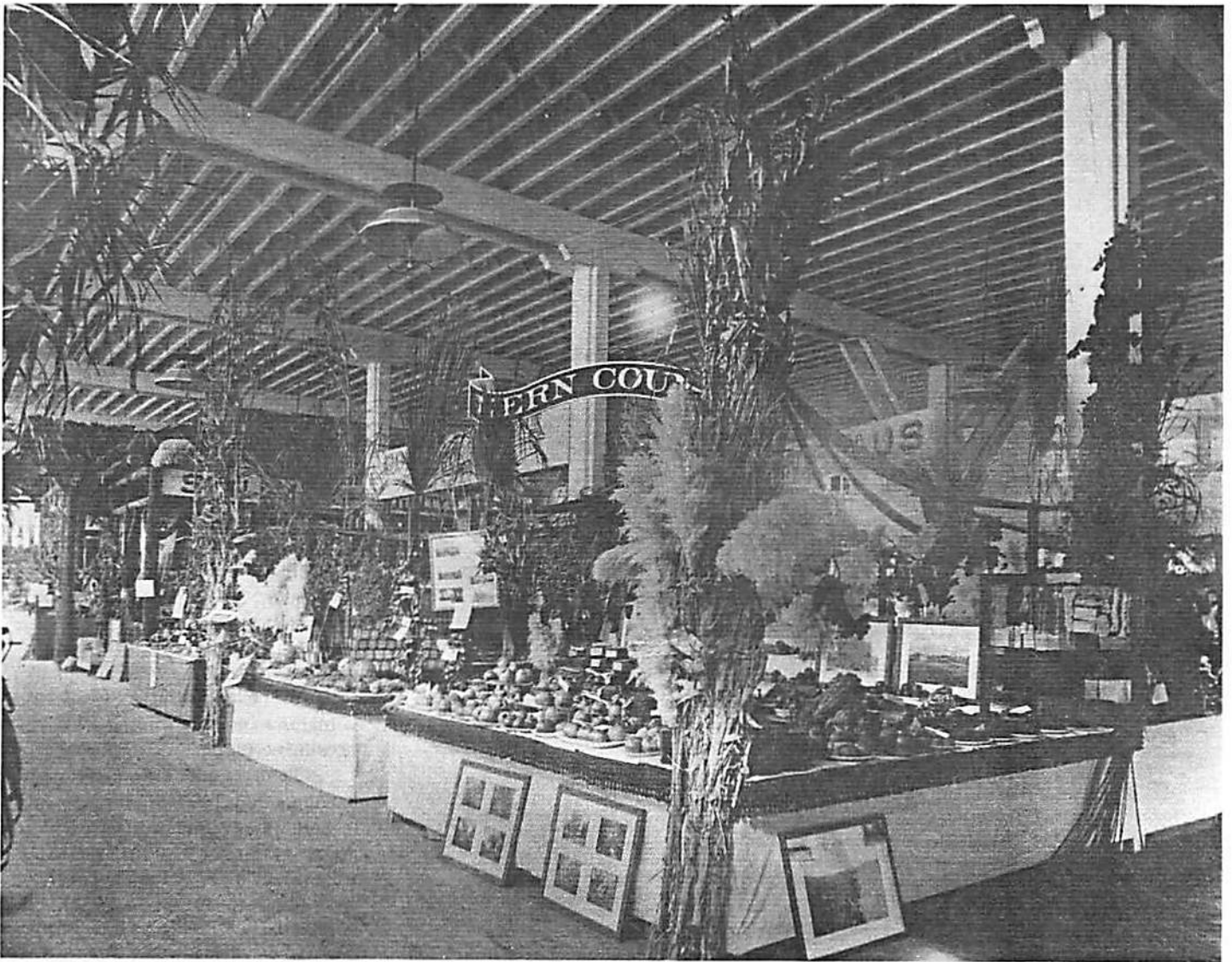


Figure 10. Kern County exhibit, Kern County products. Watkins Photo No. 287.

tion, and location in the heart of Bakersfield, but also for its tenants—the first floor houses a general store, the second floor holds offices of canal companies and lawyers. There is work for lawyers wherever limited resources produce competition. This is true even if people firmly believe that resources are unlimited and legend is built upon this belief. Battles over water rights still produce some of California's most furious fights, and the future holds nothing but trouble in this area (Reinhold 1991). Groundwater laws differ from surface water laws. With regard to surface water, California follows riparian doctrine based on land ownership, and appropriation doctrine based on initial water usage. With

regard to groundwater, the state adds the doctrine of correlative rights, which states that a landowner's use of groundwater must be "reasonable" and correlated with the uses of others in times of shortage. It is clear that the earliest efforts to divert Kern River water were bound to have long-term repercussions on local ecology, politics, and land distribution patterns. Needing to control their access to water, farmers and ranchers had to buy up land that provided access. Furthermore, they had to find ways to protect that access.

A map with Watkins's Kern photographs gives the specific location of each ranch and farm and also each canal in the extensive Kern system fan-

ning out from the Kern River just northeast of Bakersfield (Figure 14). This map also shows several of the larger ranches and the extent of their holdings. The squares and sections first appeared on maps when Congress drew up the basic plan for surveying public land in 1785, a plan that went through many subsequent revisions. The matrix of farms envisioned by the 1862 Homestead Act was, according to Smith, a blueprint for an agrarian utopia that would also deconcentrate the rapidly rising urban population (Smith 1950, p. 195). Where railroad concessions were granted, federal land alternated with railroad land. It was thought that such alternation would prevent land monopoly, but as early as 1888, when

