

WILLIAM NEIL MARTIN

A Thirst in Babylon



In 1928 a dam near Los Angeles collapsed, sending 12 billion gallons of water into an unsuspecting community. Several hundred lives were lost. This is the story of that disaster.

A Thirst in Babylon

By William Neil Martin

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13398.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**

WILLIAM NEIL MARTIN

A Thirst in Babylon



Copyright © 2024 William Neil Martin

Print ISBN: 978-1-958892-79-4

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-739-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2024

First Edition

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Martin, William Neil

A Thirst in Babylon by William Neil Martin

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024908721

Books by
WILLIAM NEIL MARTIN

Fiction

CITIZENS OF EDEN

(No longer in print)

STORM SURGE

THE McALLISTER BRAND

A THIRST IN BABYLON

Non-fiction

NORTH OF RED ROCK CANYON

(No longer in print)

THROUGH THICK AND THIN

The Coming of Age of
Floyd and Christine Martin in
Southern Mississippi
1922 - 1952

MONDAY
March 12, 1928

10:00 A.M.

JEFF KIENAST CONTROLLED the Curtiss Jenny from the rear seat of the biplane as the aircraft flew a westerly course no more than three hundred feet above a terrain of scrub brush and occasional stands of stunted oak. The southern California sky was gray and sullen, which intensified the sense of gloom that was swelling within the young pilot. Though this was merely a sightseeing flight, his suspicions were growing that his passenger had a more sinister motive. He wished by all that was good and decent that he had never consented to having any involvement in what he was beginning to suspect was a villainous act.

The pilot frowned as he glimpsed at the gray-haired passenger who sat in the front seat of the plane. A growing disappointment in the man saddened the pilot – all the more so because the passenger was his uncle.

A series of ridges drifted downward from a distant rise several miles to the west by southwest, like huge fingers splayed out from an arthritic hand, forming canyons of various widths and depths. It was over one of these ridges that the plane flew, as Jeff banked the ten-year-old relic of the Great War to the left and followed a generally south by southwest course along the contours of San Francisquito Canyon. The canyon was narrow, and its walls rose steadily upward. In order to remain above the canyon, the pilot moved the yoke back slightly. The Jenny's 90-horsepower engine struggled to

attain the higher altitude. The air speed dropped to 50 miles per hour and the pilot had to dip the nose slightly to regain speed. Even in straight and level flight a Curtiss Jenny JN-3 had a top speed of only 75 miles per hour. But Jeff could not take a chance on slowing the plane to a speed less than 50 for fear that it would stall, and, at that low altitude, the aircraft would crash into the canyon like a falling rock. After regaining a safe cruising speed, he nursed the stick back ever so gently until the plane gradually increased its altitude to approximately three hundred feet above the canyon's rim.

Fewer than ten minutes had passed when the plane flew over a perpendicular ridge that boxed the canyon, and beyond the ridge a narrow body of water, four miles in length, formed a lake inside the canyon. Regret ate away at Jeff as he realized the purpose of his mission that morning. His uncle had been a resident of the Owens Valley, located two hundred miles north of Los Angeles, and he was one of many from that region who contended that the water below had been stolen from Owens River and piped to this site by William Mulholland, Chief Engineer of the Los Angeles Water Company. And it was his desire to put an end to this theft – by whatever means. Belatedly, it then dawned on the young pilot – this was not a sightseeing aerial tour of the new dam. It was a reconnaissance mission!

Something had been gnawing at him throughout the flight. His uncle was not given to sightseeing tours. There was a sinister nature about him, but over the years the pilot had tried to ignore that fact. Aside from Jeff's father, this man was the only relative he had.

Shortly after the plane was directly over the lake Jeff noticed a stone structure on the rim of the canyon, off to his left. According to the map that had been provided prior to his departure, the structure was the water company's Power

Station Number One. Two large pipes, several feet in diameter, descended from the side of the power plant down the bank of the canyon and into the water.

