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"YOU NEED NOT HAVE HAD ANY EXPERIENCE":
Promotion and Water in Las Vegas, Nevada, 1905-1927

On a stifling summer day in 1908, Walter Bracken, hat pulled low over his eyes, watched the heat rise off the desert floor. It was probably not yet noon, but the thermometer read 110˚ and would climb higher yet. Pulling the straps to his overalls around his shoulders, Bracken lumbered from his house on the edges of his Union Pacific company town toward the water pump at the head of his fields. Nearly burning his hand on the valve, Bracken opened the lines and water gushed across his hay field. The water, brackish and contaminated with oil, would not save the year's harvest. Livid, Bracken wrote to his local water company threatening to invalidate his lease if the water was not improved. His crop failed while he waited for a response.[i]

A year later, an agent for both the Union Pacific and its subsidy, the Las Vegas Land and Water Company, sought to ease Las Vegans' concerns. The town's water was adequate, if not exceptional, for growing crops and he would prove it. Needing to allay fears that the valley could not support further development, this land and railroad agent doctored water samples to be sent to the state university's hydrologist. With the many-times-boiled water samples deemed safe, the agent plastered the test results on the post office door, for all to see. That land agent was named Walter Bracken.[ii]

Both Bracken and Las Vegas typify the story of western boosterism in the early twentieth century. Bracken, wearer of many hats, was invested personally as a farmer but also corporately as an extension of the Union Pacific apparatus. Las Vegas, a well-watered hamlet in the East Mojave known for its artesian springs, was to be the next epicenter of western growth.

Citing boundless opportunity empowered by a presumably unlimited and pure water supply, promotional literature claimed that all varieties of crops could be successfully farmed in the arid valley. While it is difficult to determine exactly what factors attracted settlers to the Las Vegas Valley, ubiquitous promotional literature clearly played a part in drawing some people into the region. 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. Early Las Vegas was a victim of its own success, with locals, sometimes playing both farmer and booster, caught in a cycle of promotion, settlement, and depletion.

Nascent Las Vegas was rich with optimism, despite the original townsite auction of May 15, 1905 ending two hours early due to heat. Supplied by three large artesian springs, there was enough water to serve both the Union Pacific, proprietor of the original townsite, and the first settlers drawn into the valley. The Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, passed in an era of belief in envirotechnical expertise through dry farming and providing for 320-acre land claims, energized the settlement of Las Vegas. With government lands surrounding the townsite suddenly opened to low-cost settlement, early Las Vegans sought to draw further investment and settlers into the region.

The passage of the Enlarged Homestead Act came during a unique age of agrarian possibility. Despite John Wesley Powell's *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States*, which called for limited settlement and reclaiming of the West, politicians generally supported wide-scale irrigation and reclamation across the region. With the passage of the Newlands Act (1902), reclamationists such as William Smythe, in *The Conquest of Arid America*, pushed a vision of an idyllic West, funded by the federal government, and filled with yeomanry

and crops. The viability of such projects in the arid West remained to be seen, but that did not stop the Union Pacific Railroad from purchasing land for the creation of a company town with visions of a profitable transport hub for the East Mojave Desert's mining products and the production of a self-sufficient farming community. To this end, prominent Las Vegas businesspeople and railroad agents formed the Las Vegas Promotion Society to produce literature promoting the region. [iii]

Materials produced by the Las Vegas Promotion Society and the later Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce assured potential settlers of the valley's plentiful supply of usable water. Images of water shooting into the air were meant to prove the natural abundance of pure water in the Las Vegas Valley. Four pamphlets, published over two decades, utilized the same gushing picture of the Eglington Well, claiming 600 gallons per minute rushed to the surface. Sensational photos of wells can be found in many early pamphlets from the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, promising "the water comes up under its own power." In one such promotional picture book from 1927, a gushing well, captioned "abundant artesian water supplies the city of Las Vegas," lies front-and-center in the middle page of the booklet. Water's ubiquity, suggested by images of gushing wells, was clear. Las Vegas was no desert – the water's availability, and pictures thereof, attested to this fact.[iv]

With water's availability proven, promotional material also spoke highly of the water's quality. In "Semi-Tropical Nevada: A Region of Fertile Soils and Flowing Wells," a pamphlet published in 1916, authors used bold typeface when writing "Las Vegas artesian water is as pure and sweet as any water in the world, without a trace of unpleasant or injurious minerals." With the water's purity as a developed trend in promotional writing, a pamphlet similar to

