1-1-1994

The River Stops Here

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Over the past twenty-five years, the field of environmental law has grown at an explosive rate, with Congress and state legislatures enacting countless laws, and environmental confrontations taking center stage in courtrooms across the country. Before the advent of this modern legal framework, however, battles over environmental issues were fought instead in the political arena. The River Stops Here is the fascinating story of one such political struggle from the 1960's.

Round Valley is located 150 miles north of San Francisco among the peaks and canyons surrounding the Middle Fork of the Eel River. It is a thirty-square-mile broad valley with a flat floor which contains farms, ranches, and an American Indian reservation.

In 1967, the State of California announced its plan to construct the Dos Rios Dam, which would completely flood the valley and create a reservoir to provide water for Southern California. Richard Wilson, a wealthy rancher well-connected in Southern California society, had transplanted his family to Round Valley. He never considered himself an activist or a hero, but his love of the land compelled him to fight back, and soon he became both.

In the era before modern environmental laws, this fight could only take the form of a political struggle. Indeed, Wilson and his followers took on corporate farmers, developers, legislators, the State Director of Water Resources, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and, ultimately, the Governor of California. The unlikely hero found an unlikely ally in then-Governor Ronald Reagan, who finally blocked the project to flood the valley.

The River Stops Here is the story of unique man waging a common battle to save his beloved valley. Given the lack of legal recourse, arguably only an individual with Wilson's mixed heritage—one of his grandparents was a Cree—could have successfully waged this battle. Wilson's society connections gave him the financial, political, and societal clout to mount a serious attack, while his Native American blood gave him his deep-rooted love of the land.

The chapters excerpted here recount Richard Wilson's ancestry and provide two different historical perspectives of the development of the American West.

RICHARD WILSON came back over the pass in the early morning. The nights had recently turned cool, and a thick white fog had settled in the valley. It lay below him now, completely obscuring the valley floor and reaching out into the draws where the creeks flowed in and where Mill Creek flowed out to the Eel. The fog exactly modeled the lake that the Corps intended to create. It had an undeniable beauty of its own, and Richard almost experienced a sense of relief, imagining the slate wiped clean.

He looked down on this "ghost of Covelo to come" and wondered just who and what he was trying to save. A sly and obdurate bunch of ranchers, "rolling right along" in their easy, shortsighted way. A few hundred Native Americans—most of them "good Indians" available to do the menial jobs, living in a ghetto. The whole place reeked of evil blood and villainy. Maybe it should all be washed away.

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It would not be hard to find those who agreed. The idea had great appeal to a frontier mentality, always ready to solve its problems by leaving them behind and moving on. In that view of progress, the land was just Play-Doh for the expression of man's ego.

A hundred years of tumultuous history had been made in this valley—a hundred years of struggle for survival and domination, of bitter conflict between two races and cultures. Then the engineers and planners come along. "Too bad," they say, "It didn't work out. Look at those depressed Indians living on welfare among their heaps of junked cars. Look at those dejected ranchers and shopkeepers, cut off from the mainstream of our dynamic society. Let's do them a favor; wash it all out and start again."

Easily said. Too easily done. What does history mean to them? What do they know about the slow piecing together of lives and relationships, the tentative triumphs of human feeling over prejudice, the gradual intermingling of color and culture by marriage and friendship that may eventually bring this society through to a better solution? How many hundreds of years did it take those oaks to establish their roots and grow to maturity? Why should a human community grow any faster?

This fine valley, which had attracted men of greedy and violent natures in the past would draw civilized and constructive people in the future. All the great human cultures, he reflected, were raised over bloodshed and tyranny. The past could not be obliterated. It had to be understood, absorbed, and transcended. Confronting the dam, Richard had come to realize that this was true of his own history, too.

Well, if the past could not be expunged, it could be made to work for him. There were elements in his family history that had brought him to this point. As he contemplated the actions he would have to take and the resources he would have to draw upon, the significance of that history gradually became more apparent. The tide of epic events that had brought his family across the continent—events in which they had played a significant role—had left him after all with an inheritance he could use. There was money, quite a lot of it, but that came mainly through his father's second marriage, and from his wife's family. In any case, though money was certainly useful, a personal fortune could never begin to match the resources of the establishment he was preparing to challenge. No, the truly valuable inheritance was the network he had been born into, the political atmosphere he had breathed in since childhood, his familiarity with the movers and shakers of Southern California.

Like his father, he had rather despised the sleazy compromises and accommodations of that world. The unlikely life he was leading as a back-country rancher was a protest and an attempt to free himself from the corruptness of it. Now that same world of relentless progress, which he more often described as blind greed, was reaching out to engulf him. There was no escaping it, it seemed, and as he realized how well his past had equipped him to fight this fight and turn this tide, he saw it more clearly as his destiny.

As for Susan, he knew that her love for the world they had chosen was if anything even fiercer and more uncompromising than Richard's. There was never any doubt that she would support his fight, to the finish. Already there were indications of the trouble that lay ahead. Some people in the valley were angry with the Wilsons' interference. In a valley accustomed to rivalries and feuds, they were quick to take sides, and the poison would soon spread into the clubs, the women's groups, and the schools. Alex, Chris, and Marjo would suffer, too, and all the more so for not knowing why. It was a hard prospect, but Susan did not falter. It was the despoliation that got to her. She was outraged that a government could contemplate such an act of vandalism.

"It's wrong, Rich," she said. "They can't be allowed to come in here and impose this thing on us. Ripping up these wonderful trees, destroying such a beautiful valley. You will have to fight it. No one else could do it so well. Thank goodness we have the strength and the means to try," and she undoubtedly felt that it was the strength of their mutual faith that would help them through.

Dams have been opposed before, but it is unlikely that a private citizen ever set himself up to defeat such powerful vested interests as these and, at the same time, to reverse the central policy of a great state. A megalomaniac or a fanatic could imagine that he might manage such an upheaval unaided, but Wilson was neither of those. However, he did carry within him the kind of quiet arrogance that the same world of relentless progress, which he more often described as blind greed, was reaching out to engulf him. There was no escaping it, it seemed, and as he realized how well his past had equipped him to fight this fight and turn this tide, he saw it more clearly as his destiny.

What made Wilson such a formidable opponent
was that he combined within himself elements from both of the great rival attitudes that have shaped American behavior throughout its history, and he had sympathy for both. In the family strands that wove him, the twin motives of conservation and exploitation were powerfully present.

There were some characteristics that he appeared to inherit from both sides. A particular fearlessness and a devotion to work were qualities that Wilson had in abundance. Otherwise it was not a harmonious combination. To indulge the one side of his nature, he had to forswear the other, and generally they warred within him, making him a complex and often inscrutable figure.

The strongest influence on his early life was that of his father, Dr. John Cree Wilson. The middle name records an ancient family connection with the Cree Indians, part of the Algonquin family of Indian nations who inhabited the northeastern forests of America. From his father Richard Wilson inherited a respect for nature, a love of solitude, a compassion for people and creatures, an uncompromising integrity, and three thousand acres in the mountains above Round Valley.

On his mother's side he was connected to a rather different man, her uncle, Angus, who went, if not from rags, then certainly from britches to riches, and took his brothers with him. His life began, curiously enough, in that same Algonquin territory, just north of the St. Lawrence River. Later it exemplified, with almost painful accuracy, America's raucous lurch into the industrial age. The rise from narrow, rural austerity, the brutally hard labor, the rootless wanderings across the continent, the dogged persistence supported by a gradually forming grasp of the managerial magic that made profits, the progress from laborer to boss to grand entrepreneur to city father, public recognition, florid Victorian tributes, and the final days of opulence tinged with an inescapable suspicion of melancholy—all this brought Wilson a background of wealth and standing among the "old" families of Southern California. Through them he understood how things are done.

The events that shaped and prepared him were the same as those that had brought the people of California to this point of absurdity—to the point of enthusiastically and blindly trashing the very assets that had drawn most of them there in the first place. Round Valley, in this argument, was but a symbol. Everywhere in California the environment was under attack: The rivers, the beaches, the forests, the soil, and the very air were all being degraded in the effort to sustain the growth of its cities and the prosperity of its industries.

The stories of these two men, Angus Grant and John Cree Wilson, and of the times they lived in, explain not only how the water lobby became such an apparently invincible force but also how Richard Wilson acquired the strength and the skill to oppose it.

ANGUS GRANT was raised on a hundred-acre farm near Williamstown, in the Canadian province of Ontario, close to the St. Lawrence river and the U.S. border. His father, Archibald, Richard Wilson's great-grandfather, was given the land in its virgin state as a "concession" from the British government. Taming it consumed his life, and he certainly could not have imagined that it would launch his sons into a quite different career.

In that climate a farmer needed sturdy buildings to protect animals, feed, supplies, and equipment, as well as his own family. Archibald's buildings were founded on rock quarried from his own land, and framed with timber cleared from his own fields. He devoted the days of his young manhood to transforming his land into a farm, and on many of those days he, too, must have been as wet and cold as the weather. By the time he was fifty-six years old rheumatism had crippled him so badly that physical labor was no longer possible, and he could only walk with the aid of two canes.

Of his nine children the first five were daughters, and he was fifty-three before his first son, Angus, was old enough, at fourteen, to be put in the farm. By then the truly backbreaking work had been accomplished. For Angus, growing up to see his father laboring alone and in increasing discomfort, the emotional pressure must have been great. Too great perhaps. Only two years after he was judged old enough to do the work, he passed the burden on to his younger brother Daniel, and left the farm to cross the border and seek his fortune elsewhere. He never farmed again.

Angus Grant grew up during America's first Space Age, the space then being lateral rather than vertical, and its appeal to the adventurous and discontented spirit can only be imagined: it would be as if it were possible for an ingenious person today to ride a backyard rocket in search of treasure on the moon. When Angus left home, the opening up of the West by the gold rush was still recent news, creating a distant focus of tremendous attraction to ambitious men. Once the pull had overcome his
family ties and expectations, it drew him, inevitably, west. The year was 1859, and America was on the brink of the cataclysmic violence of the Civil War.