A short time later, as Jeff flew the plane on its course, the top of the dam came into view directly in front of him. It was the dam that his passenger wanted to get a good look at, so he slowed his speed as much as he dared. Rather than decreasing the power on the throttle, he simply raised the nose of the plane slightly and there was an immediate slowing of the aircraft.

As the plane neared the dam it became quite clear that the lake was full, for the water level was up to the top of the massive structure. The water was rough that morning, for Jeff could see whitecaps even from his altitude. It appeared that some were even sloshing over the top of the dam. Of course, that might have been his imagination, because his focus was not on whitecaps, but on the man who was standing atop the rampart in the center of the span that crossed the canyon. Jeff extended an arm and waved to the man, but the wave was not returned. The man on the rampart merely stared upward, his gaze following the plane as it flew over the dam and over the canyon beyond the lake. The passenger showed no reaction to the man atop the dam.

With the dam behind him, Jeff dipped the nose of the aircraft, and the Jenny regained its cruising speed. Less than a mile south of the dam the plane flew over a narrow outgrowth of rock that jutted out from the east wall like a small promontory, causing the canyon to veer sharply to the right. On the other side of the outcropping, which was no more than fifty yards wide at its base, the floor of the canyon proceeded east for a short distance then returned to its generally southern course. At the apex of the curve, resting at the base of the

canyon's eastern bank, was Power Station Number Two. It appeared to be a twin of Station Number One.

It was somewhere in this area, he had been told, off to the west of the canyon, that the popular western screen star Harry Carey had a three-thousand-acre working ranch. The thought crossed his mind that, if, by any chance the dam should break, would the Carey ranch be protected from any flood damage?

Beyond the power station the canyon widened in places, and the sight below brought a sudden shock that sent a wave of nausea from the pit of Jeff's stomach. On the ground beneath were several modest residences! There was even what appeared to be a schoolhouse atop the earthen floor that separated the walls of the canyon. This was something he had not anticipated. There was an actual community directly beneath him – with families – a schoolhouse – *children!* He had not expected to find people living within these canyon walls! If the dam broke, a hundred-foot wall of water would be on this little community in a fraction of a minute!

Jeff leaned forward and tapped his passenger on the shoulder. When the uncle turned his head toward him, the pilot pumped his hand downward several times, his index finger extended, to emphasize what was below them. The passenger briefly glanced down at the community and shrugged. This angered Jeff, but there was nothing he could do at the moment.

Two more minutes of flight and the biplane reached the mouth of the canyon, which formed a rather rugged T-intersection with the gentle flow of the Santa Clara River. The pilot banked the plane to the right and headed west, following the riverbed a few more miles until coming upon the north/south highway commonly known as the Ridge Route. At the highway Jeff banked again to the right and followed a

northerly course above the highway, slowly increasing the plane's altitude.

The Santa Clara River continued under the highway bridge in a westerly course, its banks cutting through the countryside, entering Ventura County, and passing through such towns as Camulos, Piru, Fillmore, Santa Paula and Saticoy, eventually emptying into the Pacific Ocean between Oxnard and Ventura, fifty miles west of San Francisquito Canyon.

After completing his bank to the right, Jeff looked down over Castaic Junction, where he saw two people, a boy in his late teens and a grown man, below and slightly to his left. The man was working on a Model T touring car behind a motor court, and the boy appeared to be helping him. The man was preoccupied with the car's engine, but the boy looked up and waved enthusiastically as the low-flying biplane flew over. Jeff managed a half-smile and returned the wave, but his mind was elsewhere – back in the canyon – focused on the numerous residences and the school in San Francisquito Canyon, clearly within the flood path of the dam. He could not get the thought of all those innocent people out of his mind, nor could he understand the obvious indifference exhibited by his passenger. The growing knot persisted in the pit of his stomach, and he fought back the bile that rose in his throat, trying desperately not to vomit.

On the ground the boy followed the flight path of the aircraft, which continued to climb to a higher altitude as it proceeded north, parallel with the highway, for another minute. It then banked to the right and flew a somewhat north by northeast course. The teenager continued to watch the plane until it disappeared into the gloomy skies. More than an hour would pass before the Curtiss Jenny touched down at its point of origin, a runway of hard-packed sand on the northern edge of Mojave.