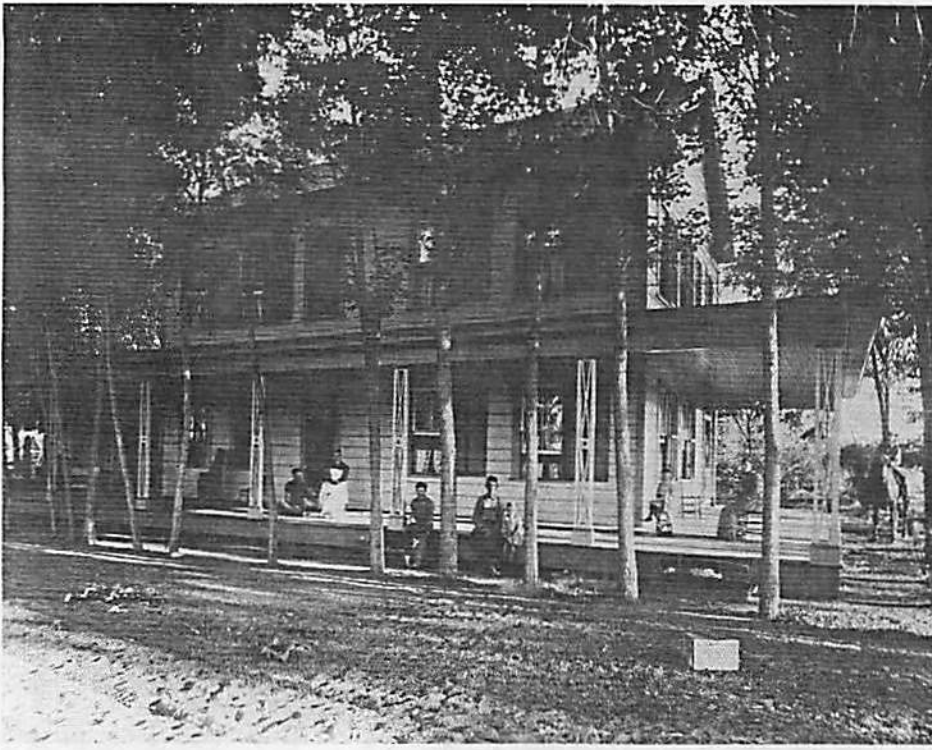


Figure 11. Headquarters, residence, Crocker Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 406.

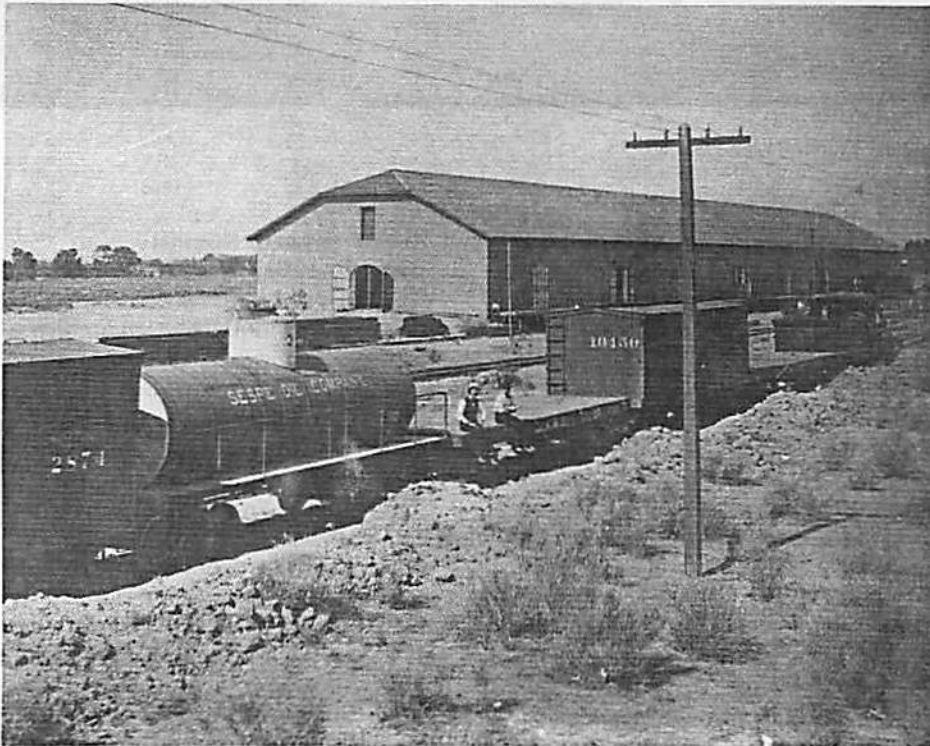


Figure 12. Warehouse, Bakersfield. Watkins Photo No. 270.

this map was drawn, one can see that single land holdings far exceed one section, or 640 acres. The map also illustrates that the gridded squares were laid out without regard to terrain, which means of course that some land was far more valuable than other land, some of which was lowland swamp or mountain foothills. The canals drew water from the Kern River. Most of the squares in the region had no direct water access apart from groundwater. Writing about fifteen years before Watkins's visit to Kern County, Nordhoff (1874, p. 128) describes how the railroad opened the land to settlement and how canal-building began there. He makes the provocative observation that it was the mining business, with its canals and flumes, that provided the model for the irrigation business that followed.

The Calloway Canal was part of the system. Its 100-foot headgate, built of redwood, was connected to its weir by an artificial abutment. Movable gate boards kept the water under control. The headgate of the Kern Island Canal is an equally impressive engineering accomplishment (Figure 15).

The pervading sense of order and harmony that figured in the landscape legend of this region is nowhere more apparent than in Watkins's view of the Lakeside Ranch at the start of the morning work (Figure 16). This well-tended barnyard with its large barn, artesian well (covered with a shed roof in the middle distance), mowers about to start work, hay wagons loaded and being loaded, mule teams, ranchhands on horseback, and geese parading across as if on cue is a paradigm of hard work and order. As he did in the photograph of San Emigdio Ranch, the caption writer calls our attention to things that do not appear in the photograph—in this case, a blacksmith's shop. But there are other things that are surely missing, too. As Alan Trachtenberg (1989, p. 144) notes in reference to Timothy O'Sullivan's Comstock mining photographs, the most conspicuous omission here and throughout the series is any real reference to the hardships of life and work on the frontier. There is little dirt, little noise, little action, and only indirect references to conflict of any sort.