The lure of the West and the growth of the railroads must have been common topics of conversation. Even though the easy gold was gone, gold was not the only treasure. What was in the wind, the sense of the time, was that a person might turn almost anything to account. What had seemed previously to be merely the furniture and fixtures of nature—the trees and rivers and mountains—could now be seen as lumber, irrigation, and ore. There was so much more to be gained from exploiting these resources rather than clinging to the old, agrarian ways, and yet it took an almost reckless discontent to reject the traditions and values of generations of farmers—and to reject the very land itself, from which all prosperity flowed.

Age sixteen and straight off the farm, Angus could not have known much about the world, yet news of great doings "out there" must have filtered through. Many men had begun as laborers and made fortunes in lumber. Perhaps Angus had heard these stories. In any case that's where he decided to try his luck.

Of all the resources that the North American continent yielded to its new conquerors, there is no doubt that timber was the greatest in quantity, the most valuable, and the most heavily exploited. Trees paved the way for the conquest of North America, figuratively and, in terms of the railroads, literally. All along the Atlantic seaboard, but particularly in the North, huge forests of hard and soft woods were laid low. They were cut for fuel, for construction, and for export, and they laid the basis for great industrial enterprises. By the 1850s the forests in and around the state of Maine were in decline, and the mill owners moved west across the Appalachian Mountains where new, vast expanses of virgin white pine awaited them in Michigan, on the shores of the Great Lakes.

The pace of exploitation accelerated, and thousands of square miles of forest were cleared and converted to agriculture in three decades. Under the Homestead Act a settler could acquire 160 acres for $1.25 an acre. Lumber companies, big and small, could afford to pay the $1.25 just for the timber, leaving the land free to the homesteader.

As young Angus made his way to the forests to try his luck, one can only imagine the wonders and temptations he encountered on the way, but there is nothing of that, nor of the rambunctious life of the loggers in the few stories he told his son. Nothing of the dangers and excitement of felling those great trees and of the "river hogs" who floated them downstream, of the curious Michigan Logging Wheel, with its ten-foot-high steel wheels, used for transporting logs, of the camp fiddlers, the Jigs, and the tales of Paul Bunyan and his blue ox Babe that delighted the "shanty boys," as lumberjacks were first called.

Maybe he took no part in that legendary life, but more probably he was not much of a reveler and even less of a sentimentalist. As his son wrote later, "My father was not one to talk of his experiences." All we know is that he stayed there six years, acquired the skills of a carpenter, and then moved on westward. In 1865 he was in the Badlands of the Dakotas where, again according to his son, "there was mining business." This by no means implies a change of trade, since the saw was as important to mining as the pick. All the mine shafts and galleries had to be framed and supported with lumber, and some very fancy carpentry was involved in holding open some of them, particularly where vertical seams were involved. So perhaps it is not surprising to find him, a little later, in 1868, even farther west at Lake Tahoe, "with a contract to log for the Comstock."

The Comstock lode gave birth to a number of mines whose names are synonymous with legendary wealth. Yellow Jacket, Ophir, Best and Belcher, Gould, and Curry, were just a few. Virginia City, which housed the miners and catered to them, the Virginia and Truckee Railroad, which carried the ore to the mills on the Carson River, the immense and wide-ranging timber industry that Grant was a small part of, "were all the direct and unavoidable result of the prospecting, in 1859...of four boozy and disreputable scoundrels who found the world-shaking Comstock Lode."

The luscious prose of Lucius Beebe describes it well: "They came by the roaring thousands, on mule back and afoot, a few in Concord coaches over the old grade by Hangtown and Strawberry and Carson City: the wicked and the willful, the soiled and solvent, the gyps and the gunmen, the splendid strumpets and blowzy madames, the gamblers, the newspaper reporters, kings and clowns. Wells Fargo came, the Bank of California came and, eventually the railroad came...."

"In the tumultuous decade that followed... Virginia had exploded into a city of 20,000 wildly irresponsible inhabitants, and the fame of its wicked ways, its continued uproar and production of stupefying wealth were celebrated throughout the
civilized world.

"San Francisco was being built and financed by the Comstock. Its vast industrial enterprises, its seemingly impregnable Bank of California, its fantastic Palace Hotel, its cable cars, sea port and the Nob Hill mansions of its ever-crescent colony of millionaires were all being financed by the profits from...[the]...fabled mines of Virginia, Gold Hill and Silver City."

Water and timber had always been vital elements in the pursuit of gold and silver. The first miners on the western slopes of the Sierras worked directly in the streambeds, panning for gold, but when those beds were exhausted, miners moved from "wet diggings" to "dry diggings" far from the rivers, and water was diverted in great quantities to pan the dirt. At this point the flumes came into their own with chutes built of wood and carried over rough terrain on timber trestles. They could deliver considerable quantities of water over increasing distances, and at high pressure. It was not long before miners realized they could use the water itself to do the digging for them. It was called hydraulic mining, and by now, of course, the grizzled prospector of a few years back had given way to big companies able to finance this sort of technology.

One company alone built more than seven hundred miles of flumes and tunnels to carry water to the gold-bearing mountainsides. It was fired at the earth through huge brass nozzles—at a roughly estimated rate of seventy-two million gallons a day. Every loose particle was swept away to expose the naked skeleton of the mountain. A small area of rock has been maintained in this condition as a museum exhibit at Columbia, near Sonora, and for some it holds the same obscene fascination as the buffalo carcasses that were skinned and abandoned by the thousands to glisten and rot on the plains.

While the Comstock was under way, the need for timber was always paramount. Mark Twain's western counterpart, Dan De Quille, left a dramatic account of this nineteenth-century ecological disaster. Saying that Comstock "may truthfully be said to be the tomb of the forests of the Sierras," he adds that, "it is going to make sad work, ere long, of the magnificent ravines and water courses. Before long, Angus knew where his best prospects lay. He was already acquainted with two of the three richest sources of wealth of the age, timber and minerals. It was the third—the railroad—that finally took him to his destination.

For the next ten years, according to a few surviving accounts, he moved from one contract to another, back and forth across the Rockies. The first contract after he left Tahoe was to build railroad bridges in the vicinity of Kansas City. By now he must have mastered the difficult art of bidding, and bringing his men and materials together at the right time, in unpredictable circumstances and for the least cost. The men were a rough bunch. Managing them needed nerve, cunning, and a strong presence, and he evidently had all three, for he did well.

With the Civil War over and railroad building booming, the rush to the West was accelerating.
This new population was, broadly speaking, of two kinds. There were the new immigrants flooding into America, those whom Europe had treated badly. They might cling to the languages and traditions of their villages, but as for the broader culture of Europe, they wanted none of it. European society was rigid and unresponsive. Things might be tough in America, as bad in their way as anything to be endured in Europe, but at least they didn’t have to suffer the intolerable weight of a rigid class system.

Thirty years earlier, de Tocqueville observed that American manufacturers were the harshest he had ever encountered, but their saving grace, in his eyes, was that they had no tendency to become an aristocracy. They were interested only in making money, and they could treat their workers badly because there was always a frontier open and waiting for those who would not endure it. The West was a safety valve for industrial discontent, constantly touted in print and in rhetoric, and millions headed west with the hope of one day owning their own farms.

Their vision was a touching blend of nostalgia and wishful thinking, which has come to be known as the myth of the garden. From the earliest days Europeans held two antithetical views of America. Some saw it as a savage and repellent wasteland, others as a paradise. Naturally the version that triumphed was the dream of America as a latter-day Garden of Eden, where the human race would be cleansed and restored to grace, and this beautiful promise, trumpeted forth in the speeches of the early days, was to be reproduced just as well in the new territories of the west as in the Ohio Valley.

"While there are uncounted millions of acres of fertile and unoccupied land, where farmers can rear their families in peace, plenty, and privacy, under the guardian genius of our laws, we hope that farms will continue to spread to the bases of the Rocky Mountains," said the Western Monthly Review in July of 1827.

And appealing to their sense of destiny Cyrus L. Dunham explained the purpose of family farming as he spoke for the Homestead bill in Indiana in 1862: "I believe, Mr. Chairman, that we are placed here for a wise and glorious purpose—to restore poor downtrodden humanity to its long lost dignity; to overthrow despots, and shed abroad the genial influence of freedom...."

But for many of those whose families had already established themselves in the East, these sentiments had a hollow ring after the Civil War. That war, as brutal as any ever fought, led to a moral collapse and cynicism felt specially by men of Angus Grant’s generation, men with whom Angus had to work and compete. The pursuit of material wealth had become for them the most sensible, even the only worthwhile occupation. Many of them were unscrupulous, even savage in their determination to win against what they considered a hostile world.

Some historians have suggested that the ravages of the Civil War robbed American society of a vital link in its development. Angus Grant’s “gilded generation” struck gold and oil, built railroads, skyscrapers and fortunes, or died in the attempt. Following them there should have arisen another generation capable of transforming this raw wealth and energy into substantial civic achievements. Instead, the doctrine of individual aggrandizement roared on into the twentieth century.

There is little doubt that what enabled America to keep its capitalism raw was the immense balance of natural resources that remained to be exploited. It was those resources, much more than any intrinsic American virtue, that kept Americans “free.”

As Henry Nash Smith wrote in Virgin Lands: “the character of the American Empire was defined [in the 1880s] not by streams of influence out of the past, not by cultural tradition, nor by its place in a world community, but by a relation between man and nature—or rather, even more narrowly, between American man and the American West....” This relation was thought of as unvaryingly fortunate. The myths, of the garden and of the empire had both affirmed a doctrine of progress, of gigantic economic development...."

The myth of the garden was given a boost by the Homestead Act. An area of 160 acres—a quarter of a square mile—was fixed on as a reasonable size to support a family, and homesteaders could acquire it simply by living and working on it for five years. There was a general belief that millions of happy homesteaders took advantage of it. The truth is different.

The available land was all in the West, that is to say in areas where some form of irrigation would be necessary. The act was passed into law in 1862. By 1890 (the year when the West was generally considered to have been settled) the U.S. population had increased by thirty million. The number of homesteads “perfected” was a mere 372,659. During the following ten years, drought and financial crisis drove many of even this small number off their lands and forced them, instead, to work for big proprietors or to rent farms where the cost of irrigation...
work had already been covered and where markets were available. Yet most Americans who were not directly confronted by these facts continued to believe that the West was being settled with small, family-owned farms.