"Semi-Tropical Nevada" pointed to the high-quality water available for the valley's residents, claiming, "of all its advantages, probably the greatest blessing the City of Las Vegas enjoys is its supply of pure spring water piped directly from its source without exposure to any kind of contamination. The water is most agreeable to the taste and is entirely free from any harmful minerals." Even further, pamphlets claimed that the water rising from the underground aquifer surfaced at the preferred temperature for successful irrigation. With water, all signs of profitability pointed to the Las Vegas Valley. [v]

Supplied good, plentiful water, settlers could expect profitable returns and pleasant lives from working desert lands. Pamphlets claimed anything and everything could be grown in the Las Vegas Valley. Alfalfa, corn, sorghums, green beans, peach orchards, watermelons: all guaranteed profit. Likewise, secure livings could be earned by raising chickens, fattening cattle, or rearing ponies from as away as Cache Valley, UT or Los Angeles. Extolling Las Vegas' proximity to the Charleston Mountains, its newly constructed schools, and its array of churches and fraternal organizations, promoters framed Las Vegas as a natural, cultural, and agricultural paradise.[vi]

Las Vegas offered all that a settler could ever need. There was pure and plentiful water for crops. There was cheap land to be had, and trains to carry the products of one's labor. The mountains surrounding the valley offered unlimited recreation and potential for power production. The town itself was a cultured metropolis, offering schools, churches, and a hospital. The older ranchers were quick to share their goods and knowledge, and the land agreeable. In wishing their valley to be "settled with progressive people," promoters of Las Vegas offered pamphlet readers the world. Unfortunately for both settlers and the local

aquifer, more people would buy into the promise of the Las Vegas Valley than local hydrology could support. [vii]

Two major issues undercut Las Vegas' potential: the water was neither as pure nor as available as promised. In 1909, Walter Bracken kept secret the true hydrology of the valley. By boiling samples before sending them to the hydrology lab at the University of Nevada at Reno, Bracken ensured the water analysist's conclusion that the valley was underlain with water "excellent for domestic, and as well, general industrial purposes." Despite Bracken's own concerns and investment in local agriculture, he worked to deceive the public, sending the analysis of the doctored water to the local paper, the *Las Vegas Age*, and posting the results on the post office door. All was not fine in the Las Vegas Valley.

In 1923, with both company coffers and town waterlines running dry, Bracken similarly worked to obscure Las Vegas' limited water supply, to fuel further investment and settlement into the area. Mayor Pro Tempore W.H. Dentner wrote to Bracken on March 20, 1923, outlining the "vital and pressing" need for more water lines to be opened to serve the ever-increasing number of new immigrants to the valley. Blaming the "limited supply of water" on overuse by families, Bracken acknowledged the precarious situation facing Las Vegas. However, always the booster, Bracken remained focused on the future growth of Las Vegas, seeing water's use as central to beautifying the city: "we are making no request of curtailment of this [overuse], as we are very desirous of seeing the town beautified by lawns, trees, and shrubbery." Bracken worked to meet the expectation created by earlier pamphlets, that the homes of Las Vegas would all be hidden under large trees, an expectation naturally at odds with the arid

environment. However, despite his belief in Las Vegas' ascendancy, Bracken understood that such deliverance would be short lived.[viii]

Some settlers, facing realities disparate from their expectations, must have wondered who had a hand in producing pamphlets. The Promotion Society's motto, "nothing to sell," was dishonest. Salesmen they were, selling a dream of a farming Eden, of a modern metropolis in the desert, and of success limited only by the work ethic of the settler. The dream proved illusory, despite Walter Bracken's best efforts, and newly arrived Las Vegans had to measure their own limits of perseverance in the desert.[ix]

None of this is to say that Las Vegas boosters were wholly malicious in intent. Best outlined by David Wrobel in *Promised Lands*, the division between the internal booster, motivated by romance from "becoming West" and the success of the community in which it lived, and the external booster, motivated by profit, is especially muddled in early Las Vegas. Walter J. Bracken's multiple roles as Union Pacific agent, Las Vegas Land and Water Company executive, and local farmer expose how the tension between local and external boosters obscures the motivations behind promoters of the Las Vegas valley. [x]

Bracken embodied the contradictions of desert settlement. Despite being a local resident with a vested interest in farming, Bracken called for the continued misuse of water for the beautification of the city. In the midst of the desert, he faced a situational quagmire: Bracken could only ensure the future of his city by exhausting the local water supply. To guarantee future investment, Las Vegas needed to maintain its façade as the oasis in the desert, even at the cost of long-term aquifer stability. Perhaps Bracken looked optimistically toward the Boulder Dam Project, but its construction was not yet guaranteed. Regardless,

Walter Bracken committed the city's last drops to shade trees along Fremont Street. While the tension between external and internal goals could be embodied by one man, it was less easily read in promotional literature, all of which claimed with sanguinity that the Las Vegas Valley was the place to be.