HALF AN HOUR after the plane flew over him at such a frighteningly low altitude, Tony Harnischfeger was still standing atop the rampart of the St. Francis Dam. This was not a good day for him, and that blasted plane just added to the drama. He would not be surprised, he thought, if the Old Man had hired that pilot to fly over just to check up on him. Then again, that wouldn't make much sense, seeing as the Old Man was on his way right this minute to see him about the condition of the dam.

Harnischfeger had been hired as the damkeeper when the dam first opened almost two years earlier. He lived with his common-law wife and small son in a cottage provided for them a quarter of a mile downstream from the structure. Prior to his employment as keeper of the dam, Harnischfeger worked as a security guard patrolling the Los Angeles Water Company's aqueduct that ran from Owens Valley to Los Angeles. His patrolling area was in Jawbone Canyon, an isolated piece of high desert country north of the town of Mojave. He and his small family had resided in the nearby community of Cantil.

The security measures taken by the water company were certainly justified, because there had been attempts to sabotage the aqueduct. On more than one occasion a group of raiders, purportedly from the Owens valley, dynamited sections of the aqueduct, causing significant damage. It was for this reason that armed patrols were employed.

Just before the St. Francis Dam opened in 1926, Tony Harnischfeger was offered the job of damkeeper, and he jumped at the chance. For him it was quite a promotion. In addition to the pay increase, the water company provided living quarters for him and his family.

After two years, however, the novelty of the new job had worn off, and he had developed a strong sense of apprehension

about this concrete behemoth that had become his charge. The truth be known, it was more than apprehension. Harnischfeger had a genuine fear of the dam. He frequently had nightmares of him and his family sleeping in the small cottage near the base of the towering wall that held back fifteen billion gallons of water – water that relentlessly pushed forward in its quest to continually move downstream to the ocean. And in his nightmare, the dam would always break, sending a mountain of water, one hundred feet high, crashing down on the small cottage. Harnischfeger would then awaken in such a sweat that he would often wonder if he had, in some way, gotten drenched but managed to survive the disaster. His concern regarding his family's safety became so acute that the damkeeper constructed a crude set of steps up the west side of the canyon, near the cottage, as an escape route in the event something happened to the dam and sufficient warning could be given to allow their escape. It was not the most efficient safety precaution, but the escape route did offer him at least a modicum of comfort.

Harnischfeger could not admit to himself or to anyone else that he had any fear of the dam. He did, however, regard himself as a cautious man, and it was his duty to report any irregularities, such as seepage, etc., to the higher-ups. And it was seepage from the dam that prompted him to report the matter to the main office in Los Angeles that morning. To his distress, though, he was told that the big man himself, William Mulholland, would be driving out to inspect the dam personally.

As the dam keeper paced nervously atop the rampart, he frequently gazed southward, along the upper side of the canyon's west wall, where the roughly graded dirt road ran along the contours of the canyon. It was the primary route to

the dam, and the road that Mulholland would travel to meet him.

Then, shortly after 10:30 A.M., the knot in the pit of the damkeeper's stomach tightened as he saw the unmistakable water company's executive vehicle lumbering slowly around the curves of the narrow, bumpy, dusty canyon road.

A moment later the big car, of the Packard vintage, pulled to the left side of the road and parked a dozen feet in front of the dam's west wing. The driver stepped out and opened the left rear door and waited for the occupant to emerge. The right rear door opened from within, and Harnischfeger recognized Harvey Van Norman getting out of the car. The sight of Van Norman, Mulholland's right-hand-man, brought a momentary sigh of relief to the damkeeper. Van Norman had a reputation for being an easy-going person with a friendly disposition – someone who would not jump down a man's throat at the least indiscretion.