Of course, these photographs had to be posed. If the photographs possess

a timeless quality, part of that can be attributed to the photographic process itself. The new dry plate process simplified the photographer's task and allowed him far greater flexibility in shooting multiple exposures close in time, but the exposure time was still too long to permit real "action" shots. Sheep shearing, generally a struggle, looks well controlled in the stalls at the San Emigdio Ranch (Figure 2). In fact the closest approximations to action photos in the series are views of falling water, literal and metaphorical expressions of power (Figure 17). Here, Watkins shows the bridge weir looking eastward. To the east, bluffs rise in the direction of the mountains; to the west, there are cultivated fields of alfalfa and corn, orchards, and houses belonging to what the caption describes as "prosperous citizens." It goes on to say:

This canal is the property of the Kern Island Irrigating Canal company. It takes its waters from the Kern river . . . about two miles and a half northeast of Bakersfield, the county seat of Kern county, California. It runs south through Bakersfield and terminates at Kern lake, being eighteen miles long and having a width at the headgate of fifty feet and a depth of four feet, with slopes of two to one. At Bakersfield the canal makes a vertical fall of over sixteen feet, capable of furnishing a vast water power, a small part of which only is now utilized by a large flouring mill. This important canal has two main branches, the town branch, supplying Bakersfield and vicinity, having a length of two miles, and a central branch, diverging from the canal south of town and running nearly parallel to it, carrying from one half to two miles distant, for a distance of ten miles in a southerly direction. . . . The central branch is one of the best irrigating canals in the valley. It has nineteen drops of from two to six feet each in the distance of ten miles, placed at intervals of half a mile, and aggregating a total fall of about seventy feet. The canal and its branches have thirty-one lateral ditches, besides a connecting ditch with the Stine canal, having a total length of over eighty miles, and covers an irrigable area of 150,000 acres of land. This canal appropriates 20,000 miners' inches, equivalent to four hundred cubic feet per second. Its location dates from the latter part of 1870. (*Watkins Photo No. 279 caption*)



Figure 13. Merchandise houses, Bakersfield. Watkins Photo No. 495.

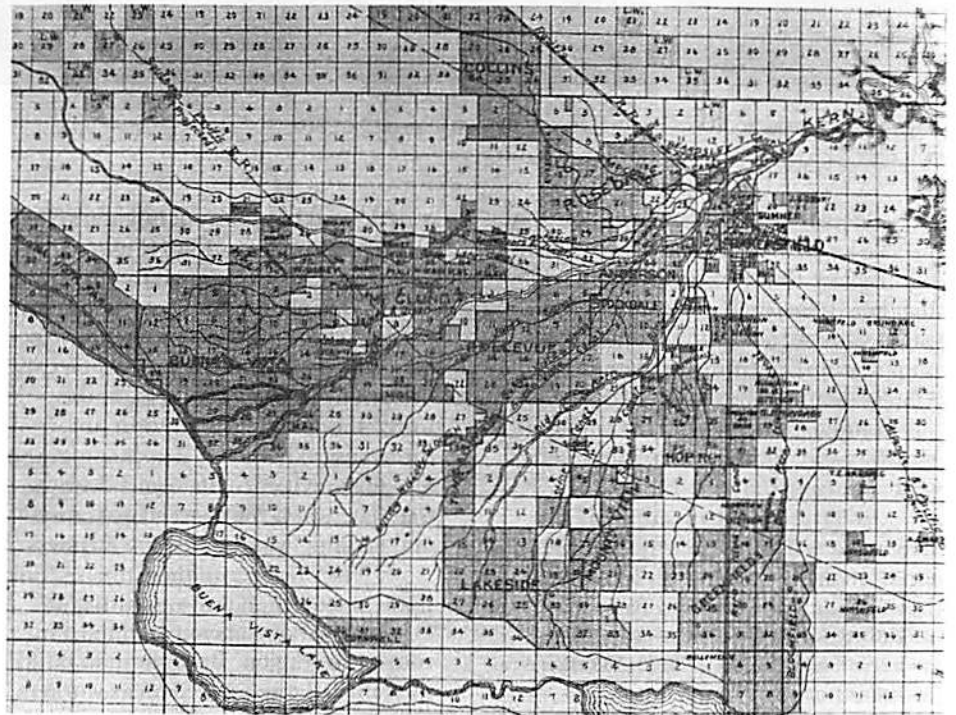


Figure 14. Canals in Kern County, portion of map in Watkins collection. Courtesy of Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