In an attempt to improve matters, Congress passed the Desert Land Act in 1877. The idea this time was that if you could put down twenty-five cents an acre and a promise to irrigate, you could have a square mile of public land. Three years later, with proof that you had brought water to the land plus another dollar per acre, the land was yours.

The Desert Land Act, like the Homestead Act, did little to improve the chances of the family farm. There are stories of men emptying a bucket of water on their land in front of a witness who would then swear he had seen the land irrigated. Cattlemen assembled great spreads by assigning their ranch hands as "dummies" to each collect his square mile. One notorious profiteer was James Ben Ali Haggin, who later played a significant role in California water development. Haggin owed the exotic part of his name to the fact that his father had married a Turkish woman. He was a colorful tycoon but not, by all accounts, comfortable to be around. Gertrude Atherton, who saw him frequently in the salons of San Francisco, said "he always entered a room as if he hated someone." By manipulations and forgeries, he and his associates Lloyd Tevis and W. Carr, created what may have been "the greatest farm in the world" in Kern County at the southern end of the San Joaquin Valley. Haggin did, in fact, irrigate his land and make it productive, proving, as he himself proclaimed at the time, that the job could only be done properly over a large area with considerable capital.

Other operators on a giant scale, such as Lloyd Tevis and Henry Miller, were quick to teach the same lesson, followed by Jim Boswell, Russell Giffen, and Fred Salyer. The gamble to win in the West was a desperate one, and not many succeeded, but those who did discovered that once they had accumulated some money, the prospects for making more were unlimited. California, the last frontier, attracted bold refugees from the East by celebrating individuality and self-reliance but, paradoxically, it has been dominated from the start by large corporations.

This situation caused Henry George, an eloquent defender of the poor and disinherited in California, to protest in 1871 that "concentration is the law of the time." Far from land holdings being broken up, old land ownerships were being combined, new land was being monopolized. Cities were swallowing up little towns. "A thousand little dealers become the clerks and shopmen of the proprietor of the marble-fronted palace..."

In a harsh judgment of the prospects for small farmers, he went on to say: "Of the political tendency of our land policy it is hardly necessary to speak. To say that the land of a country shall be owned by a small class, is to say that a class shall rule it; to say—which is the same thing—that the people of a country shall consist of the very rich and the very poor, is to say that Republicanism is impossible."

Congress was forced to make yet another attempt to remedy the situation in 1902, when President Theodore Roosevelt signed the National Reclamation Act. Under it, the government was to use money raised by the sale of western lands to build irrigation projects on public land. This federally subsidized water would be delivered to worthy homesteaders with farms not exceeding 160 acres per family. Over a ten-year period they were supposed to reimburse the federal reclamation fund for the cost of the irrigation works. Donald Worster describes how once again the purpose of the act was frustrated.

The original intent...had been that the federal government would mainly concentrate its reclamation efforts on the public domain. After a site had been selected, homesteaders would file on their free claims and reside on them for the standard five years required to get title, while enjoying the water gurgling in ditches through their fields. It did not work that way at all. The appearance of Service engineers and a construction crew in an area touched off a frenzied rush of speculators. They grabbed up the free homesteads, intending not to settle there but to sell them a few years later, whenever the water arrived, at a stiff price to latecomers.... Even more unexpected was how much reclamation was done on the private, not the public domain. By 1910 there were thirty projects in the works, and some of them had not a single acre of public land. Altogether, they included 1,199,926 acres of public land and 1,402,702 acres of private property. By and large federalization worked to enrich speculators and enhance the holdings of established owners, not to furnish new homes for homeless folks from overcrowded cities.
The service that did this work later became known as the Bureau of Reclamation. Throughout its existence it has had the impossible job of reconciling the agrarian dream with the realities of western agriculture and a hydraulic society. With a brief to carry out irrigation works that were both useful and profitable, it was dogged by its failure to impose acreage limitations, and by a tendency to do favors to the rich. Whatever sermons were being preached in Washington and in the state capitals, it seemed that when man confronted the West there was only one way to go, and that was the way of the wild—survival of the fittest and largest. It was a rule that certainly governed the progress of Angus Grant. After he finished up in Kansas there was another railroad contract in California, and some more mining business. Then in 1878 he went to work for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe, and stayed with it, working his way south. In 1880, via Las Vegas and Santa Fe, he entered Albuquerque in triumph. He was thirty-seven and was already considered a success.

He liked Albuquerque, a railway town at the beginnings of its growth, and built a house there in the so-called New Town across the tracks. He had already begun to reconnect himself to his family in Canada with occasional visits, and met there a young teacher, Joanna McMillan. In September of 1880, in Chicago, when she was twenty years old, they were married. They returned to Albuquerque and had a son, Daniel Garfield Grant, named in memory of the president who was assassinated on the day Daniel was born.

The following year Angus and his wife traveled to Las Vegas, then a quiet green oasis in the desert, for a holiday. While out driving in a carriage they were drenched by a sudden thunderstorm. She caught cold, which set off a galloping case of tuberculosis. A year later she died. Her second child, a daughter of six months, died a few weeks after her. Angus Grant took his son to Glengarry to be looked after by his parents and a cousin, and went back to the life he had known before his brief and tragic attempt at domesticity.

A frenzy of business seemed to overtake him. He continued to build bridges, but he seems also to have made it his ambition to create Albuquerque almost single-handedly. In only a few years he built the town's biggest office building and an opera house. To these, sometimes in association with others, he later added a reservoir to supply the city with three million gallons of water a day, an electric light company, a gas company, an ice company, a new street railway, and a wool scouring mill. He was a director of the First National Bank, and he also bought a newspaper, the Albuquerque Democrat, but not, it seems, to express his opinions, for he leased it out to others. In any case, he was a confirmed Republican.

After three years, he brought his younger brother Lewis out to help him. They formed a company, Grant Brothers, and got the contract to build the Santa Fe line to Needles, in California, and eventually all the way to the coast at Los Angeles. In all they built about a thousand miles of railroad track, and left a small town, Grants, New Mexico, named after them. In 1886, Grant Brothers took offices in Los Angeles. A third brother, John, had joined the firm, which now undertook contracts to lay track in Indian territory, and after that in Mexico.

An early history of New Mexico comments: "Among the enterprising men of Bernalillo County, and Albuquerque in particular, none occupies a more prominent position than A. A. Grant. Born in Canada in the year 1843, we find him to-day, a man forty-seven years of age, in the prime of life and, endowed with native ability coupled with the successful results of his labor, he stands a fitting example of honest endeavor, energy, and ambition.

"Here [in Albuquerque] he has a spacious and elegantly appointed suite of rooms, fitted for his use, and here he dispenses genial hospitality to his many staunch friends among the businessmen of the city.

Later, when an encomium to Angus Grant appeared in another history, Grant Brothers Construction Company was described as "one of the most important contracting concerns in the United States." That may have been a slight exaggeration. The biographers of those days flattered their subjects handsomely and bedecked them with fine verbal flourishes. Nevertheless, Grant Brothers was certainly a very successful firm, and Angus Grant a wealthy man. Whether he was in any sense content is hard to say.

There is a photograph showing him enthroned in an ornately carved Spanish chair; a burly figure buttoned up in a dark, heavy suit with starched collar and cravat. The head is square and strong-jawed, the features well balanced, and he gazes at the camera through deepset eyes like a man accustomed to being obeyed. The walrus mustache does its fierce duty to his expression, but in the shadows there could be, if one cares to think so, just a suggestion of mockery.

Despite his interests in New Mexico, and the fact that the company was now in Los Angeles,
Angus Grant chose to live in San Francisco. It is not clear why. Perhaps his tastes in company and entertain-ment had developed to a point that could only be satisfied in that relatively sophisticated city. He stayed at the Arlington, "a respectable rooming house on Kearny Street," as his son described it. Then, together with his brother Lewis and a General Williamson, he bought the Moraga ranch, many hundreds of acres in extent, five miles out of Oakland. He spent very little time there, and engaged a cousin to manage it. When his parents died and it became time for Angus to bring his son, Daniel, back with him to California, he put the boy on the Moraga ranch with his cousin. In 1901 Angus Grant died while travelling, probably of heart failure. He was fifty-eight. In all his adult life he had spent only two years at what could be called home. The rest of the time he had lived on work sites, in hotels, or on trains, laying the basis for a fortune that he seems not to have known what to do with.

He was only thirty-nine when his wife died, and although he must have been a very eligible match he did not remarry. One must assume that the untrammeled bachelor existence was one he chose, but his son, telling the story to his own daughter, carefully avoided any details and made no reference to his father's state of mind. It is only when he talked, enthusiastically, about his Uncle Lewis's outgoing nature and love of life that the implication of joylessness creeps in. There is something enigmatic about Angus's choices, and it may be that his heart failed him in more ways than one.

After his father's death, Daniel Grant went to live with Lewis Grant and his wife, Hattie, in Los Angeles. "They had two little girls, Anna and Gertrude, who became the nearest things to sisters I ever had." It was Anna who was to be Richard's mother.

At age twenty-seven, Daniel became a director of Grant Brothers. According to an obituary in the Los Angeles Times, he later became a stockbroker and the first president of the Los Angeles Curb Exchange. He moved in the circle of those old families, whose names Sartori, Chandler, Otis, O'Melveny, Graves, Kerckhoff, Van Nuys, et al.—continued to reverberate in Los Angeles society. He did business with them, went to the same clubs, and his children went to school with their children. In short, he played his part in establishing and maintaining one of the more exclusive power structures in America. He put on a good deal of weight, was loved and supported by his wife and family, and, no doubt, did well by them. Through his cousin Anna the benefits of those connections passed on in due course to her son, Richard Wilson.

THE GOLD RUSH was over long before the Grants and the Wilsons arrived in Southern California, but the fever never subsided, and both families were drawn and influenced by it in different ways. But for the gold, California could never have been boosted to stardom at such a tender age. Before that lick of yellow winked at James Marshall through the ruffled waters of Sutter's millrace in 1848, California was going through the same modest beginnings as other new states. Only a decade earlier, she had still belonged to Mexico, and had been loosely occupied by missionaries, then by great landowners, relatively few in number, who exploited native labor and set a pattern that has endured to this day.