But the moment of relief faded when the damkeeper saw the Chief slowly step out of the left passenger's side and walk around the car. At 72 years of age Mulholland walked with a slight stoop to his shoulders. His drooping mustache hid much of his facial expression, and if one were not accustomed to his dry sense of humor, that person might be left with the opinion that Mulholland was always in a bad mood. Harnischfeger was one such person. To say that the Chief intimidated him would be an understatement. To say that the mere presence of the Chief frightened the damkeeper into a state of almost complete immobility would be more accurate.

To Tony Harnischfeger, as well as to most of the lower-level employees of the water company, William Mulholland was larger than life. He was a giant. His feats in bringing water to an otherwise dry metropolis over the past quarter of a century had made him the most famous engineer in California,

if not the entire United States. The people of Los Angeles, for the most part, loved him, while the folks up in the Owens Valley area hated him. But love him or hate him, most of the country stood in awe of William Mulholland's accomplishments.

Harnischfeger's feelings were a jumbled mess. Part of him resented the man. Part of him looked upon the Chief in wonder. The dam keeper tended to say critical things behind Mulholland's back that he would never say to his face. He knew that it was a cowardly way to be, and perhaps that was the reason for the resentment. At this moment, though, what Tony felt was fear of the man who was now approaching him atop the rampart.

"Mr. Harnischfeger," Mulholland inquired when he was within five feet of the damkeeper.

"Yes sir," Tony replied meekly.

"I believe you've met the Assistant Chief, Harvey Van Norman," Mulholland said, indicating the man standing to his right.

"Yes sir," Tony replied again.

Van Norman smiled warmly and nodded to the damkeeper. "Morning, Tony."

"Morning, sir."

"It is my understanding, Mr. Harnischfeger," Mulholland resumed, "that you detected muddy water flowing from a leak in the dam. Is that correct?"

"Yes sir, that's correct."

Mulholland's face remained expressionless, but within him a growing tension began to swell. Minor leaks in a dam were quite common, and usually presented no concerns as to the structural integrity of the dam, provided the water flowing from the leak was clear. If, however, the water was muddy, it could spell disaster. In all probability it would mean that

foundation material was being eroded away from beneath the giant structure. Because the reservoir was full, it would be only a matter of time before the water pressure against the dam would cause the structure to collapse.

“Perhaps you could show us this leak and point out any other concerns you may have about the dam.” Mulholland spoke in a calm voice. He had no intention of revealing his deep concerns about the leak to the damkeeper, for he was aware of Harnischfeger’s loose tongue, and before he departed, the Chief was determined to discuss that matter with him.

“Yes, sir, I can do that,” Tony said.

For the next two hours the three men inspected every foot of the structure’s exposed area, beginning on the east side. Evidence of seepage was found in various places, but the seepage created nothing more than a minuscule trickle of clear water that dripped down the face of the dam. It was nothing to be concerned about.

Mulholland’s driver, meanwhile, removed a camera from the car and descended the west bank of the canyon, where he began taking snapshots of the massive structure. He had obviously been directed to do so by the Chief prior to their arrival at the dam. The chauffeur then ascended the east bank and took shots from that angle before moving farther north to get a shot across the water, facing west by southwest. The photo took in the entire expanse of the dam, showing the three men standing together about midway along the rampart. The water in the foreground was at the top of the spillway. Little did the driver realize that, in the not-too-distant future, these photographs would become historic.

When the trio moved to the west side of the structure, where the leak that had caused all the concern was, Van Norman, who was more than two decades younger than the

Chief, descended the steep hillside adjacent to the site of the leak for a closer inspection. When he arrived at the precise spot where the water exited the dam he studied the escaping water keenly and was relieved to see that the water was quite clear. There was not a trace of material in suspension leaking from the dam.

As Van Norman carefully descended the hill, he followed the course of the stream that carried the leaking water. The stream flowed across the old construction road that had been used at the time the dam was being built, then down the hillside, where it picked up dirt that had been dumped during construction. It was at this point that the clear water became muddy. Van Norman reported his findings to the Chief and both men breathed heavy sighs of relief.

By this time the chauffeur had completed his picture-taking and had returned to the car. Mulholland suggested that Van Norman join the chauffeur, and he would be with them momentarily, for he had a few final suggestions to give to the damkeeper. Van Norman gave the Chief a knowing look then glanced uncomfortably at Harnischfeger.

