

The Good Old Days of Water in Ojai and the Ventura River: A Myth?

by Kit Stoltz

Before the padres from Mexico arrived in force in the Ventura River valley in the 18th century, and began to harvest water for the mission they built, and before settlers from the eastern United States arrived and began to grow citrus in the Ojai Valley, a century later, water flowed plentifully on the land, and fish swam in abundance in the river and its tributaries.

“Ventura County was once regarded as the best watered county south of the Tehachapi’s, and it probably still is in comparison with other southern counties,” wrote TK in the Ventura County Historical Society Quarterly in the summer of 1960. In “The Ojai Valley: an illustrated history” Patricia Fry notes that Ventura was the first place in our area to be settled by the Spanish, largely due to the ready availability of water from the Ventura River, which had already attracted five settlements of the Chumash, mostly around the mouth of the river, with a handful of others upstream in Ojai.

Natural facts speak to the abundance of water in the mountains and in and around Ojai. Beaver could be found in many streams in Southern California in the not-so-distant past, according to US Geological Survey biologist Christopher Lanman, and can still be found in some Southern California rivers, such as the Kern. Rick Bisaccia, stewardship director of the Ojai Valley Land Conservancy, points out that beaver were found in the Sespe along the creek that runs by Highway 33 north of Ojai as late as the 1980’s, and were well known to the Chumash, as well as to his father Andy, who led Boy Scout camp-outs in the area in the 1930’s and 1940’s.

The Ventura River and its tributaries, including Matilija, Coyote and San Antonio creeks, brought a great deal of unpredictable flooding and silting to the river bed before the construction of Matilija Dam, in the 1940’s, and Casitas Reservoir, in the 1950’s. An ecology of the history of Ventura County rivers, published in 2011 by the California Conservancy, shows that the types of plants supported by the river remain largely unchanged, but that the Ventura River downstream from Meiners Oaks was wider, with bigger flood plains, a more meandering flow, and substantial islands – as large as twenty acres – in the river towards the mouth.

Then and now, the presence of surface water depended in large part on the underlying geology. Not far from the Friend’s Ranch citrus packing house on Highway 33, the roadside stream hits an underground rock dam and comes to the surface, but disappears a couple of miles downstream, according to Tony Thacher, of the Ojai Pixie Growers Association.

“There’s always been water in this stretch of the river,” said Thacher, speaking from the packinghouse overlooking the stream where his family has been growing citrus for generations. “The Indians knew all about it.”

Father Juan Crespi, one of the first of the Spanish to explore what was then known as “Alta California,” said in his diary, describing an exploration up the Ventura River in August of 1769, that “...we followed a good-sized stream of running water...the hollow [valley] keeps ever on, with a great many cottonwoods, a great deal of willows, and many live oaks.”

An account of a journey from Ventura up the road to Ojai (on what is today Creek Road) in the 1870's, published in a Ventura newspaper called the Signal, sounded a similarly lush note.

"The road to the Ojai leads up the San Buenaventura River which is a beautiful stream, almost clear, with rock and sand bottom and full of trout and small fish," wrote the unnamed author. "The river bottom is covered with huge sycamore, walnut and live and white oak trees, many of which are covered with wild grapevines which add much to their beauty."

THE SPANISH BUILD A MISSION – SUPPLIED BY THE VENTURA RIVER

The 224-square mile Ojai watershed, which is still mostly undeveloped national forest, and from which come the flows of Matilija Creek and the Sespe, still supplies (with groundwater from wells) the entirety of water for Ojai, Upper Ojai, and to properties downstream on the Ventura River. This watershed also supplies a substantial but varying percentage of water for the city of Ventura. In wet years the city draws about 50% of its supply from the Ventura River and from Lake Casitas; in dry years, a total of about 30%, purchased from Casitas, according to the city of Ventura.

A complete dependence on a local watershed – to be "off the grid" of the State Water Project and not connected to water imported from the Colorado or from Northern California at all -- is rare in our semi-arid region.

But although unusual in the dry and populous Southern California of today, in this mountainous watershed is it business as usual. For thousands of years the Chumash have lived in settlements in around the river, mostly near the mouth. Although the Chumash were not growers, they developed "a culture of remarkable sophistication, successfully incorporating many characteristics usually thought to be exclusive hallmarks of agriculturists," wrote archaeologist Brian Dillon, in a 1990 survey.

