

## Water brought life to Corona citrus groves



Thomas Buckley / Special to The Press-Enterprise  
Water pours over the spillway at Railroad Canyon Dam. The discovery of useable water in the 19th century brought citrus growers to Corona.

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Published: August 14, 2010; 06:15 PM

Before the lush, verdant citrus groves stood in Corona, its mesa was desert, covered in cactus. Water was what made the agriculture of Corona possible.

Men from Iowa, including a former governor, bought 12,000 acres of land to develop into a Queen Colony in 1886. The land included an alluvial fan formed by what washed out of the Temescal mountains. The soil was loam, which retained moisture, and was rich in phosphates and humus. It was level, so the land didn't have to be worked. To the north was the Santa Ana River, but a water source closer to the land was needed.

Historian Ted Taylor of the Corona Heritage Park and Museum said that the land the Iowa men bought was nothing to look at.

"It was pretty ugly and desolate. No trees. There was nothing here when they came," he said.

One of the colony founders, R.B. Taylor, secured more land around the mesa and Temescal Canyon 12 miles away. At what is now Sixth Street and Main Street in Corona, Taylor dug a well 140 feet down and hit water.

The Temescal Water Company was formed and brought in water from the canyon and other areas through a system of pipes, wells and distribution systems from Colton, Hemet, the Agua Mansa Indian reserve, Ethanac, Perris, Lake Elsinore, the Railroad Canyon Dam and the Santa Ana Mountain canyons. As citrus crops were planted in Corona, field irrigation systems supplied a steady stream of the life-sustaining water to the trees. Taylor said the Railroad Dam sat across from the community of Alberhill.

The Temescal Water Company built a power plant to supply power to its water pumps. Built about 1901, the power plant supplied electricity to the Chase Plantation in Corona, another part of Corona, and Glen Ivy and Alberhill south of Corona. In 1911, a water pipeline was built to Corona from Glen Ivy. The Corona City Water Company became a public utility by the California Railroad Commission in 1912.

Unexpectedly, in 1920, the water levels in the wells in Ethanac began to fall, and what was left was saline water. At the time, the only water well in Corona was still the first one dug at Sixth and Main streets. The Temescal Water Company dug a well at Third and Joy streets and in 1922, it began to build a dam in the Railroad Canyon to hold almost 13,000 acre feet of runoff from the San Jacinto River.

To build this dam, the water company had to file condemnation suits to secure sites in Railroad Canyon. Litigation soon followed, but the company won its cases in court by 1927 and bought 2,000 acres in the canyon.

In 1928, the Metropolitan Water District was formed by 13 southern California cities to bring Colorado River water west through an aqueduct. For this reason, the Lake Matthews Reservoir was built in 1940. Corona fought being forced into the MWD, as it had plenty of water and believed the Colorado River water was of lower quality. The state Public Utilities Commission declared the Temescal Water Company a public utility in 1959 against its wishes.

The company created a subsidiary to continue its water activities and to add land management, developing almost 6,000 acres of land and leasing 1,400 acres for mining gravel, sand and clay.

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