“Be seeing you, Tony.”

“Be seeing you, too, Mr. Van Norman,” Tony replied, a note of nervous anticipation in his voice.

When they were alone Mulholland, standing no more than three feet in front of Harnischfeger, stared, unblinking, into the eyes of his subordinate. After what seemed an eternity to the damkeeper the Chief finally spoke.

“I’ve been hearing some rather disturbing stories about you, Mr. Harnischfeger.”

“Wha ... what kind of stories, sir?”

“Oh, I think you know, Mr. Harnischfeger. For one thing, it has come to my attention that you have been allowing friends to have fishing parties out there on the reservoir, as if it

were your own private lake.” He waited a moment to see if Harnischfeger was going to reply. When he did not, Mulholland continued, “You know, of course, there is a strict policy against allowing anyone on the lake. The reason for that is quite clear. In the event of an accident, such as a drowning, the Los Angeles Water Company is liable – especially if an employee of the company invited them out onto the lake. I never want to hear of that again, is that clear?”

“Yes sir,” Harnischfeger replied. Inwardly he felt a bit of relief, for the last sentence in the Old Man’s tirade inferred that he would not be fired.

“Now I need to address a matter that, to me, is even more serious than allowing people onto the lake, and it has to do with your loose tongue.”

“Why, I haven’t ...” Harnischfeger began, but stopped when Mulholland held up his hand angrily in front of the damkeeper’s face.

“Don’t!” The Chief’s face reddened, and his frown deepened behind the drooping mustache. “Don’t anger me any more than I am already by some feeble attempt at denial. I know for a fact that you have been spreading gossip about the dam being unsafe. You visit friends and, before you leave you make remarks such as, ‘I’ll see you next week, that is, if the dam doesn’t break in the meantime.’ When your friends ask if they can fish in the lake, you reply, ‘Sure, if the lake is still here when you come to fish.’ Don’t ask me how I know this. I have my sources.”

Harnischfeger stared at his superior in disbelief – not because the allegations were untrue, but because the Old Man was aware of them. How could he know?

“For as long as large dams have been built throughout the world,” Mulholland continued, “they have created a sense of insecurity among the residents who live downstream from

them. This is natural, at least until the dam has been there for a while and the residents come to trust in its safety. But this dam is only two years old. People have not had time to get adjusted to it yet. It takes time. But when the damkeeper himself is constantly berating the dam, how are the residents expected to react? It is your responsibility to build that trust; not tear it down.”

“Yes sir,” Harnischfeger replied weakly, sensing a need to make some kind of response.

Mulholland went on, as if the damkeeper had not spoken. “And now I’m going to issue you a warning, Mr. Harnischfeger. If I ever hear of another occasion where you have badmouthed this dam, you will be fired immediately.”

A long pause followed as Mulholland stared directly into the damkeeper’s eyes. Harnischfeger wanted desperately to drop his eyes and stare at his feet, or at the Chief’s feet – anywhere but into the Old Man’s eyes.

“Yes sir.” With that, Mulholland turned and walked slowly back to the car.

The driver, meantime, had turned the vehicle around and was facing down the canyon. As soon as the Chief was seated the car began rolling down the rough road. Mulholland leaned his head back on the seat and closed his eyes. A moment later he softly chuckled.

Van Norman looked at his superior and grinned. “I take it your conversation went well?”

“It was a bit one-sided, but, yes, I believe it went well.” He chuckled again. “I don’t think we will have any more problems with Tony.”

A long, silent moment passed; then Van Norman’s grin faded. “I did see something back there, Boss, that we’re going to have to fix real soon.”

Mulholland lifted his head from the backrest. He was suddenly all business again. "What is it, Van?"

"When I discovered that the water leaking from the dam was clear and I followed it down to where it became muddy, I noticed something else. I didn't want to say anything to you then, in front of Tony, because I knew there was nothing we could do immediately to fix the problem."

"What was it?"