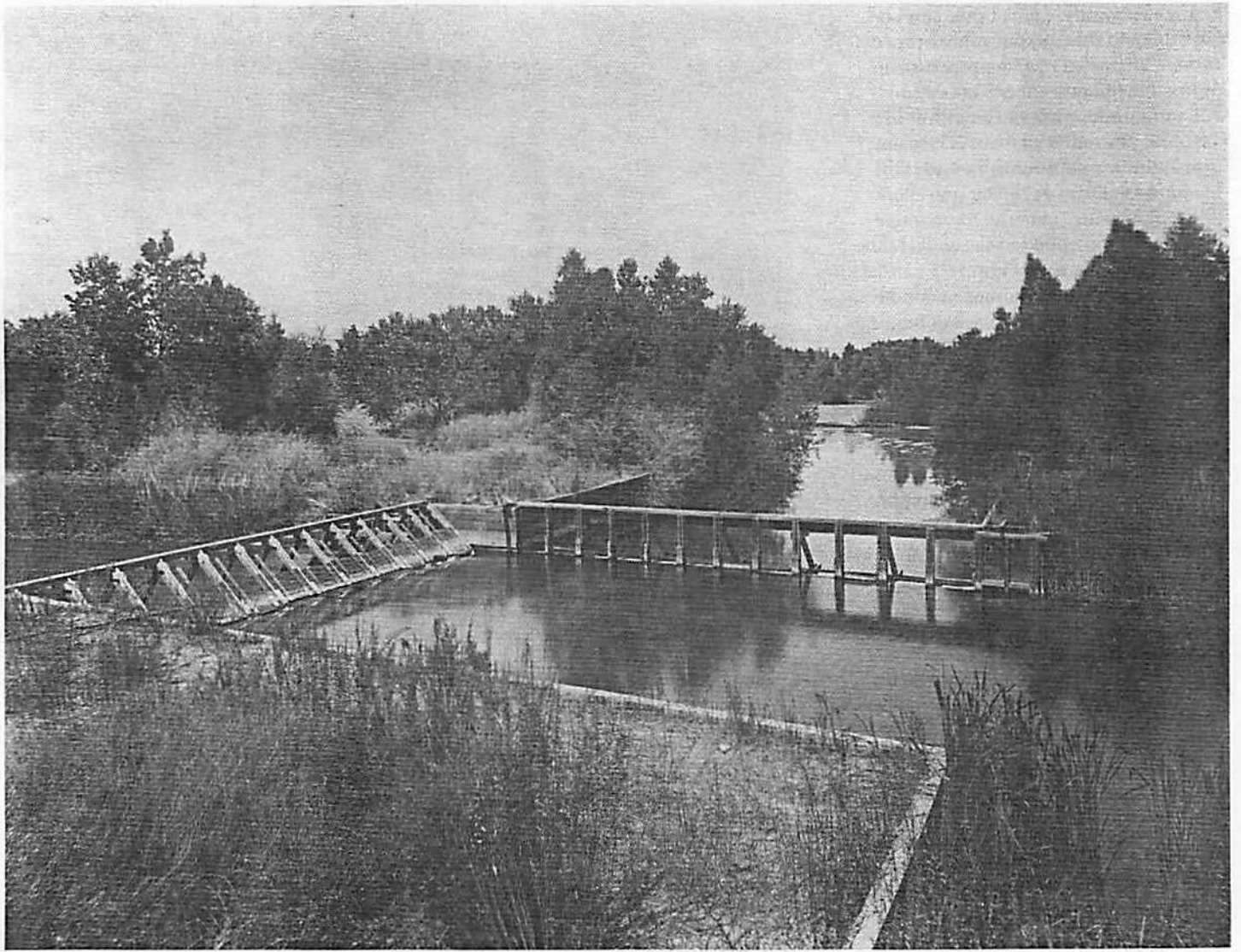


Figure 15. Headgate, Kern Island Canal. Watkins Photo No. 276.

Domesticity is another theme that plays a key role in the legendary allure of this place, but it is important to note that here domesticity does not necessarily connote individual home ownership, nor does farming connote self-employment. At the Bellevue Ranch, for example, ranch and store employees who were married were provided with cottages (Figure 18).

In fact, the organization of life here in Kern County was quite different from any precedent set in colonial New England or Virginia. Instead of including a photograph of only the owners of any ranch or farm, Watkins includes portraits of the “management”—the managing owner, the superintendent, the engineer, a tenant,

a clerk, and the cook—a full hierarchy already apparent in 1888 (Figure 19). The owner probably lived in San Francisco. This photograph is an impressive portrait, showing a sense of teamwork and confidence, if such expression can be seen in the eyes of others, in the unity of the composition, or in the directness of the pose. This photograph also gives evidence that ranch work at that date was a commercial operation and farming was definitely a business.

The presence of the Chinese cook in the photograph is also significant. Chinese workers played an important role in this region. Brought in to build the railroad, they stayed on as workers, but often lived a desperate existence on the frontier. Watkins includes glimpses of Chinese farm workers loading hay

and doing other farm tasks (Figure 20). One photograph, labeled simply “Headquarters: Water Pumping,” shows a Chinese worker tending a steam engine used to pump water (Figure 21). “An exhaustless supply of splendid pure, cold water” is raised, we are told, by a small steam pump or, alternatively, by windmill when winds permit. There are two water tanks, an old one of galvanized iron and holding 6,000 gallons and a new one of wood holding 20,000 gallons. With a pipe distribution system, the water is “everywhere convenient and accessible.” The caption for this photograph does not mention the Chinese laborer, but focuses instead on the sublimity and efficiency of the steam pump. This



Figure 16. The barnyard, Lakeside Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 102.

is consistent with the other captions, all of which omit reference to individual identity, treating the landscape as the subject.

Like the mill town at Lowell, Massachusetts, which depended on immigrant labor for the construction of its infrastructure but overlooked the presence of that population in fashioning its self-image, this region depended on a large labor force, for whom frontier life was harsh and unpredictable. The deprivations of this unsettled life style are well described by Olmsted in his 1865 essay, "Notes on the Pioneer Condition" (1990, pp. 577-763). There, he expresses his concern for the plight of the Chinese, Indians, Blacks,

and Mexicans who live and work on the frontier.

Olmsted praises the Chinese for their hard work and reliable habits. Nordhoff similarly writes that they, and they alone, seem willing and interested in conserving the precious water supply, rather than wasting the runoff. Nordhoff notes that of all the workers in the region, the least reliable were the white settlers known as the "Pikes," who arrived from Missouri, Arkansas, and other southern states and proved unwilling or unable to put down roots and stick with tasks. J. B. Jackson makes a similar observation in his book *American Space* (1972). As Jackson says, the "Pikes" set a tone for the region. Both Nordhoff and Olmsted, writing 100 years earlier, characterized the

population by its lawlessness, fierce independence, mistrust of others, and transient ways.

Not only was there friction among the various workmen and between labor and management (Olmsted arrived to manage the mining estate at Mariposa and almost immediately found himself trying to settle a strike), but also there was a long-standing antipathy between cattlemen and farmers, which culminated in a victory for the farmers with the later passage of "no-fence" laws.