Adventurers occasionally wandered across the Sierras from the United States, and some became excited at the prospect of owning such wide expanses of land, most of them under only nominal control. The prize consisted of cattle country and irrigable river valleys, and to grasp the prize meant annexing the territory.

The scale of operations was minuscule compared with what was at stake. California's fate was determined in 1845 by mere handfuls of men in petty disputes. John Charles Fremont was an adventuresome (some would say meddlesome) captain in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, with a senator for a father-in-law. With his band of sixty-two men he was a major force in the area, and provoked a standoff with Mexican Commandante José Castro whose "army" was little larger. Archibald Gillespie, another officer given to romantic missions, later ruled Los Angeles with fifty men. José Antonio Carillo successfully revolted against him with sixty rancheros and a toy cannon.

U.S. General Stephen Kearny, having "conquered" New Mexico, rode west to do the same in California with three hundred dragoons. At one time Kearny, Fremont, and the naval Commodore, Robert Stockton, all claimed to be governors of California. All were replaced by Col. Richard B. Mason. Kearny relieved his annoyance by arresting Fremont for insubordination and taking him back over the Sierras in handcuffs, though he returned soon enough as a civilian.

And so it went on. The confrontations that loosened Mexico's grip and led, eventually, to American
statehood, caused no more deaths and injuries than an average gang fight in Los Angeles today, and the victims were often innocent bystanders. The principal players—others were J. D. Sloat and Thomas Larkin—are now immortalized in the names of cities and San Francisco streets. Much of their skirmishing had a comic opera quality, and success appears to have ambushed them, but they had the good fortune, like many others who followed, to be there when it mattered, and their names glow with the same aura that has gilded all things Californian.

Those were the small beginnings of California and, but for the gold, the state would surely have matured much more gradually over time. What Fremont had in mind in 1845 when he coined the name Golden Gate for the entrance to San Francisco Bay is hard to say. He certainly had no inkling then of the hordes that would rush through it after the gold strikes of '48 and '49. In five frantic years San Francisco, from being a fort with a few hundred dependents became a ramshackle metropolis of 50,000 souls living in a frenzy of hope and despair. Editorialists in the East branded it "the Sodom of the West."

Most probably, but for the gold there would be no San Francisco at least, not as we know it. With all the sunlit shoreline of that immense bay to choose from, why build where summer is often just a weather report heard through the fog? But the seaborne imperatives of the gold rush put it where it is, and the gold came back to it, corrupted it, embellished it, and, as in so many other mushrooming capitals of commerce, finished by cultivating it.

Los Angeles meanwhile remained a small, provincial town living off cattle and wheat. Then, several decades after the gold rush, keen entrepreneurial eyes saw it as a worthy rival to San Francisco. It had a seductive climate and a natural port. The newly built railroads took the people to Los Angeles, by the hundreds of thousands. A good deal of the money went there, too, but in spite of Hollywood (or because of it) the sophistication stayed in San Francisco for a long, long time. Much of California's social history is tied up in the rivalry between north and south; in the frantic efforts of Southern California's nouveaux riches to catch up with San Francisco's cultural dominance. California today may mean beaches and the Santa Monica Freeway, but in the prewar days of Cole Porter and his East Coast socialite fans, California was still San Francisco, and the lady was a tramp for insisting that "it's cold and it's damp."

The fascination that both these great cities have exerted on the rest of America, and indeed on the whole Western world, has obscured the most extraordinary thing about them: In all reason, they should not be there at all. Mesmerized first by gold, and then by the romance of modern transport, observers found it easy to gloss over the simple truth—cities must have water. Of all the ways in which California is exceptional, none is stranger (or more ominous) than its defiance of the basic rules of growth and development set by human civilization up to that time.

Throughout history communities have developed alongside streams, bounded by the natural limits of their watersheds. In this way they could reap all the natural diversity of their ecosystems, from the lush riparian bottomland up to the thin summer grazing of surrounding peaks. Cities grew by rivers. Big cities grew by big rivers. Commerce followed the paths of rivers, and was founded originally in the agricultural wealth created in the river valleys.

In San Francisco and Los Angeles, sudden wealth and the astonishing growth it generated came from quite other sources. For a long time it obscured the underlying absurdity of their situations—one on a dryish and very shaky rock, the other in a desert. So well did these cities project images to match the fantasies of the millions longing to go west, that it was worth incurring any expense to maintain them, and water was undoubtedly the greatest expense.

Both cities fought to prevent water from being the controlling factor in their growth, and until recently, at considerable cost to their environments, they succeeded. San Francisco, with her Bay Area satellites, remains the queen of the north. Los Angeles, whose puny streams have long been bundled away in concrete ditches, has waxed from southern star to galaxy. Both, like bloated and bedridden patients living on intravenous drip, would be helpless without armies of attendants to feed them their essential nourishment through slender tubes from improbable distances.

Land was already available in vast tracts, granted either by older Mexican decrees, or by the federal government to finance the railroads. As thousands rushed west with all the money they could scrape together, they created, suddenly, a big market for food and clothing at inflated prices, providing a further impetus for large-scale agriculture and land monopolization.

Through the years, as unbridled growth posed mounting problems, ever more elaborate solutions
were financed out of that growth, but always borrowing on the future. The survival of this pyramid scheme became so essential to the economy of the state (and ultimately the nation) that it was shored up by all available means. Inevitably the same system extended beyond the cities into the southern and central valleys. Millions upon millions of people, involved in complex infrastructures of industry and agriculture, have established themselves where they have no natural hope of survival. Their very existence depends on the wisdom and cunning of hydraulic engineers and the prosperity that funds their enterprises.

Everyone knows that growth must have its limits. Among planners there was occasionally abstract talk of some such an ultimate moment, but it could not, must not, be imminent, for it would spell the end of a golden age, and California was to be exempt from the mortal condition. Yet all the time the pressure was building. In the sixties there were already some who felt the state would have to change course, or it would simply crash under the weight of exaggerated expectations.

Such prospects were unthinkable, however, when the Grants first came to Los Angeles. They played their part in the story, but the man whose name is inseparable from it, who one might almost say wrote the script for California's growth, arrived just a couple of years later.

Harry Chandler, who created Hollywood before movies were even thought of, first came to Los Angeles in 1888. He had dropped out of Dartmouth College, and came west to recover his health. For reasons known only to himself, at school he had taken a dare and dived into a vat of starch, with catastrophic consequences to his lungs. Everybody with an adventurous spirit was talking about striking it rich in California, but Chandler also hoped the climate and dry air would heal him. He found a job picking fruit outside Los Angeles in the San Fernando Valley. Then he thought he might do better selling it off a donkey cart. One of the vast ranches of the Van Nuys wheat empire was close by, and he took his cart to the ranch houses where a group of hands gathered.

According to the story he often liked to tell later in life, an autocratic horseman drove up and chased him off the property. He had hardly escaped to the highway before he saw his persecutor, whom he took to be a foreman, galloping up to him. The horseman apologized, and explained that he had assumed Chandler to be a bootlegger. He introduced himself as Isaac Van Nuys, and asked the young man to come back and sell his fruit anytime he chose.

Van Nuys was by far the greatest of the landholders in the valley, with about sixty thousand acres. He was the flinty son of a Dutch family long established in New York State, and by a curious coincidence had also come west seeking relief from asthma, which plagued him all his life. The two men apparently became friends, much to Chandler's later benefit.

Harry Chandler appears in his photographs as the mildest of men, looking out through his round-rimmed glasses with a cheerful, naive innocence. This was entirely belied by his performance, for he quickly discovered in himself a ruthless business talent. Giving up on fruit, he went to the city and got hold of a newspaper delivery round. Soon he had a stranglehold on the distribution system, and used it to ingratiate himself with the Los Angeles Times. Before long he married the publisher's daughter and became the newspaper's business manager.

The publisher was Harrison Gray Otis, a retired general notorious for his colorful slanders and fulminations who used the paper shamelessly to promote his own profit.* Otis was in on all kinds of development schemes and had many interests and business friends to boost. Chandler slipped effortlessly into the same role, and showed such brilliance at the game that he ultimately netted a fortune of several hundred millions-worth, enough at that time to make most present day billionaires eat their hearts out.

Around the turn of the century Los Angeles seemed to change from a sleepy cattle town into a metropolis almost before its astonished inhabitants' eyes. A land boom in the eighties brought people flooding in (the Wilson family among them) and doubled the population, which by 1900 was over 100,000. It was clear to some that Los Angeles would continue to grow fast, and Van Nuys sold off twelve thousand acres at the end of his property closest to the city, to a syndicate of developers. Other parcels of land to the northwest of the city were being developed at the same time, financed by another syndicate that Harry Chandler assembled, laying the basis of his enormous fortune. This entire area became known as Hollywood. Meanwhile the town of San Fernando had already been developed at the northwest end of the valley. Between the two remained about a hundred square miles, all of which might potentially be developed as satellite

* On one famous occasion Otis was paid back in kind. "He sits there," said Hiram Johnson, campaigning for the governorship in 1910, "in senile dementia with gangrened heart and rotting brain, grinning at every reform, chattering impotently at all things that are decent, frothing, furiously."
communities or small farms to feed the growing market. The principal difficulty lay in water supplies.

Los Angeles was originally established by the Spanish on the banks of the Los Angeles River, a stream that drew on rainfall in the San Gabriel and Santa Susanna Mountains north of the San Fernando Valley. Beneath the valley, the water gathered naturally in a vast underground basin, which kept the river flowing through dry periods. This was the only source of water for the valley, but Spanish law had granted all the water in the river to the city, and in 1899, under American law, Los Angeles had established, in court, that this right included all the groundwater of the San Fernando Valley.

Wheat required no irrigation. Housing and other kinds of agriculture most certainly did. How, then, would it be possible to develop this land without water? It was a challenge that preoccupied the minds of Chandler, Otis, and others whose names are now plastered over the maps of modern-day Los Angeles. The techniques for developing new communities, with salesmen’s hype and electric trolley lines, were already thoroughly understood and practiced by a group of “financiers,” but there was no source of water in the vicinity, apart from what already belonged to Los Angeles. The developers were opening up tracts around the city and running electric rails out to them, and it was not in their interests to rob Los Angeles of her water supply. Their plans depended on the city’s growth, yet with only the Los Angeles River and its groundwater to draw upon, prospects would ultimately be limited. The population was now approaching 200,000. For men like Chandler, who had their acquisitive eyes on the next 100,000, water was of paramount importance.