"The water coming from the leak was not flowing in a slow, steady stream. There were frequent spurts shooting out. The concern, of course, is that the enormous pressure of the water against the wall of the structure may be causing the leak to slowly widen."

Mulholland thought for a moment. "This does present a problem. In order to repair the leak, it will be necessary to lower the water level. The reservoir is now full. It will take weeks to lower it to a level that will allow workmen to repair the leak." The Chief leaned his head back on the headrest and closed his eyes. Breathing a deep sigh, he added, "Oh, well. There's nothing to be done about it now. Let's go back to the office. In the next few days, we'll address the matter with staff. Perhaps someone will come up with a quicker solution than dropping the water level."

The car lumbered down the canyon road toward Los Angeles. Unknown to the two engineers, the vehicle was taking William Mulholland and Harvey Van Norman from their final visit to St. Francis Dam.

I:
MULHOLLAND
1877-1904

1

YOU DON'T KNOW ME. Never heard of me. My name's not important to this story so there's no need for me to introduce myself. What's important is that I knew Bill Mulholland inside and out, from the day he and his brother first rode into Los Angeles back in the late 1800s, all the way to the end of this story, more than half a century later.

You might have noticed that I referred to him as Bill. Actually, he was known by many names. When he was young some of his relatives called him Willie; others referred to him as Will, or William. After he became an important man in the water company he was known as Chief, or Boss. Those in the lower ranks – and out of the Chief's hearing – referred to him as the Old Man. Over the years Bill made a lot of enemies, and they also had a lot of names for him that I won't mention here. But as for me, I always just called him Bill.

What you are about to read you can take to the bank. Either I witnessed it myself or I learned of it from a reliable source shortly after the event in question. You might say that, for more than fifty years, where Bill Mulholland was concerned, I was the proverbial fly on the wall.

IT WAS A DRY, dusty January day in 1877 when 21-year-old William Mulholland and his younger brother, Hugh, rode into Los Angeles. Bill was not impressed by what he saw

as he took in the surroundings from astride his horse. He saw no beauty in this dry, colorless pueblo that boasted a population of 9,000 souls.

The two brothers had entered the town from the north, and as they slowly rode south on the dirt road that was identified as Main Street by a crude sign they had noticed several yards behind them, they passed several adobe dwellings that seemed to emphasize the dryness and filth of the dusty ground on which they were erected. Between the drab gray houses were thatched coverings supported by an eight-foot pole in each corner. Under the coverings were several Mexicans – men, women and children. They all seemed to be taking naps – in the middle of the afternoon! No one was working!

There were also wooden structures, none of which had ever been painted, their surfaces long since bleached bone dry by the relentless rays of the sun. These, too, appeared to be private residences, but there was no one around.

The Mulholland brothers then rode past the Pico House on their left. The only building in the area made of red brick, it was, without a doubt, the most elegant hotel in the immediate vicinity. The structure stood out like a single rose placed upon a colorless pile of sand and debris. There were other hotels within a few blocks of one another, such as the United States and St. Elmo Hotels, but none as classy as the Pico House.

Less than half a block past and on the opposite side of the street from the Pico House the Mulhollands rode past a horse stable. It would be an understatement to say that it was poorly maintained. The foul stench that emanated from the stable, the ground of which overflowed onto the roadway with horse dung, was overwhelming. And the large flies that buzzed the vicinity of the establishment were a nuisance to any man or animal that had the misfortune to pass by the disgusting waste.

Continuing south, the brothers had just managed to ride a short distance beyond the range of the corral's offensive odor and began to breathe fresh, clean air when they found themselves adjacent to the main entrance of the St. Elmo Hotel. Both Mulhollands suddenly reined their mounts at the same time. But it was not the hotel that brought them to a halt. One door south was a saloon with a sign in the window advertising nickel beer and free sandwiches. Both of the brothers were hungry after their long ride, and the sign's offering was too tempting to pass up. Tying their horses in front of the saloon, they pushed through the batwing doors and proceeded to the end of the bar, where stacks of beef, ham, pork and cheese, along with pickles and loaves of bread, awaited them.

