



DESERT FARMING IN CALIFORNIA

Wade H. Ramsey, Jr., Vice President of California Central Fibre Corporation at El Centro, California, has written the following article for *The Echo*. You will find "Desert Farming In California" both interesting and educational. We are indeed indebted to Mr. Ramsey for this fine article.

COMMERCIAL air-line passengers flying west over the southeastern corner of California are impressed with the lush green fields of growing crops which nestle between rugged mountain ranges on the north and west and the Colorado River on the east. The change in landscape is very abrupt from desert waste to fertile farming. Tourists entering California over U. S. Highway 80 gain the same impression after passing through the towering sand dunes of California's "Little Sahara" and immediately thereafter coming upon a farming oasis of immense proportions. What they are seeing is California's Imperial Valley.

Dr. William P. Blake, geologist in the Williamson Expedition which was making railroad route surveys to the Pacific Coast in 1853, named this area the Colorado Desert and as early as 1855 reports to the War Department had indicated the apparent fertility of this alluvial soil which grew excellent crops of vegetables, corn and barley for the Indians wherever water could be brought onto the soil.

The story of man's conquest of the Colorado River and the Colorado Desert has often been told and yet there is much to tell about this area which within the span of a half-century has become one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In May of 1540 the Spanish explorer Melchior Diaz crossed the Colorado River at a point above the Gila River and became the first white man to set foot on what is now known as Imperial Valley. It was not until 1774 that Captain Juan Bautista de Anza and his expedition crossed the present Imperial Valley en route to the missions of San Gabriel. At a later date (1858 - 1861) the Butterfield Stage Route traversed this area, which at that time was a barren desert. It is doubtful if the early explorers remotely dreamed that this desert waste, inhabited by hostile Indians and with sparse and widely-scattered water holes, would one day become one of the Nation's principal winter vegetable gardens.

It was in 1849 that Dr. Oliver M. Wozencraft, while on an investigational visit to the Colorado

Desert, conceived the idea that water could be brought by gravity from the Colorado River to the floor of the desert for farming purposes, but not until May of 1901 did Mr. George Chaffey turn the first water into the main canal.

The subsequent fights to contain the Colorado within its channel, the leveling with mule teams and Fresno scrapers of farm land out of scorching desert, and the economic struggles of the pioneer settlers and the early water and land companies is a story which captures the imagination of travelers who learn for the first time that this farming oasis was once desert waste. The All-American Canal was completed by the Department of Interior in 1938. This canal brings water from the Colorado River, across the sand dunes on the American side of the International Boundary, and assures Imperial Valley a constant supply of water. The All-American Canal is truly the Valley's life line; without it there could be no farming in this area.

IRRIGATION SYSTEM

Water, occupying three-fourths of the earth's surface, has played a dynamic role in the history of mankind down through the ages. Without the erosive action of water there would be no soil. The destiny of many nations has hinged upon the control of certain waterways and portions of the high seas. Plant and animal life depend upon water for existence and in the case of most agricultural plant life the water supply must be fresh water. California occupies the lead in many phases of the Nation's agriculture, and irrigation water is largely responsible for it. California's irrigation water is either gravity water taken from the rivers and lakes or well water pumped out of the ground. The economic importance of water to California and particularly to Imperial Valley is obvious and accounts for the current controversy in the Congress over priority rights to water in the Colorado River. Without irrigation water Imperial Valley's 612,658 acres of irrigable farm land would soon return to the desert waste which existed prior to 1901.

The utilization of water from the Colorado River for surface irrigation is based upon gravity flow through the All-American Canal to the south-end