It was also of great interest to a handsome, charming, and well-connected former mayor of the city, who thought he had the answer. Fred Eaton is generally credited with planting the idea of the Los Angeles aqueduct in the mind of William Mulholland, the city’s legendary water engineer, but it could not have been Eaton’s idea originally. In fact two surveys had been done privately in 1885 and 1891 to prove that it would be possible to take water from the Owens River 250 miles away, and transfer it by gravity to Los Angeles. Of course there were severe problems to be overcome, but they were problems of design, materials, expense, and politics.

Eventually, as most people know, the aqueduct was built. The story of its conception and construction needs a book of its own, and several have been written. The most recent, most detailed and most revealing is by William Kahrl, and deserves to be read by anyone with a taste for intrigue and a good story.

Two areas of mystery and controversy have kept the story alive up to the present. One has to do with the relative rights and priorities of an agricultural valley and a burgeoning metropolis. The other, which inspired Polanski’s film, Chinatown, has to do with the shenanigans surrounding the San Fernando Valley.

Before being elected mayor, Fred Eaton had been the superintendent of the private company that supplied Los Angeles with water. Through the eighties and nineties he had occupied himself with looking for additional sources. He settled, in the end, on the Owens Valley as the only possibility. Given what had already been accomplished by canal builders in Europe and the East Coast, let alone the flume builders of Comstock and elsewhere, the notion of bringing water over a great distance was not outlandish.

Eaton saw his aqueduct from Owens Valley as the key to the future of the city, and also as a source of personal wealth. His plan was to acquire in his own name the land through which the Owens River ran, and to profit from his ownership of the water. He discussed his ambitions with Mulholland as early as 1892, when the Los Angeles water supply was still in private hands, but Mulholland scoffed at the idea as being, literally, farfetched.

Eaton was widely liked as an all-around nice guy. During his years as city engineer and then mayor of Los Angeles, he knew everyone, had access to anyone. Surely Eaton would have mentioned his plan, in confidence of course, to whomever might be helpful. One such person was certainly Joseph B. Lippincott, the Bureau of Reclamation’s resident engineer, the man who is usually cast as the villain of the piece where Owens Valley is concerned, and with good reason.

All three, Mulholland, Lippincott, and Eaton became close. All three could have discussed the idea with others. Eaton would have been looking for some way to finance it. Mulholland, at first, might just have wanted to comment on its absurdity. Lippincott’s corrupt ethics allowed him to act as a double agent. His government job required him to investigate the possibilities of an irrigation project in the Owens Valley, just the kind of project that was meant to help small farmers. But in fact he thwarted his employers and prevented federal interference with the aqueduct. Obviously he knew where his bread was buttered, and he had several good reasons to tip off a few big players.

The Owens Valley aqueduct was attractive to all those entrepreneurs who had an interest in the
development of Los Angeles. What made it particularly interesting for some, however, was what was obvious from a glance at a map. For the water to get to Los Angeles from the Sierras it would have to cross the San Fernando Valley, making a hundred square miles of barren ground suddenly most desirable. Furthermore, as anyone with an eye for profit quickly realized, most of the water that came down that aqueduct would have nowhere to go for a long time. This was the crucial perception. Whatever water came that way was destined for future growth. Los Angeles would have to grow to many times its size before any of it would be needed. All that water, in the meanwhile, would be available to develop communities and farms in the valley, and increase the value of the land tenfold or more. This was a very big game and the stakes were high.

There were some preconditions for the gamble to come off. For one thing, it could not, as Eaton may have once hoped, be a private venture. The Bureau of Reclamation’s investigations had already begun in the Owens Valley. That was what Lippincott had been sent there to do. Taking the water to Los Angeles was in direct contradiction to his mission, for it would leave the valley high and dry. Ultimately there would have to be a showdown between Los Angeles and Washington. How could the federal government be seen to abandon the farmers of Owens Valley in favor of some private utility? Only the city, representing “the people,” could muster enough moral and political power to counter the federal plan.

The aqueduct would have to be a municipal project for the greater good of the greater number, but the city’s water supply was still in private hands. In 1902, just after Eaton’s term as mayor, Los Angeles was able to buy the utility, and with the purchase came its superintendent, William Mulholland. In 1904, Mulholland announced his plan to build the aqueduct to a select few city officials. The project still had to be kept under wraps, for now the challenge lay in acquiring, piece by piece, the water rights in Owens Valley, without allowing the innocent proprietors to know that they could hold the city to ransom.

Acting as an agent for the city, as well as on his own behalf, Fred Eaton secretly acquired options on a number of strategically situated properties in the valley, and he did it, apparently, with the connivance of Lippincott. Eaton did very well out of these transactions, and Lippincott’s consultancy business prospered mightily. But their earnings were nothing compared to the fortunes made by those who were lucky enough to own San Fernando Valley.

There was, of course, one more obstacle to overcome before the aqueduct could be built: to persuade the people of Los Angeles to pay for it. Mulholland set the bill at $24.5 million, and a bond issue was authorized for the amount, to be voted on in 1907. In the press an outrageous campaign of lies, insults, and innuendo was waged for and against the project. The two central issues were, first, whether the water was actually needed, and second, whether a syndicate of developers in the San Fernando Valley had profited by inside knowledge of the city’s plans. Since the syndicate in question included both Otis and Chandler of the L.A. Times, and E. T. Earl of the Express, the mud flew thick and rank.

The rival Hearst newspaper, the Examiner, reviled in charges of graft and corruption, which centered in particular around an option that was picked up in the San Fernando Valley before news of the aqueduct was made public. The buyers of this option were a group of the foremost real estate developers of the day, who knew, among them, all there was to know. There was Henry Huntington, nephew and heir of Collis Huntington, prime mover of the Central Pacific Railroad. He had learned about railroads at his uncle’s knee, and his bright red trolley cars were already a famous sight in the Los Angeles region. There was Moses Sherman, who laid street railways and had sold Huntington his first trolley system. There was L. C. Brand, who had once sold Huntington an electric utility company and was vice-president of the Title Insurance and Trust Company. There was Otto Brant, president of that same bank. There was E. H. Harriman, president of the Southern Pacific Railroad, which owned immense tracts of land through which the aqueduct would have to pass. There was William Kerckhoff, another utilities tycoon, and Joseph Sartori, another great banker; and there were Harrison Gray Otis and Harry Chandler.

Nobody has yet been able to prove that they knew the water was coming through the San Fernando Valley, but there is one significant piece of evidence. In 1910 Harry Chandler paid Van Nuys just over fifty-three dollars an acre for his San Fernando valley land. By this time the value of the land was well known, the water was guaranteed and on its way, and heavy profits had already been taken. Yet that earlier option picked up in 1903, in supposed innocence of any knowledge of the bonanza to come, valued the land at more than thirty dollars an acre, a ridiculously high price for semi-desert. Somebody definitely knew something.

The darkest suspicion naturally centered around the fear that these men had somehow pro-
promoted the aqueduct purely to serve themselves at the city’s expense, and some progress was made with this theory. Certainly, once Mulholland had made up his mind to go for the aqueduct, he stretched the truth to promote it.

At one of several inquiries into the matter afterward, it was shown that Mulholland had understated the amount of water already available from the Los Angeles River. He had claimed it would only support 200,000 people, but he later admitted that 500,000 was closer to the mark. The drought during the first years of the century, much trumpeted by the L.A. Times, also turned out to be fictitious, according to rainfall figures since available. In this respect Mulholland’s behavior was typical of the way water project engineers have behaved since. They know how reluctant the people are to fund projects so far ahead of the time when they will benefit from them.

These suspicions generated a lot of fire and smoke, which have always obscured the main issue. Why, in the final analysis, should any group have been allowed to profit so hugely from a municipal project? At one of the several investigations, Mulholland himself testified that the land in the San Fernando Valley should have been available to the public at one hundred dollars an acre, but had been “seized by a few capitalists who have forced prices up to one thousand dollars an acre,” and who “have stolen the unearned increment for the next twenty years” an unearned increment that obviously should have gone to the people of the city who paid for the project.

According to those figures, Harry Chandler’s syndicate could have paid the entire cost of the aqueduct and still made a handsome profit. What’s more, between them the speculators (if that’s what they were, given the minimal risk) owned the utilities, the construction companies, and the transport systems to service their captive communities.

Clearly the San Fernando Valley was a money-making machine on a par with the Comstock. Given that all this profit taking was being done in full view of the public, why did the city not find a way to skim off enough cream to cover at least some of its costs?

A simple answer is that the political atmosphere favored speculation and admired those with the wit and good fortune to strike it rich. There by the grace of God go I. What does it matter if one man becomes a millionaire so long as we all might benefit? And it is also doubtful whether those who voted in the bond issue understood how the cost—approximately one hundred dollars per capita—would be visited upon them as individuals.

There was a scandal, and it did lead to an inquiry, but nothing really came of it in the end. Whatever political will there may have been to recover that “unearned increment” Mulholland had spoken of was swamped by the city’s phenomenal growth rate. Everyone was in a hurry. There was no time to linger over old losses. Every day was a new game, and anyone could play. The whole argument was dissolved in a pragmatic solution. The San Fernando Valley was annexed by the city, and received all the water it needed at the common price.

Both Mulholland and Eaton, quite legitimately, bought land in the San Fernando Valley along with thousands of others, and most did very well with it. The Los Angeles aqueduct proved to be the model for success in California. All the great water projects that followed were inspired by it, and all the great entrepreneurs who profited by them were emboldened by the dizzying success of Chandler’s syndicate.

Chandler and his associates did not rest. South of the Mexican border they bought 840,000 acres (1,300 square miles), and sucked water out of the Colorado that had been intended for the Imperial Valley. North of Los Angeles they acquired the 300,000-acre Tejon ranch, which now draws water from the State Water Project. Both were simply variations on the same San Fernando gambit, which has continued to deliver unearned increments with satisfying regularity.