I would like to point out that I happened to be in the saloon sitting alone at a table in a corner nursing a mug of beer when the Mulholland brothers entered the establishment and was therefore a witness to everything that was said at that time.

When the young men entered I could tell at a glance they were related. Both were a bit taller than average. Each had a dark, thick, wavy mop of hair. Their facial structures were similar, with eyes and mouths that hinted at a no-nonsense nature about them.

As Bill and Hugh hungrily stacked meat and cheese onto slices of bread, the bartender, a middle-aged man with an enormous handlebar mustache, approached and said, "Boys, you're gonna have to order a drink if you wanna eat the grub."

"Yes sir," replied the elder Mulholland. "We'll have beer."

The bartender withdrew then returned a moment later with two mugs of cold beer, the foam flowing over the sides. Each with a beer in one hand and a plate full of sandwiches in the other, the two young men found a table near the window at the front of the saloon.

For the next five minutes they both ate ravenously, neither of them saying a word. It had been several days since either had eaten a full meal. They had departed San Francisco a week earlier with ten dollars and some change between them and a sack of biscuits and some beef jerky. In the San Joaquin Valley, the brothers had stopped at a farm and were treated well. That was the last decent meal they had eaten until now.

It was mid-afternoon and there were only a few patrons in the saloon. One man, standing at the bar, had been watching the two brothers ever since they first entered the establishment. Bill made a mental note of the man's apparent interest in them, but he chose to ignore it for the moment.

"Now that we've made it to Los Angeles," Hugh began, "where do we go from here?"

"Our next step is to locate Aunt Catherine," Bill said. After a pause, he added, "That is, if she and our cousins made it this far."

Having finished his beer, the man at the bar set his mug on the counter and moved to the table where the Mulhollands were sitting. He was a handsome man who appeared to be in his early thirties and was attired in a neat dark suit. He sported a full mustache and goatee, the two of which seemed to meet at the mouth. It was a solid mass of whiskers, three inches wide, from just beneath his nose to two inches below his chin and seemed to serve no purpose but to try to hide his otherwise youthful appearance.

"You boys just arrive in Los Angeles?" he asked.

“Yes sir, we did,” Bill replied, then added, “Why do you want to know?”

The man opened the left lapel of his coat to reveal the badge of a deputy sheriff pinned to his shirt. He smiled and said, “Let’s just say it’s my job to know.” He motioned to a vacant chair. “May I?”

“Help yourself,” Bill said.

As he seated himself the man took off his hat and placed it on the table. “My name is Henry Mitchell. I’m the undersheriff of the county.”

“What’s an undersheriff?” Hugh wanted to know.

“The undersheriff is the number two law enforcement officer in Los Angeles County. Second only to the sheriff.”

“My name’s William Mulholland, and this is my brother, Hugh.”

After the brothers shook hands with the undersheriff, Mitchell asked, “And what do you think of our fair city?”

“From what we’ve seen so far, not much,” Bill replied. “We just passed some Mexican houses when we rode in and everyone was outside, under some kind of veranda or something, and they were all sound asleep – in the middle of the day! Doesn’t anybody work in this town?”

Mitchell offered a patient smile. “The reason they aren’t working is because this is the hottest part of the day. It’s an old Mexican custom, and for my part, a very wise custom.” After a pause, he continued, “You see, these people come from a hot, dry climate, and they learned a long time ago to adapt to the climate by working with it. So, they get up very early in the morning to begin their work day. Then, when the day is at its hottest point, they take a rest for a few hours. This is known as a *siesta*. Later in the afternoon, when it cools off, they resume their work, and will continue into the evening hours.

Mexican families often do not have their evening meals until late at night, perhaps ten p.m."

"But this is January, sir," Bill countered. "While it's not as cold as other parts of the country, the weather now seems to be fairly mild – certainly not too hot to work."

The undersheriff breathed a patient sigh, then spoke in a slightly softer tone. "Be that as it may, the siesta is a year-round custom. The Mexicans in our community are far from lazy. Quite the contrary. They are very hard workers."