Whether the boosters were dishonest or quixotic, the Las Vegas Valley suffered from its own success. The four-fold increase in population between 1909 and 1927 imperiled Las Vegas' greatest assets, its springs and accessible groundwater. According to one hydrologist, by 1924, "the overdraft of the [aquifer] was estimated at close to 25,000-acre feet per year," meaning Las Vegans were withdrawing twice the water that was being recharged each year. Within a decade, the water table would drop up to 100 feet in some parts of the valley. From its earliest years, Las Vegas needed more water. It eventually arrived with the completion of the Boulder Dam Project, pushing anxieties of wilting crops and dry creek beds onto another day.[xi]

The Las Vegas Valley is a dry place. Once known for its artesian springs, the valley has outgrown the promises of early promotional material. While power brokers in early twentieth century Las Vegas tried to obscure the reality of the arid environment, historians benefit from promotional documents nonetheless, as they reflect hopefulness during the early days of America's driest city. Neither hero nor villain, Walter Bracken embodied the contradictions of promoting desert settlement. Las Vegans' optimism justified the uncontrolled mining of water in the Las Vegas Valley, a prerequisite for commercial farming in the area, but also the cause of future aquifer depletion and one of the justifications for the later Boulder Dam project. Promising good, cheap land, unique cultural amenities, and limitless profitability, boosters sold their readers a hopeful vision at once both true and misleading.[xii]

NOTES:

[i] Walter R. Bracken to C.O. Whittemore (Los Angeles), Letter, 17 January 1908, Box 1, Folder 14, San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad Collection, UNLV Special Collections; John F. Cahlan and Florence Lee Jones, *Water: A History of Las Vegas*, Vol. 1 (Las Vegas, NV: Las Vegas Valley Water District, 1975), 45–6. For biographies of early commissioners, see "John Bunker," *Clark County, Nevada*, 25 May 2012, http://www.clarkcountynv.gov/parks/Documents/centennial/commissioners/commissioner-j-bunker.pdf; "William Haight Bradley," *Clark County, Nevada*, 25 May 2012, http://www.clarkcountynv.gov/parks/Documents/centennial/commissioners/commissioner-w-h-bradley.pdf; "Samuel Wells," *Clark County, Nevada*, 25 May 2012, <http://www.clarkcountynv.gov/parks/Documents/centennial/commissioners/commissioner-s-wells.pdf; "William E. Hawkins," *Clark County, Nevada*, 25 May 2012, http://www.clarkcountynv.gov/parks/Documents/centennial/commissioners/commissioner-hawkins.pdf; Harry O. Geren, "Nevada Section: Reno, Nevada, June, 1908," *Climatological Service of the Weather Bureau* 22, no. 6 (June 1908): 43.

[ii] Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 1914, UNLV Special Collections, F.849, L.35, L.24; H.I. Bettis to Governor J.G. Scrugham, Letter, 1 April 1923, MS-00397, W 23-3-3, Union Pacific Railroad Manuscript Collection, UNLV Special Collections; Cahlan and Jones, *Water,* 42–5.