The system, discovered somewhat accidentally, depended on grasping one simple principle underlying major water projects. The user’s manual reads something like this:

- Water demand grows gradually, but water supply has to be provided for in one fell swoop (because you can’t gradually increase the size of an aqueduct). So when the new project comes on line, there will be a huge, but gradually diminishing surplus. If you can station yourself strategically to make use of that surplus you are liable to get it very cheap, and you can make a lot of money.

- If you can persuade the people, in whatever form they come, municipal, state, or federal, that the need for water is urgent, so much the better. A good way to do this is to stress the importance of growth because, magically, the more you talk about growth the more it happens. Growth will pay for everything, and solve all old problems. New problems will be solved by more growth.
Once you start using the water, you have a pretty good case for keeping it even though it was only meant to be temporary. There will be jobs lost, you say, terrible hardship, loss of productivity. The answer is not to take your water away, but to get more. That will encourage more growth.

These principles have been applied, with resounding success, up and down the state of California since Los Angeles led the way. A great proportion of the water captured by the federal- and state-built systems has found its way onto very large corporate holdings at derisory prices. Variations of the gambit have been successful in many areas besides water. Great accumulations of capital have resulted from those unearned increments, supposedly compensated for out of growth. There is a fallacy embedded in this rationale, however, for the loss of the unearned increments represents a steady hemorrhage of the people's resources, an immense deficit that becomes apparent when growth finally slows to a standstill and all those unearned increments have been spirited away to even sunnier climes. As for the Owens Valley, whose water nourished this fevered growth, Bill Kahrl writes:

“What is important about the valley’s development is that its people have had very little to do with shaping it. Many of the most vital decision affecting the future of their lives on the land are made in Los Angeles, where their interests are not represented. The residents of the Owens Valley have thus been effectively disenfranchised. And in a system of representative government that is wrong.”

Not dissimilar to the fate that was being prepared for the people of Round Valley.

ARDUOUS AS Angus Grant’s career may have been, it was also as simple and straightforward as the track he laid. He had only to seize his opportunities, give them his best shot, and pray for success. His personal ambitions and the aims of society were in excellent harmony. Whatever moral dilemmas threatened him along the way could be disarmed by the claim, generally shared, that he was bringing civilization to a savage land.

Angus and his cohorts achieved their aim. They opened up the West. It was for succeeding generations to plant the seed and enjoy the fruits, but things took an unexpected turn. During the first half of this century the true nature of a society dependent on massive irrigation projects was made manifest. Alongside sudden wealth and rapid growth, poverty, misery, and repression darkened the land, and those who lived through that time preferred, on the whole, to watch the pictures that Hollywood made rather than dwell too much on what was going on around them.

To the extent that they were forced to respond to reality and reconcile it with their beliefs, they found different ways of performing this difficult feat. Grant’s son, Daniel, who was to become Richard’s uncle, seems to have taken the more comfortable route. He used the advantages of inheritance to sustain the fortunes of his family, but did little else. “He was a California Club sort of person,” Richard says. “A businessman, but no Chandler. He was respected, and he fit in.”

Richard Wilson’s father was cut from a very different cloth, and the way in which he dealt with the problems of his time was the paramount influence on Richard’s later development. Through the Grant family Richard derived many of the material advantages and connections that became indispensable to his campaign, but it was his father who furnished his conscience, and the spiritual strength to follow its dictates.

John Cree Wilson was born to a farming family from Pennsylvania in 1888, the year Chandler came to Los Angeles. He grew up with his sister on a dairy farm in Santa Ana, which was then an agricultural community south of the small town of Los Angeles. In essence, his childhood was a fulfillment and vindication of the Jeffersonian dream of America. Having left behind the harsh winters of populous Pennsylvania, no doubt by dint of much hardship, the family settled on the farthest shores of the continent in what may be the world’s sweetest climate, masters of their own land by the banks of the Santa Ana River. There, through a pious upbringing, hard work, and responsibility, John acquired the strength and independence of character that he displayed throughout his life.

Unlike Angus Grant, John Wilson had had no desire to escape from the farm. His respect and affection for rural life—it amounted almost to a passion—remained constant in him until his death. In the eyes of his parents and teachers, though, his evident intelligence and ability marked him out for a different career. He was accepted into the medical school of the University of Southern California, and when that institution later went bankrupt, he was able to transfer to the Berkeley school, where he graduated. He satisfied his longing for the outdoors by working his way through school at one of the roughest occupations available-running a mule wagon on the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir project. Driving the mules in those hard conditions was only
part of the difficulties. Hauling his men out of
whorehouses to get them back on the job was often
an even greater challenge. This delight in tough
physical work was all the more remarkable in the
light of his academic brilliance. When he finished
his training on the East Coast, in his board exami-
nations at Massachusetts General Hospital he got,
according to his son, "the highest scores of any man
in the state, ever."

Back in California, before the First World War, he
lived and practiced in an apartment on Sunset
Boulevard. Then, as now, hospital positions were
jealously protected and, often as not, awarded on the
basis of influence. John Wilson had to watch the bet-
ter connected but less qualified slide into plum jobs,
while he struggled to make his way. However, he
overcame this disadvantage by developing a special-
ty in helping children with clubfoot, a congenital
deformity that still went largely untreated and was,
of course, a damaging physical and aesthetic handicap.

He achieved most of his cures through the use of
shoes and therapy. The scalpel was only a last
resort, and he became known for the extraordinary
care he took of his patients. He was one of the first
to employ a physical therapist in his office on a full-
time basis. These innovations were still experimen-
tal in the twenties, and his pioneering work earned
him gratitude and respect from all levels of society.

Very early in his career he met Anna Grant, and
they were married in 1916. The war interrupted their
marriage for a year, when he went east again, this
time as an army captain in a base hospital, and
when he returned they moved out of the apartment
into a large house belonging to Anna's widowed
mother. The Grants and their relatives had various
properties in the areas developing around Los
Angeles, and soon the Wilsons were able to move
again, this time to a house of their own on South
Virgil, which is today a street off Wilshire Boulevard,
but then was separated from Los Angeles by sever-
al miles of open country.

In those years between the wars, the upper echi-
ons of the medical profession flourished as never
before. Many of the fundamental discoveries of the
previous century were brought to fruition in the
medical technology of that time, and the deadly
scourges of the human race no longer seemed
invincible. A cornucopia of drugs, vaccines, vita-
mins, anesthesics, soporifics, lotions, and potions
spilled out on a grateful world, and the heroes of
this liberation were the pinstriped specialists, the
fashionable consultants, surgeons, and physicians
pictured in the papers attending at the bedsides of
the famous. In an important city, in such an atmos-
phere, any skilled doctor who was in some way part
of this new age of medicine could expect to do well.
John Wilson, though he never wore pinstripes, was
by all accounts an exceptionally clever and dedicat-
ed doctor as well as being a handsome, authorita-
tive figure. With all these qualities he succeeded in
spectacular style. By the time his third and
youngest son, Richard Alexander, came into the
world, Wilson was already an established orthope-
dic surgeon with a brilliant reputation. When the
new Children's Hospital was opened in Los
Angeles, he became its first resident surgeon.

He was a tall man with a reserved and formal
manner, but behind the public face of the masterful
and accomplished physician there was another side
to Wilson. Though generous when he thought it
warranted, he guarded his self-respect and did not
forget old scores. His son recalls—with great glee-
an anecdote from one of the doctors at the hospital
who happened to push an elevator button at an
inopportune moment. The door slid open to reveal
John Wilson thrusting a panic-stricken medical
functionary up against the wall with both feet off the
ground.

"He was calling him a son of a bitch and threaten-
ing all kinds of mayhem because this guy had
given him the business over some appointment—you
might never know that physical side of him, but it
was there. Oh, yes, it was there."

Both Wilsons, father and youngest son, sport
hawklike noses they liked to attribute to their Cree
bloodline, and perhaps it showed in John Wilson's
natural preference for the country and outdoor pur-
suits. He was always much happier in the country.
As he became more prosperous, he built an isolat-
ed beach house at Newport Beach (where today you
can jump from rooftop to rooftop) so that he could
hunt duck on Balboa Island (where ducks are now
more commonly found frozen in the supermarket).
He loved gardening and became quite expert at
raising roses and tulips, which he took to flower
shows.

Although his hospital work was both profitable
and demanding, he deliberately offered his help to
friends in the country so that he could combine his
rounds with hunting expeditions, taking first his
nephews and later his sons along with him. As the
pressure and congestion around his workplace
increased, he gradually extended his wanderings
over the Tehachapi Mountains and up the San
Joaquin Valley.

He did not share the general delight in the
unending growth of the greater Los Angeles area,
but it was a phenomenon that continued to astound
the world. In 1890 the city contained some fifty
thousand people being taxed on property assessed
at about $50 million. By 1928 Los Angeles had a population of almost one and a quarter million and property valued at more than $2 billion. The excitement of the postwar boom in the twenties reached fever pitch in Los Angeles. Even the most cautious minds saw visions of limitless improvement.

All the big cities were developing that particularly yeasty metropolitan culture with its tang of modern times that intoxicated a generation newly arrived from the land. They were only too willing to shed the cumbersome habits of rural life and plunge into the fast-paced sophistication of the streets, and this, too, offended Wilson's sense of values, which were still strongly rooted in rural tradition. America had discovered the secret, it seemed, for making money multiply itself magically, effortlessly, and everyone was getting rich. The secret was in moving money around and, not for the last time, the true sources of wealth were forgotten in the fascination of the deal.

By now Los Angeles was directly connected with the rest of the continent by four different railroad companies, and with the seagoing trade routes of the world through her port of San Pedro. While the agricultural produce of the Sacramento Valley and northern San Joaquin Valley naturally went out through San Francisco and Sacramento, the central and southern parts of the valley fell within the hinterland of Los Angeles, as did the hugely prolific Imperial Valley that had been coaxed from the desert between the coast and the Colorado River.