That such tensions are not readily apparent in these photos is no reason to dismiss them, any more than it would be to dismiss a landscape by

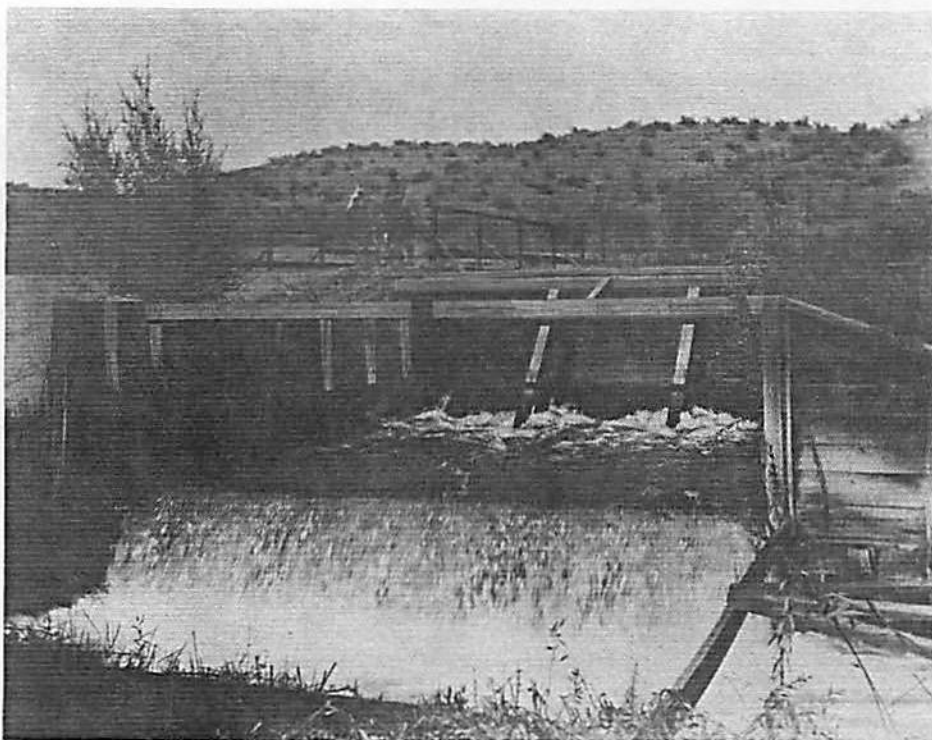


Figure 17. The bridge weir, looking eastward, the Kern Island Canal. Watkins Photo No. 279.



Figure 18. Bellevue employees' cottage, Bellevue Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 20.

Monet for its failure to show the harsh side of farm life in rural France. However, we do know that Watkins's principal client was the Kern County Land Company. He worked also for other landowners while he was traveling in the Kern area. In local newspapers, he advertised \$6 a dozen for 8" x 10" prints. He photographed ranchhands, dairy workers, and farm workers posing in their work settings and relaxing at home. There are many images of people admiring the newly cultivated gardens, relaxing in the precious shade, and even one view of ladies in long dresses playing croquet. At the Tejon Ranch, there are images of Indians impeccably dressed and posed not as freaks of the frontier or specimens of lost history, but as civilized and dependable family folk, part of the life of the ranch and the region (see, for example, *Watkins Photo No. 529*).

Olmsted agonized over the anarchy that he found in the Mariposa region east of San Francisco in the early 1860s.¹⁶ In his letters and in the lengthy essay cited above, he reflects on the misery, degradation, and mutual hostility that he sees around him every day. He compares the frontier to plantation life in the South, where slavery produces widespread apprehension and anger, and where exploitation leads to nothing but waste. "Communitiveness" is the quality that the region lacks, he says, and that it must acquire to become civilized (1990, p. 659). In part, Olmsted blames physical isolation and excessive mobility for the absence of civilization, and he reiterates concerns first expressed in his travels in the South (1959 [1861]) about the effect of environment on behavior.

Ironically, the very policies formulated to assure rapid and democratic settlement of the vast public domain made it difficult for community to evolve. These policies promoted the idea of land as a commodity, supported uniformity over diversity, and stimulated large-scale projects over small ones (Preston 1981, pp. 79, 90, 92). While providing easy access to land, they encouraged isolated farmsteads. Still, towns grew and flourished in this region. The railroad, which arrived after Olmsted had left the western frontier to return to his task at Central Park, more than any other force

brought organization and connectedness to the Kern landscape. In many ways, the railroad brought “civilization” to the region.¹⁷ Choosing his Kern County views with care, Watkins managed to depict civilization emerging from a landscape still hostile and difficult to understand, and order amidst the chaos of frontier life.

Watkins uses a plunging centrality to organize his view of the Southern Pacific Railroad bridge that crosses the Calloway Canal and the Kern River (Figure 22) as he does above (Figure 7). The receding railroad tracks, dramatically centered by Watkins and sharply lit by the sun, make this a memorable image. The smooth steel tracks race to the distant vanishing point on the horizon, transporting us in imagination to a future destination of infinite promise.

A Landscape Transformed

The real subject of the Kern County photographs is not the farms, ranches, wells, canals, houses, animals, and people as separate and ordinary views of everyday life. The subject is the radically transformed landscape, a garden landscape that only a generation earlier was thought to be inhospitable desert, unfit for settlement, let alone intensive agricultural development. Looking at the contrast between the rugged and dry terrain and the cultivated fields, one sees instantly that nature alone, though filled with beauty, is not the sole focus of Watkins’s attention. Nor was he primarily interested in documenting the advent of humans as a series of technological innovations, either destructive or beneficial. It was a working relationship between nature and technology that Watkins captured in these photographs.

Landscape is a perceived relationship between humans and nature. It is more than the land itself; it is what people see on it and in it, how they think about it and use it. Watkins saw the harmony in his surroundings, or managed to capture harmony in his photographs. His work describes the relationship between the frontier farmers and ranchers and their formerly inhospitable land. Moreover, he tells us in subtle ways the story of a landscape that was marked for large-scale development from the outset as a result of its dependence on water and the dis-