When the Spanish arrived late in the 18th century, within a few years – using hundreds of Chumash workers for labor – they built an aqueduct that ran from the Ventura River near Foster Park to the San Buenaventura Mission present-day downtown Ventura, seven miles in length. This aqueduct, remnants of which can still be seen, supplied a twenty-five acre mission, with a pear orchard of hundreds of trees, with water for fifty years, until it was destroyed in the devastating floods of 1860-1861.

John Krist, who has written a recent history of Ventura County agriculture called "Living Legacy," points out that in the 19th century agriculture in Ventura County depended largely on "dry farming," with crops such as olives, apricots, and grains such as barley and wheat, routing surface water for irrigation where available, and using artesian (naturally pressurized) wells elsewhere.

"In the higher elevations of the county, such as Ojai, which has an average of about 15 inches of rain a year, you can find surface water and dig artesian wells and sometimes find flowing water that will shoot all the way to the second floor window of a farmhouse when it's first tapped," he said.

Dry land crops planted in Ojai in the 19th century included olives and apricots; in the Ventura River valley, over 3000 acres of wheat and over 1000 acres of barley were planted. According to historian Fry, the Ojai Valley had over 115 artesian wells in the 1880's. But that wasn't enough: One enterprising Vermonter named Buckman built a flume from Horn Canyon (on present-day Thacher School grounds) and routed water to the first citrus ranch in the East End in the 1870's, totaling twenty-five acres.

RUNNING DRY – A HUNDRED YEAR AGO

Ojai's burgeoning growth – in both population and agriculture – brought water shortages to Ojai beginning about a hundred years ago.

"Agriculture expanded beyond the sustainable yield prior to 1920," said engineer Paul Jenkin, who with Surfrider and the Ventura River Watershed Council has been working on watershed issues in the region since the 1980's. "There were already over 4000 acres planted."

According to Russ Baggerly, who over the past decade has served on the boards of three separate water agencies, "if you wanted to buy property in the past, you had to buy water too – we had our own little "Chinatown" going on in the Ojai Valley clear back then."

In the late 19th and early 20th century, a plethora of local water companies sprang into existence. They ranged from the small (Ojala, which first began serving about fifty people north of Ojai in the 1880's) to the substantial, (Casitas Municipal Water District, serving over 55,000 people). Casitas was launched in the early 1950's, after several years of drought, and not long after the withering Dust Bowl drought of the 1930's. In association with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Casitas went on to build the reservoir on which Ojai, surrounding town, and much of Ventura still depend.

Casitas reservoir is intended to keep us in water even through a twenty-year drought, according to long-time general manager Steve Wickstrum. The fact that all local water districts had to face then and must face now is the extraordinarily variable amount of rainfall characteristic of Southern California, as shown in this current drought, now heading into its fifth year.

"We can't exclusively blame the people for the declines in groundwater," said Jordan Kear, a hydrogeologist who contracts for the Ojai Basin Groundwater Management Agency. "Drought is the overarching climatic reality that native species have adapted to, and newcomers are beginning to understand."

Talk to Tony Thacher, who has decades of experience in agriculture in Ojai, and he will tell you that the squabbling and bickering over water in this region is nothing new.

"The whole history of agriculture in this area, going all the way back to the 1870's, is developing a source of water for when it doesn't rain, which is most of the time," he said.

Talk to Russ Baggerly, who recently gave a talk during the "Living with Drought" put on by the Ojai Valley Green Coalition, and he will tell you the good news and the bad news about water in Ojai.

The good news is that "the alluvial material that makes up the basin that holds our water is made of fine gravel, with sand and clay and cobble," he said. "It's not like the central valley aquifers that collapse when you take the water out. We don't have a lot of subsidence in the basin, and it fills up quickly. We are at low water levels, but that is based on the lack of rainfall, and not necessarily attributable to drawing 5000 acre feet a year out of the basin. The last good rainfall we had the static water level rose five feet."

Still the static water level on which pumps draw today is at about 210 feet below the ground, the lowest it's been since the 1960's.

"Save water as if your life depended on it," he warned.