Four fifths of this land was irrigated—all by private projects. Farmers had squeezed every drop they could command with their own resources from the rivers of the valley. The new All-American Canal was bringing even more Colorado water to Imperial Valley. King cotton came to California in the twenties, and did three times as well there as in the rest of the nation. And all around Los Angeles, from Santa Barbara to San Diego, from the coast to Pasadena, irrigated orange groves and grapevines covered every usable acre. The output was vast and expertly organized. The wealth nourished Los Angeles, constantly raising the stakes on real estate and later protecting her from the most brutal effects of the depression.

In 1921, J. K. Baillie of the Los Angeles Evening Express interviewed Joseph Sartori, founder of Security Pacific, who was then the city's most powerful and respected banker, and came away with a joyfulness akin to requited love. He wrote:

A city is just as big as its banks, no larger. This is the day of big business. Big business makes a big city, and big business must have big banks with big resources. "We are building not alone for today but for the future," said Mr. J. F. Sartori this morning. And as I listened to this kindly man with the brilliant mind and the vision of an empire builder it was not difficult to see why he controlled millions and could put through a single deal involving close to $150,000,000. His force is irresistible and his logic as true as steel. "You will see a continual stream of people from the East and the Middle West pour into Los Angeles and surrounding country," said Mr. Sartori. "The possibilities of this section are almost limitless. No other place will be as densely populated as the section in and around Los Angeles. This is the garden spot of the world, and to it will come people from the four corners of the earth." And I walked up the street happy that I lived in Los Angeles, and convinced that if I were spared I would live to see the city built from the mountains to the sea.

He could have written the same piece again in every decade up to the time forty years later when all the oranges were finally gone, and the city did stretch from the San Gabriels to the beach.

In 1933, the year of Richard Wilson's birth, the city and its surrounding communities continued to fulfill Sartori's heady predictions, despite the depression that was devastating the rest of America, but it was not a good year for mankind as a whole. In Germany, Adolf Hitler finally achieved full power, and most of the industrial world was mired in a financial swamp. Millions upon millions of working people were sucked into hardship and even destitution-fertile ground, it was feared, for the dreaded "red" agents who seemed to be lurking under every capitalist bed.

And indeed there was trouble on the farm. Migrant workers, laboring in the most appalling conditions, were threatening to organize. The activists who spurred the field workers to strike and revolt were a motley crew, but they all shared one belief. They were convinced that the growers could, if they wished, put matters right; that it was just greed, indifference, and not a little malice that kept the employers from paying a living wage and replacing the squalid, unsanitary encampments with decent quarters.

As for the growers, they took it upon themselves to put down migrant protest by force, and were left free to do so as long as the general public didn't interfere. Since they controlled or, at least,
had the sympathy of most of the newspapers, they were largely successful in deflecting public attention. As a result, the real issues were never exposed. Neither they nor their critics ever came to grips with the underlying cause of the problem—the fundamental principle that governs large-scale agriculture by irrigation.

The unhappy truth is that all of them, owners and laborers alike, were in the grip of a system that left little to spare for social justice. Everyone involved could witness the marvels that irrigation provided; the densely packed, luxuriant orchards; the immense fields with that weird, industrial flatness, where emerald crops grew like grass; the inconceivable quantities of stuff that rolled out of this dreamlike landscape and into Southern Pacific’s waiting boxcars.

What they were actually seeing was in direct line of succession to the slave economies of China, of the Nile Delta, of the Sumerian period. But what they wanted to see—this being America—was farming, American-style, and they said, “This is perverse, a travesty, a corruption of all we stand for. How can American-style, and they said, “This is perverse, a

The railroad companies had planned their routes carefully. As a cheap means of public financing they were rewarded with huge tracts of free land on either side of their lines. Those checkerboard patterns of land became the bases of huge farm holdings. At one time, Southern Pacific alone owned a tenth of California—over eleven million acres. They sold, leased, or managed their lands with one object in view: to ensure the greatest volume of freight at the highest possible price. In collaboration with giant utilities such as Pacific Gas and Electric, dams were built that supplied power as well as water. To amortize the great expense of these projects, only certain crops would do, grown intensively over large acreages, tended and harvested by mobile armies of cheap labor, processed, packed, and marketed like soap or shoes or any other industrial product. Cotton, rice, alfalfa, grapes, fruit, nuts, sugar beets, and green vegetables were the major items.

Why then could not smaller farmers come together to finance a dam and a canal? There were such projects, although almost always led by an entrepreneurial developer or moneyed interest. Present day Fresno owes its existence to a certain William Chapman and his associates who, in 1875, subdivided 277,600 acres into 20-acre family farms irrigated by canal from the Kings River. Planted with saplings and vines, they were all sold off in three years to would-be farmers from the East (many of them Armenians) at a thousand dollars apiece, and the new settlers achieved a considerable level of success. Other such schemes followed, taking advantage of readily accessible irrigation water, to create the valley towns of Selma, Dinuba, Kingsburg, and Reedley. Later projects, however, were poorly planned and rather cynically promoted. Some were out-and-out swindles; most were failures. The evidence indicated that irrigation farming demanded a degree of enterprise and managerial skill that conventional farmers lacked.

Overshadowing all was the simple fact that the enormous estates did exist, that they were run in cooperation with equally enormous packing houses such as Libby, Heinz, Santa Cruz Packing, Kings County Packing, Bercut-Richards, and Burton Gray, and were in collusion with the railroads so that prices for most staple commodities were shaved down to the point where small farmers could not compete. Only the plantations of the South, presenting the same challenges and opportunities, had required manpower on the same scale. This time it was not to be slavery, precisely, but something even more convenient. For the slave owner had the problem of caring for his human property year-round whereas his California counterpart had only to provide for his rented slaves as long as they were needed.

For decades the farmers had drawn their labor force from all around the globe. Wherever they could find men so miserable that they would jump at any chance to work, they shipped them in. From

* In 1915, of the eleven million acres under cultivation in California, four million of the best belonged to 310 proprietors. In Kern County four companies owned a million acres. In Merced County one company owned a quarter of a million. See Factories in the Fields, by Carey McWilliams.
China, from India, from Japan, from the Philippines, from Mexico, they came in waves and, when their attendant problems outweighed their usefulness, they were expelled. Until the onset of the depression, this system passed generally unremarked by the public. Only when the numbers of any particular race became so great that they began, inevitably, to drift away from the bare-bones existence in the fields and impinge on the lives of citizens were they noticed. Then, usually in one of those times of economic hardship that hit periodically, they were perceived as a threat, prejudice grew rapidly, and the "coolies" or the "ragheads" or the "braceros" were labeled a scourge and sent packing. However, there was little or no concern over the conditions under which they labored, and sometimes died, in fields, down mines, and on railroads.

When the Great Depression of the thirties hit, the picture changed dramatically. Suddenly it was white folks, the so-called Okies, evicted from their homes and farms in the South and Midwest, who became the great drifting migrant labor force, and they could no longer be ignored or deported. Even worse from the point of view of the big farmers, the social climate had changed. Now everybody in America was being hurt, and the plight of others was noticed. Then, usually in one of those times of economic hardship that hit periodically, they were perceived as a threat, prejudice grew rapidly, and the "coolies" or the "ragheads" or the "braceros" were labeled a scourge and sent packing. However, there was little or no concern over the conditions under which they labored, and sometimes died, in fields, down mines, and on railroads.

To forestall expected trouble, in 1933 the employers, prompted by big interests, combined into a statewide organization. The Associated Farmers of California—the AFC—was formed, county by county, through the Farm Bureau and the chambers of commerce, to confront what they saw as a serious challenge to their survival. The members were farmers and businessmen of all kinds, but the leading lights were also those who wielded the most power, and the money came from the railroads, the utilities, the banks, and others with more than a general-interest in the survival of agriculture in California. Just to quote one example, during the depression approximately 50 percent of farmland in central and northern California came under the control of Bank of America alone.* These interests, with their fears of a red insurrection already inflamed, had good reason to expect a violent eruption of discontent, and they were determined to suppress it by force.

Several military men, such as Col. Henry Sanborn and Col. Walter Garrison, held positions with the AFC, as did the tear gas salesman, Ignatius McCarthy. These specialists developed connections with the sheriffs and the state bureaucracy. They could muster two thousand deputies anywhere in their area in a few hours and, together with the state's Bureau of Criminal Identification, they maintained a file on about a thousand "dangerous radicals." In Imperial Valley alone, some four thousand gun permits were issued in 1935. "Professional agitators" were rounded up merely on suspicion and held at Salinas and Brentwood in detention centers that were actually referred to as concentration camps. Vigilante groups were encouraged to burn crosses and issue threats, and their activities were reported approvingly in newspapers like the Los Angeles Times.

Growers controlled the state and federal employment agencies, which in turn forced the relief agencies to cut off workers' relief and deliver them to the labor camps. The growers pretended a greater labor demand than actually existed, and setting desperate workers against each other, they got their men to work for half their already miserable pay. Strikes were broken in the Santa Clara Valley in 1931, and in Vacaville in 1932; 1933 was an extraordinary year of violence, at Vacaville again, and then at Pixley, a cotton-growing area between Fresno and Bakersfield. At Pixley a posse of armed growers fired on strikers and their families, killing and wounding men, women, and children while the highway patrol looked on passively, hidden from view.

* Author's note: Since my book was published I have learned that this information, drawn from Carey McWilliams' 'Factories in the Field', is false. Bank of America apparently only held 3.6% of the farm mortgages in that area, but this does not, of course, invalidate the statement that banking interests controlled most of the land at that time.
These events were presented to the population at large in a very partial light. The Los Angeles Times had always been rabidly opposed to any kind of worker organization. In earlier, rugged days, its vituperative founder, General Otis, had had a cannon mounted on his limousine for fear of angry union organizers. Now the paper frothed at the mouth about foreign agitators, congratulated sheriffs for averting strikes, and complimented the California Cavaliers, who burned crosses and announced that “anyone who peeps about higher wages will wish he hadn’t.” The readers, by and large, swallowed what they were told.

When the strikes and rebellions reached their peak, times were bad and everyone knew there were fundamental problems to be resolved, but 1933 was the very year when, far from modifying the agricultural system, California decided to extend it to its limits. It was the year when the Central Valley Project was authorized by the legislature. This remarkable plan had been brewing for sixty years. Even in 1873, it was apparent that God had gotten it all wrong. Rivers were running out to sea, when they should obviously be running someplace useful. Canals would carry them across the foothills and bring millions of acres under irrigation, and big dams on the Sacramento and the San Joaquin Rivers would generate free power.