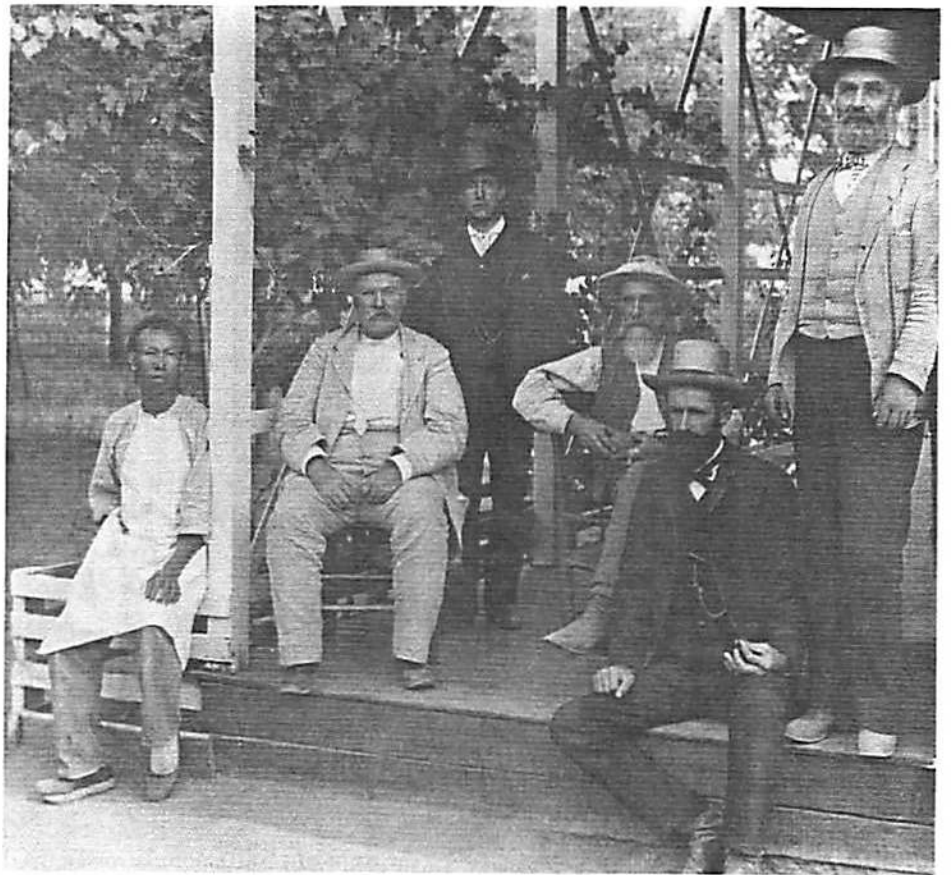


Figure 19. The management, Poso Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 251.

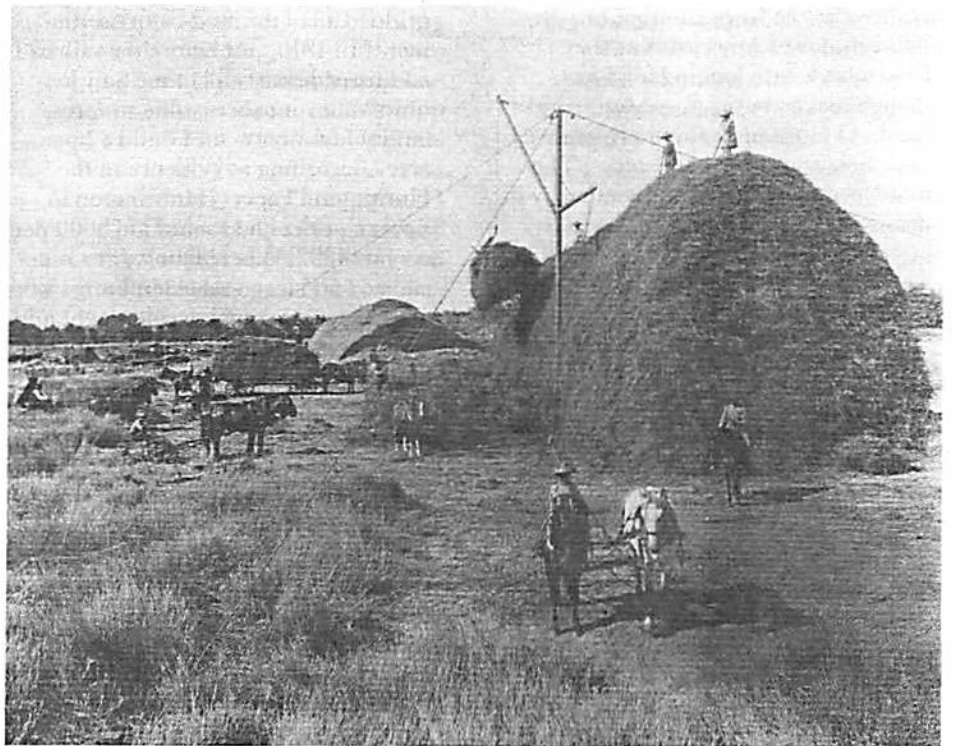


Figure 20. Stacking alfalfa hay, Stockdale Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 48.

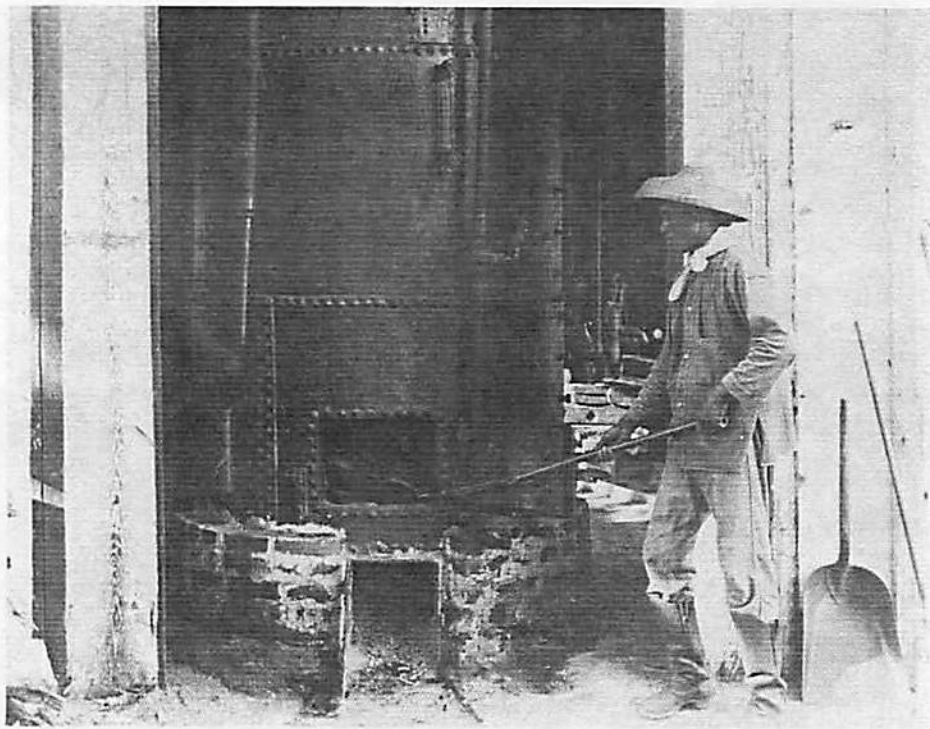


Figure 21. Headquarters, water pumping, McClung Ranch. Watkins Photo No. 631.

tinctive way in which its lands were sold and settled.