[iii] Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S. Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), *xii*, 9–15; U.S. Congress, House, *Reclamation Act/Newlands Act of 1902*, HR1093, 57th Congress, 1st sess., introduced in House 17 June 1902, http://grcahistory.org/wpcontent/uploads/K12_pdfs/Damming%20Controversy/Newlands%20Act%20Text.pdf. The Newlands Act was named for the legislation's sponsor in the House of Representatives, Francis G. Newlands of Nevada. For more on the passage on the Enlarged Homestead Act, see Mont. H Saunderson, *Western Land and Water Use* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950), 78. For development of culture of scientific agriculture, see Walter Nugent, *Progressivism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 56, and John Whiteclay Chambers II, *The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 199–200. For Powell, the rationalizing of western space and usage, limitations of western reclamation, and the role of government in promoting reclamation projects, see Wallace Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (New York: Penguin, 1954), 300–16, and John Wesley Powell, *Report on the Lands of the Arid Region of the United States*, 2nd ed. (Washington: Govt. print. off., 1879). For coverage of the need of cooperative activity for successful western settlement, see David Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to the New Deal* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 78. For turn-of-the-century anticipation of the triumph of envirotechnical expertise, see William E. Smythe, *Conquest of Arid America*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1907). For the disconnect between promises of homesteads and environmental reality of the arid West, see Donald Worster, *A River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 483, 528–30. For more on the scale of the Newlands Reclamation Act's undertaking, see Donald J. Pisani, *Water and the American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 1–31. The Progressive Era and its homestead laws have a complicated historiography with much left up to debate. For further discussion of Progressive Era belief in envirotechnical expertise, see Sara Gregg, "Imagining Opportunity: The 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act and the Battle over the Public Domain," *Western Historical Quarterly* 50 (Autumn 2019): 262–3. For context on the balance between Gifford Pinchot-style best-use conservation and preservation, see David Wrobel, *America's West: A History, 1890-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 49. For the role of the progressive movement within American history and the difficult nature of the term "progressive," see William Deverell and Tom Sitton, *California Progressivism Revisited* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1–3, 10. There is much to be said about dry farming, but early twentieth century belief in the practice was best stated by Dr. V.T. Cooke in U.S. Congress, House, Committee on the Public Lands, *Increasing Size of Homestead Entries: Hearing Before the Committee on the Public Lands*, 60th

Cong. 11th sess., 1908. It is worth noting that Dr. Cooke would describe Las Vegas, receiving less than 12 inches of rain per annum, as a desert and an inappropriate location to practice dry farming.

[iv] "Las Vegas, Nevada: Where Farming Pays," Pamphlet, 1913, p. 10, Vertical Stacks: Las Vegas–Agriculture–Farming, Cahlan Research Library Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas; "Semi-Tropical Nevada: A Region of Fertile Soils and Flowing Wells," Pamphlet, c. 1916, permanent gallery: "Ranching in Nevada," Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas; "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley," 1909, Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas, permanent gallery: "Ranching in Nevada"; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada," 1927, UNLV Special Collections, F.849, L.35, L.245; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada (1914)." It is worth noting that there were two pamphlets entitled "Las Vegas and Clark County," one published in 1914 and the latter, a picture booklet, in 1927; Boosters, or promoters of a local area, came from many backgrounds and interests but all shared the goal of bringing more people into the Valley. This group of boosters included, but was not limited to, railroad company representatives, local chambers of commerce and promotion societies, ranchers wanting to sell or divide up their plots, and, of course, the national government's land agents seeking to fill homestead plots for the development of previously useless land for the benefit of reaching towards a Jeffersonian ideal of a landed nation filled and tilled by a yeomanry.

[v] "Semi-Tropic Nevada," 11, 12; "Las Vegas and Clark County (1927)," 13–5; "Las Vegas and Clark County (1914)."

[vi] "Semi-Tropic Nevada," 17–24; "Where Farming Pays," 15–21; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada (1914),"8–9.

[vii] "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley".

[viii] Walter R. Bracken (Las Vegas) to W.H. Dentner (Las Vegas), Letter, 26 March 1923, Box 13, Folder W23-3-3 LVL&WC, Union Pacific Railroad Manuscript Collection, UNLV Special Collections; Walter R. Bracken (Las Vegas) to W.H. Dentner (Las Vegas), Letter, 20 March 1923, Box 13, Folder W23-3-3 LVL&WC, Union Pacific Railroad Manuscript Collection, UNLV Special Collections; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada (1914)," 12; "Where Farming Pays," 28.

[ix] "Where Farming Pays," 34; "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley".

[x] David Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 6–7; The subject of "becoming West," when a settler in a region becomes a regional institution, I leave to other scholars.

[xi] Glenn T. Malmberg, "Available Water Supply of Las Vegas Ground-Water Basin Nevada," in *Geological Survey Water-Supply Paper 1780* (Washington: United States Govt. Printing Office, 1965), 36–58; Cahlan and Jones, 3–5; "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley"; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada (1927)." These population statistics are from the promotional pamphlets and may lack absolute accuracy, as promoters often conflated county and city populations so as to make the city seem more significant than it may have been. The 1920 census listed Las Vegas' population as 2,304, per Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas*, 37.

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