The idea was too grand for its time, and was shelved for lack of finance and support, but in 1920 Col. Robert B. Marshall revived the splendid visions of the nineteenth century. He published his own version of the water plan, and by now there were plenty of farmers to get excited about the thought of all that icy northern water rushing through their hot, arid lands. They were dealing with the same problem that had bedeviled pioneers everywhere, the very problem that the Federal Reclamation Act was intended to solve.

Addressing the state legislature in 1925, Paul Bailey from the Division of Engineering and Irrigation described the dilemma faced by communities wanting to open up new land to irrigation. How do you get enough farmers together at one time to pay for irrigation projects on the scale that conditions in California demanded? Quoting a report from 1923, he said there were already a million or more acres in California, fertile enough and with water at hand, unable to produce adequately to pay for their costs. Those costs, of course, included the cost of bringing water to the land.

“Much of this,” he wrote, “is in large holdings and in new districts that have recently been brought under irrigation.” And the problem was that “at present these lands are lacking in numbers of tillers of the soil to respond to the propitious agricultural environment of the state.

He goes on to explain why so little of this irrigated land was under cultivation. It is because the projects are necessarily of such a size “that in a year or two, [they] bring under irrigation in one community, an area of land greater than can be absorbed by normal growth within as many decades.”

He points out that communities find themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea. Dry farming communities cannot compete, and can be seen to stagnate, shrivel, and die. Only irrigation communities can prosper in the long run. But the engineering costs of new irrigation projects can be covered only if they supply large areas. Then, the problem is to find enough farmers to take up the option quickly enough to pay for it. Only a state-financed scheme could absorb the costs until enough farmers could be brought onto the land.

But the plan ran into powerful opposition from private utilities. An important part of the package involved generating and distributing public power. The Pacific Gas and Electric conglomerate, among others, wouldn't have it, and the growers weren't yet powerful enough to overcome them. They had one other recourse. They could pump.

It had been known for a long time that water lay below the valley in vast, primeval lakes, but at first the inefficient pumps of the time made it either impossible or too expensive to go below certain depths. Some growers were fortunate. They had artesian wells on their property. They had only to drill to the water and it spouted to the surface under geologic pressure, but for the great majority well water was no solution. Then technology got them off the hook with the invention of the electric pump. Soon there were wells thousands of feet deep, and the surface of the underground lake began to decline.

By 1930 it was clear that the groundwater reserves were becoming dangerously depleted. Evidently it was again time to move on to the next stage, and again approximately the same plan was issued, this time as the State Water Plan. It met with even more enthusiasm, but unfortunately when it came time to raise the money, the state had to concede that in the midst of the depression it could not. Agriculture could not expand without more water, and severe restrictions would limit the use of such water as already existed. This was anathema. The state needed more than production. It needed growth. California had already mortgaged its future and was living beyond its means, in a way that had become the principal feature of the American economy.
During the depression there was only one source of available finance in America—the federal government. In 1935, the Bureau of Reclamation under Roosevelt took over construction of the Central Valley Project. This would have been fine, but for one unfortunate snag: The rules governing federal water projects were all too well known. They followed the same old idealistic principles that were intended to foster the expansion of agrarian America. Federal water was supposed to be water for the people, not for the plutocrats. Nobody could have water for more than 160 acres, and if the bureau took over the Central Valley Project it should have meant breaking up the great estates.

In their camps and clubs and dining rooms, the proprietors considered their chances of taking the federal water and getting away with it, and it must have seemed to them that they held a strong hand. For the valleys of California to become what the laws and rhetoric of America had clearly intended—an extension of the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, with federally funded canals substituting for rainfall—would require a most un-American level of government interference with the existing, privately funded operations; a policy far too "socialistic" for even the New Deal to contemplate.

The big growers owned politicians, newspapers, radio stations. Their lawyers could keep justice spinning its wheels almost indefinitely. But beyond all this they could rely on a certain ruthless logic. They made the money that kept California growing. Their farming methods could keep this bounty flowing into the state's coffers, in a way that a proliferation of small farms never could. They wanted the water, there seemed no other way to get it, and political reality dictated that they would eventually have their way. They saw to it that what happened took exactly the opposite direction to what the federal law intended, and public money was used to expand their current practices to the limit of the state's capacity. They supported the federal takeover and made their own plans.

For a man like John Wilson, all these events presented an insoluble dilemma. He believed, as did most successful Americans, in unfettered private enterprise as the best of all possible systems in an imperfect world, and rather than look to bureaucratic regulation or some foreign ideology, he depended on the wholesome instincts of individuals to redress social inequities. With his strongly conservative background, he could hardly sympathize with militant unions and labor activists, and yet the factory agriculture that had brought these crises about was distasteful to him also. Unable to resolve the dilemma, he used his leisure time and resources to distance himself from it.

Anna Grant died prematurely in 1937, when Richard was only three, and Wilson remarried soon after to Marjorie Connell, of an even more wealthy and influential family. She was more socially and politically active than Anna too, and the Wilson family's range of connections widened further still. It was Marjorie's uncle, Michael, who made the Connell family fortune from lumber in Montana, and when he came to Los Angeles he used much of it to support the arts (her aunt founded the Los Angeles symphony orchestra) as well as education and health care in the city. The Connells, together with the wealthy and influential families they knew through their social, political, and philanthropic activities, were inclined to a gregarious and elaborate form of rustic fun. The men of the previous generation had established a tradition of camps in the Sierras and the redwoods. They took with them their servants and their silverware, set up tents and marquees, and played at being outdoorsmen. In these bucolic beauty spots, free from observation, the men could reinforce their opinions and indulge in those pleasures then considered to be exclusively masculine, and which usually involved heavy drinking as a competitive sport.

The best known of these retreats was Bohemian Grove, near Guerneville, where various camps were established by the financial heavyweights of the age, and where they liked to entertain the politicians they had sponsored to represent their interests. Mike Connell had a special affinity with the Lost Angels camp. Though considered by the others to be a rather raffish and ill-disciplined bunch, they were still important enough, through the prejudice of one of their members, to have accidentally swung the presidential election in favor of Woodrow Wilson.

The Connells had particularly close connections with the Valentines, who had a camp above Mammoth Lake where the O'Melvenys, Joseph Sartori, and others gathered—all people who became important in Richard's later life. Inevitably they became acquainted with all the families bearing the old Los Angeles names, the same people who starred in Daniel Grant's world. These were the elite of a small town grown suddenly very big. There was a tremendous amount of money to be made in this time of urban effervescence, and for several decades, through undisclosed dealings and private understandings, they succeeded in retaining control of the power structure among themselves.

Although he was not a "clubable" man, Wilson did nevertheless, through his wife's family, meet with the cream of California society. He sat on the
board of a bank and knew the very people who stood behind the vast agricultural enterprises, and the financial institutions that owned or serviced them. He met them on his occasional visits to their camps. He may have met them at the opera, or in his consulting rooms, or even on the operating table, where he met all manner of people. (Once, when working as a police surgeon, he took the leg off a policeman who had previously handed him a speeding ticket. "You've got me where you want me now, Doc," said the cop.)

What they would no doubt have told him about the deplorable state of affairs in the valleys, was that the economic realities left no leeway to increase wages or do anything else that might raise the cost of their products. For once, this hoary old line from the tearful plutocrat had a measure of truth to it, but there was no satisfaction in that. Clearly there was something fundamentally wrong with attitudes on all sides of the question.

Wilson's reputation attracted many of California's most powerful citizens to his office door, but neither the businessmen nor the politicians he knew seem to have impressed him as having a worthwhile handle on the problems of the day. During his lifetime he saw their efforts debase and overwhelm ideals that he cherished. In particular he saw Santa Ana, his symbol for rural virtue, degenerate into a grimy industrial suburb, and he had a marked tendency to regard city life in general as corrupt.

Those who knew him say that he lived for his work. He was, without doubt, considered the best surgeon in that time and place. He was a compassionate man and gave help often and freely to needy people who came his way. For the rest he took what time he could to escape the urban throng and roam the valleys in search of quail and congenial friends in the country who shared his values.

He came to know a modest farming family, the Twisselmans, on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley near Paso Robles, having had to operate on one of them. He went there to hunt when he could, and, among all the rich and celebrated people he had to deal with in his life, it was Carl Twisselman whom he acknowledged as his best friend. Carl's wife, Dorothy, has survived him, and she remembers Wilson's visits among the highlights of her life. Later he brought young Richard with him.

"He adored that boy," she said, "though I don't suppose he knows it."

The Twisselmans did not irrigate, and Dorothy has become convinced that the hydraulic culture of the Central Valley is a cruel and unnecessary perversion of nature. Through all those years of political strife, she never heard Wilson endorse agribusi-

ness. To him farming was a wonderful way of life, and a blessing on those who could sustain it. To make agriculture into an industry of exploitation, with all the attendant evils that had surfaced with it, was to make a travesty of something he revered, and he wanted nothing to do with it. Richard, who worshipped his father, absorbed that message at an early age, and it was reinforced every time they went out together.

As early as 1929, in his search for greater distance and detachment, John Wilson was drawn all the way into the mountains of Northern California, more than six hundred miles from his home and work. There, at the edge of the Yolla Bolly wilderness, he was offered a seven hundred-acre parcel that would satisfy even the sharpest desire for isolation. The only access was on horseback, after a grueling drive on dirt roads that took him through a dusty little cattle town named Covelo. It was a glorious tract of meadows and fir forests at four thousand feet, sloping down to the Eel River, where salmon spawn in winter and summer steelhead wind lazily in deep stone pools. High above the river was the crowning jewel of the place, a lovely lake named Henthorne, from which the parcel also took its name. He bought it and later added to it and, by this unlikely act he ensured that his family was, henceforth, stretched out in both space and time across the length and history of California.

Although he had no inkling, in his lifetime, of the consequences, his remarks to his son show that he was doing what he could to redress a balance.

Once Henthorne became his, he went there religiously every year for almost forty years to breathe the clear mountain air. His son remembers him saying, with unforgettable conviction: "It straightens a man out."