The agrarian myth of the yeoman farmer or the rugged individual living off the land, described by Smith and also by Richard Hofstadter, was not realized on the Kern frontier, but grew in the minds of Americans as they looked back with longing for a lost, though maybe never possessed, rural ideal. As Hofstadter says in reference to the incorporation of business, "The more farming as a self-sufficient way of life was abandoned for farming as a business, the more merit men found in what was being left behind" (1960, p. 24).

Almost from the outset as a result of public policy, homesteads in the West grew rapidly into the larger units for which massive irrigation projects were more cost-effective. Specialized labor forces, not individual families, worked these large new farms. Engineers assisted in assessing soil conditions and water needs, foremen managed large staffs of men involved in different aspects of agricultural production, and seasonal workers joined the overall effort as needed. The need for seasonal labor, its scarcity, and the problems of finding decent field workers from among the Indians, the Chinese, and

the transient white population figured prominently in the earliest accounts of regional history.

Likewise, circumstances combined to encourage speculation in land. The federal survey had measured and gridded all of the land before settlement. In 1870, just before the railroad had turned nearly all of the San Joaquin Valley into accessible squares, land sold for between \$1 and \$2 per acre. According to evidence in the Huntington Papers (Huntington to Speyer), prices had soared to \$600 per acre by 1892. Where labor was so specialized and large-scale land units were necessary for capital development and investment, the industrialization of the landscape was more or less inevitable.

Another key factor in the human-land equation in the Kern region was the belief that nearly everything there was unlimited. As seen in Figure 22, land seemed to stretch to distant horizons and beyond; water, once diverted for use, seemed to flow from "never failing" streams out of "perpetual" mountain snows; and groundwater seemed endlessly abundant (*Watkins Photo No. 287* caption). Water that cost two cents an acre-foot for irrigation in

1888 costs \$92 today. Demand is so high that supplies in some places now vary from low to nonexistent (*Reinhold 1991*).

Legend is a tool of conquest by which explorers, settlers, and even armchair travelers link the past that they have experienced, studied, or merely imagined, the present that they know or think they know, and the future about which they can only dream. It is a way of picturing things, of making them legible or readable; it is the process we use when we look at a painting or photograph or landscape and ask it to tell us its story. In the Kern County landscape, some may choose to see a story of thoughtful use, where others may see thoughtless exploitation; some will label Watkins's photography "documentary," and others will call it "propaganda." But it is not necessary to reduce such a reading to an either/or situation to appreciate the aesthetic quality of the photographs or to appreciate the complexity of culture and how it is expressed in this landscape.

The Legend as Legacy

The roots of California's contemporary crisis in land and water management can be traced to the creation of this legendary landscape in the middle- and late-nineteenth century and to the tremendous power that the legend held and continues to hold over the popular imagination. In addition to viewing the land with optimism and finding it to be endlessly fertile and well watered, the legend's themes included pastoral beauty, blissful domesticity, technological promise, endless economic opportunity, a pervading sense of harmony, and the premise that civilization is the by-product of progress. The vast Central Valley Project, authorized in 1935 and built upon earlier models such as the Kern system, stands today as one of the most extensive water management systems in the world (*Lancaster 1991*).

Continuing evidence of the landscape legend can be seen in the way that Californians talk about the current drought as if it were a freak event, soon to disappear and after which water supplies will again meet all needs. It can be seen in continued efforts to grow high-water-demanding crops and in the commitment to green lawns in an



Figure 22. The Southern Pacific Railroad Company's bridge, the Calloway Canal. Watkins Photo No. 507.

arid region. It can be seen in the maintenance of federal subsidies that offer price support to high-water-need crops such as cotton and rice and in the continuation of artificially reduced prices for agricultural water use. Among its legacies, the landscape legend has left California farmers with rights to water desperately needed by rapidly growing urban areas and industrial users. In American cultural history, there is nothing new in such an expression of sympathy for the rural life. The legend lives on in the expectation of plenty that continues to lure settlers to the region and to give them confidence in its future.

If Watkins recognized the tension between growth and pastoral values, he saw it not as cause for alarm, but rather as evidence of progress. While the mountains had always been alluring to explorers, both scientific and artistic,

the flat and arid bottom lands acquired the importance of place only as a result of their man-made transformation, a transformation based largely on a legend so appealing and powerful that it continues to shape the region today.

Notes

1. That assortment of photographs and glass plates is owned by Castle & Cooke, Inc., which now holds property formerly held by the Kern County Land Company. Founded in Hawaii in 1851, the corporation is a major real estate developer and also a leading producer and marketer of fresh fruits and vegetables under the brand name Dole.
2. Record group #3379, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress; also available on microfilm. The Library also has examples of Watkins stereos of Yosemite.
3. More recently, Watkins's photographs were included in "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920" at the

National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian, Washington, D.C. (1991).

4. All of Watkins's plates and prints stored in his San Francisco studio were destroyed in the 1906 earthquake and fire, which effectively destroyed Watkins as well. His health declined precipitously after that date, and he died in 1916 in the Napa State Hospital for the Insane. He had earlier lost his work in 1875 during a financial crisis. It came into the possession of a competing photographer, I. W. Taber, who commenced printing Watkins's views as his own. Watkins's photographs after that date are referred to as "New Series," to distinguish them from the pirated work by Taber.
5. For the best account of Jackson's early years, see Jackson, *Time Exposure* (1940).
6. Among the ways that migrants came to terms with the "inner geography" of their new home was by carrying with them pieces of the past. The most portable of these were place names, which the settlers used to replace existing Indian place names and thus symbolically take possession of new land. It is no surprise to find Watkins later (1884-85) photographing the Oregon landscape near a town called Oneonta Falls. See *Oneonta Gorge*, albumen silver print reproduced in Palmquist (1983, plate 93).

