

Wind, Fire, Finance Troubles Took Their Toll With Flume Until Eventually Abandoned

BY W. S. HEAD

(This is the 22nd in a series of articles telling the history of El Cajon Valley. Herein is related the financial difficulties that beset the Flume Company almost from its start.)

The flume company and its associates were in financial difficulties almost from their very beginning. The drought of 1898 through 1904 caused an indebtedness of several hundred thousands of dollars. These debts were further increased by inability to cope with taxes which went un-

paid for several years. Increased cost of upkeep was realized as wind, fire, and on rare occasions, floods took their toll. And finally, the inability to furnish water in amounts required by those who had subscribed for the service.

Those men who first invested in the flume company were almost a "Who's Who" of old timers. Of course there was T. S. Van Dyke, who had conceived the idea of the flume in the early 80's, and along with him were W. E. Robinson, S. H. Marlet, G. D. Copeland, A. W. Hawley, Milton Santee, R. H. Stretch, George W. Marston, General T. T. Crittenden, Robert Allison, James Luco, and E. W. Morris. Many of these men lost heavily on their investment, while others who hung on realized a responsible return on their money.

Between 1904 and 1811 the flume went into a period of decline. Many who had purchased land in the Valley decided to invest in wells rather than depend on this source for water.

The main source of money in the setting up of the corporation in May, 1888, came from a wealthy group of English investors who purchased better than \$600,000 worth of the company stock. By 1891, \$400,000 worth of bonds on a second mortgage had been disposed of.

It was not long after the heavy construction work had started on the flume that the investors came

up with another idea to raise money. Water rights were placed on sale to the land owners for \$150 to \$800 per inch of water. An inch being a continuous flow of 12,960 gallons of water in 24 hours.

Real estate also became a part of the company's means of raising money. Investors had acquired some 3,145 acres of land known as La Mesa Colony. This land was surveyed into 10 acre tracts and in turn were sold at \$1000 each, provided the new owner agreed to take out a water right for one miner's inch at \$30 a year. Along with this purchase, by the way, went a lot, free of charge, in what was known as La Mesa Townsite.

The Londoners who had the heaviest investment in the flume became alarmed at these continued heavy costs and decline of the company. In 1898 they appointed a committee to take over the operation of the company. The Londoners retained control of the company until 1904 when the Consolidated Water Company of West Virginia was organized to take up all the flume company securities.

But with all of these changes and negotiations, the company failed to respond, and finally on June 1, 1910, the entire flume system, less the Monte Pumping Station, was sold to Col. Ed Fletcher and James A. Murray for a fraction of the money that had

been placed into the venture, \$150,000.

In the next 15 years, Fletcher and his associates had many a legal battle to retain ownership of the system. But these were real American business men. True, their investment was a paltry sum, but in the time they held ownership, they spent several fortunes in improvements. Murray Dam was built, and many thousands of yards of the old wooden flume gave way to underground concrete syphons.

A movement was started in 1911 for community action in water matters which eventually led to the formation of the La Mesa, Lemon Grove and Spring Valley Irrigation district, which included 14,794 acres of the rural communities.

In 1922 the City of El Cajon and the surrounding area petitioned for annexation into the irrigation district. Upon acceptance, the added area increased the district to 17,588 acres. In the Valley, as in other parts of the district, there were a number of land owners who did not go along with this annexation. Even today the results of this action can be seen in those unimproved areas set between large residential areas.

In 1924, it was voted by the Irrigation District that two and a half million dollars worth of bonds be issued. This staggering amount caused many more land owners in other parts of the district to withdraw.

Then on January 4, 1926, the district purchased the entire flume system with all the improvements from Col. Ed Fletcher and his associates for \$1,100,000.

Water stories are always long drawn-out stories dealing with many legal battles. Rather than to tire the reader with the some 23 pages of reports on all that has transpired, the writer has tried to condense the story into these few words. Old timers undoubtedly can point out many other memorable things which transpired.