

“No Water in Nevada?”:
Promotional Campaigns and Aquifer Depletion in Las Vegas, Nevada, 1905-1927

This paper will examine how early-twentieth century boosters drew settlers into the arid Las Vegas Valley. Settlers' activities, in turn, depleted the aquifer that made the valley an attractive settlement location for commercial agriculture. Citing boundless, Edenic opportunity empowered by a presumably unlimited and pure water supply, pamphlets claimed that all varieties of crops could be successfully farmed in the arid valley. When Las Vegas's first building was erected in May, 1905, “there were grandiose ideas of fortunes to be made, and optimism was the mood of the day.” While it is impossible to determine exactly what “pull” factors brought settlers into the Las Vegas Valley, promotional literature, much of which was misleading, clearly played a part in drawing some people into the region, and, by 1927, the city's population and water use outpaced the recharge rate of the local aquifer, disrupting the delicate equilibrium of the arid environment. This paper, using water supply surveys, census data, letters between Union Pacific and Las Vegas power brokers, and promotional literature, will explore what pamphlets claimed, the usefulness of such pamphlets to historians, and how the arrival of new settlers contributed to the continued quest for water in the Las Vegas Valley.

The dishonesty that historians read in sensational promotional pamphlets may be misplaced. In truth, the people and promoters of the Las Vegas Valley believed in their community and environment, even if they presented opportunities beyond those attainable by incoming settlers. Farms had succeeded, industry was growing, and people were arriving. Yes, they may have exaggerated the size of cantaloupes, and they may have minimized the effects of the summer heat or the less-than-ideal water quality, but not all boosters were equally malicious in intent, nor were all settlers equally helpless in confronting their new realities. There was a general faith in Las Vegas' future role as a desert empire.

Instead of seizing on dishonesty, historians should look to the truths within booster material. Las Vegas did grow as promised. Despite a downturn in the early 1920s, Las Vegas was soon expanding its townsite and looking for new sources of water. The courthouse and schools helped legitimate the town as a cultural center, and Fremont Street became the epicenter of a rapidly growing metropolis. The Charleston Peaks provided recreation and escape from the city, and still do. In some ways, belief in an inexhaustible water supply excuses promoters' problematic claims of farmability. Armed with optimism and lack of scientific awareness of the aquifer's health, there was no reason to doubt the potential of Las Vegas. Seeing promotional pamphlets as an extension of Las Vegas' optimism, rather than a trap, this paper will attempt to balance the sanguineness of pamphlets with active work by Las Vegas power brokers to mislead settlers.

Between 1905 and 1927, the Las Vegas Valley outgrew its reputation as an exceptionally wet haven from the desert. Farmers and later gamblers and workers affiliated with the Boulder Dam project all stressed local water resources as the limits of desert homesteading, empowered by the passage of the Enlarged Homestead Act, became readily apparent. As environmental restrictions became clear, the value of Las Vegas shifted from the center of desert farming to America's playground. Promotional materials created this first identity, but the Las Vegas Valley's aridity ensured it would be short-lived.