7. Palmquist uses passenger lists and other documentary evidence to show that Watkins traveled west with Huntington. In her Harvard doctoral dissertation, Nanette Sexton uses similar though not necessarily the same evidence to document Watkins's move west via Panama, but she concludes that the trip cannot be precisely documented. If it cannot be definitively proven that Watkins traveled with Huntington, the several scholars who have addressed this question do agree that he did know Huntington, that he and fellow Oneontans did follow him to Sacramento, and that he did go to work for him there. See Palmquist (1983) and Sexton (1982).

8. Huntington Papers, Series IV, Reel 2, microfilm #64, Library of Congress. Huntington spent three months in Panama on his first trip waiting for a steamer to complete his journey. During that period, he walked the 24-mile width of the isthmus twenty times and turned his \$1,200 into \$5,200 through astute buying and selling. His business acumen was already well apparent.

9. Huntington's papers reveal little about his relationship with Watkins. Aside from several dinner party guest lists and such, Watkins does not figure in the extensive correspondence in this collection. Still, the friendship was a long and useful one and merits further scrutiny. For information on Muybridge and Stanford, see "Muybridge's Motion Pictures" (1880).

10. Palmquist 1983, p. 5, and interview with author, 1991. See also Sexton (1982, p. vi and p. 50), who maintains that Watkins worked for James M. Ford, not Vance. There is general agreement, however, that Watkins was already working as a photographer in the San Francisco area when the wet plate process was introduced in 1854.

11. Author's interview with Palmquist, July 9, 1991.

12. Passages of text are mounted above each photograph. I use the word "caption" to refer to the written text with each photograph in order to avoid confusion over the word "text." The photographs themselves are texts here, too. The photographs are grouped by ranch or locality. Each individual photograph in a group is described in six to eight sentences, followed by a much longer overall description. Only the first part of the caption varies with the scene depicted, and the second part is reprinted with each photograph in a group, so there is considerable overlap of material. The lettering in the captions is so small that it is extremely difficult to read in the original and nearly impossible on microfilm. Students of this region would welcome the publication of these written texts.

13. Handwritten drafts of captions can be found at Castle & Cooke, Inc., in Bakersfield. More than one person may have written the captions, but the language is distinctive, as is its style, and Reed's handwritten text completely corresponds in language, style, and content to the captions printed with these photographs.

14. Richard Kern was the topographer who accompanied Captain John W. Gunnison's 38th parallel expedition out of Fort Leavenworth in 1853. Earlier, Kern had accompanied Frémont on his disastrous 1848 expedition (Goetzmann 1966, p. 286).

15. For further reference, see: *Charles Lux et al., Appellants, v. James B. Haggin et al., Respondents,*

Nos. 8587 and 8588 in the Supreme Court of California (1886). On this famous case, Watkins worked for Haggin.

16. Olmsted did know Watkins. Olmsted probably met him before June 1864. In August 1865, as the first commissioner of the Yosemite Commission, he wrote to Watkins and to two painters, asking for advice on ways to preserve and enhance the scenery of Yosemite. There is no record of a reply from Watkins. See Olmsted Papers, Vol. V (1990), pp. 433-444.

17. For further references to the railroad and civilization, see Marx (1964), Barth (1975), Preston (1981), and Danly (1988).

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The following is a sample of one of the captions that accompany the Watkins photographs in the Library of Congress and elsewhere (see Figure 10). It serves as a fine example of the written text that was paired with the visual.

KERN COUNTY PRODUCTS (Watkins Photo No. 287)

KERN COUNTY EXHIBIT.—This beautifully arranged display of fruits, citrus included, cereals, vegetables, in fact a little of everything mother earth can produce, embellished with palms and pampas plumes, is a photograph of Kern County's initial exhibit at the Mechanic's Institute building, Larkin street, San Francisco during the Mechanic's Fair in 1887. The products attracted great attention for their phenomenal size and superior qualities.

KERN COUNTY.—This is the most southern and at the same time largest county in the great San Joaquin valley. The northern boundary of the county is distant from San Francisco nearly 300 miles. The area embraces 8,100 sections or over 5,180,000 acres. Three million acres of the county are designated as the mountain and desert portion, and while it is not at present available for farming purposes, it is rich in gold, silver, coal, oil, lumber, building stone, etc., and considerable is valuable for grazing purposes. The foot hills and high plains may be said to embrace 1,300,000 acres more, and fully three-fourths of this is susceptible of cultivation, and the remainder is pronounced by those engaged in stock raising as the best of pasturage. The remaining portion of the small empire is known as the Kern Valley, so called because it is under the canals fed by the water from that never failing stream, the Kern river, which has its source among the perpetual snows of Mt. Whitney, the highest mountain in the United States. Kern valley, without exception, is one of the richest sections in the fertile and productive State of California, and it is doubtful if in any other portion of the world can be found so large an unbroken body of rich agricultural soil. Kern valley is situated in the dry district of the State, therefore, in order to carry on successfully agricultural and horticultural pursuits, it was found necessary to irrigate. By dint of years of hard work and large expenditures of money, a system of irrigation was completed, which for magnitude, completeness and economy, stands without rival. Over thirty canals, aggregating some three hundred miles in length, besides the distributing ditches have been dug from Kern river, furnishing the life giving fluid that has transformed the barren plains into luxuriant fields of alfalfa, orchards and vineyards, and enabled the rearing of beautiful homes in the midst of lovely gardens where grow the plants of many climes. Besides this vast supply of water from Kern river, the county is situated in a magnificent artesian belt. The limit of the belt is as yet undefined, but it is known to cover a distance of fifty miles north and south with a width of ten to fifteen miles. Over forty wells have been dug, some with the enormous capacity of 2,500,000 gallons of water daily. The principal town in the county is Bakersfield, the county seat. It is situated on the line of the S.P.R.R. and is a rapidly growing town, well supplied with churches, schools and all the advantages to be found in modern towns.

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