Both brothers were quiet for a moment. Bill realized that he had misspoken, and he was momentarily embarrassed. He did not like this awkward feeling. It didn't sit well with him. He wanted very much to change the subject. Then his eyes lit up as a thought occurred to him. "You're right, sir, I prejudged those folks, but that wasn't the only thing that rubbed us raw as we rode into town. For instance, what about the smell around here?"

"Come again?" Mitchell asked.

"We passed a corral back there that stunk up the whole block. How can people put up with such an awful stench?"

Mitchell chuckled. "You must mean old Joshua Hewitt's stable. Yes, you're right. In fact, the Pico House has filed a complaint with the city, requesting that Mr. Hewitt's corral either be cleaned up or shut down completely. It seems that the foul odor has made its way into every room in the hotel."

"How long has it been like that?" Bill wanted to know.

"Several months now, I guess."

"Several months! Why does it take so long to get the matter settled?"

Mitchell shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. "I don't know. Wheels of justice, I guess."

An awkward silence followed, then Mitchell asked, "Could I buy you fellows another round?"

Both brothers perked up and smiled. “Sure. We’d be obliged,” Bill said.

After the beers were delivered to the table, the undersheriff asked, “So, what other complaints do you have about our city?”

Bill could not help but grin. “We just barely got into town. Isn’t what we said enough?”

Mitchell smiled. Bill decided he liked the undersheriff. There was a friendliness about him that was real, and his smile also came across as genuine.

Before speaking, Mitchell’s smile faded. “Actually, I can think of at least three things about our town that should cause you some serious concern ... that is, if you fellows are planning to settle here.”

“Oh? And what might those things be?” Bill asked.

“For one thing, Los Angeles is in the middle of a depression. Secondly, I don’t know if you noticed it or not, but we are also experiencing a drought. And finally, we are in the latter stages of a smallpox epidemic.”

The brothers looked at one another. “Smallpox!” they both repeated.

Mitchell saw the concern on both their faces and said, “Don’t worry too much about the smallpox. From what I’m told it is on its way out. Besides, most of the ones who came down with it were Mexicans and Chinese. There weren’t a great number of whites who caught it.” When neither of the brothers spoke, he added, “The ones who have caught it, at least the Mexicans and Chinese, have been quarantined.”

“Where are they being held?” Bill asked.

“A few miles northwest of here – a place called Chavez Ravine.”

A wry smile appeared on Bill’s face as he shook his head slowly.

“What is it?” Mitchell asked. “What’s wrong?”

“Well, it’s just that the reason we came to Los Angeles was to escape a sickness back east.”

“Smallpox?”

“No. Tuberculosis. A few years ago, when Hugh and I came over to America from Ireland, our Uncle Richard and Aunt Catherine Deakers took us into their home in Pittsburgh – Uncle Richard is our departed mother’s brother – and we worked in their dry goods store. They are wonderful people.

“Well, about two years ago tuberculosis came upon the family, and eventually two of our cousins – Uncle Richard and Aunt Catherine had eight children – died of the disease. It was then that the decision was made to come west to a drier climate. Aunt Catherine has a brother who lives out here somewhere and he said the climate is dry and suited for those with lung problems.” After a slight shrug and a sigh, Bill concluded, “So here we are.”

“How did you get separated from the Deakers?”

“Ah, and that’s another story,” Hugh put in.

“Why don’t you tell it?” Bill urged.

“No, Willie. You’re the talker. You go ahead and tell it.”

“Well, Uncle Richard had to stay behind to close out the dry goods business and sell the house, and such. But Aunt Catherine and our six remaining cousins took passage on a large three-deck passenger ship out of New York. Hugh and I did not have enough money to pay our fare, but we assured Aunt Catherine that we would find a way to Los Angeles and would meet them here.” Bill grinned. “Actually, Hugh and I started out aboard the same ship as the Deakers ... as stowaways.”

Mitchell smiled, but said nothing, allowing Bill to continue uninterrupted.

“Eventually we were caught, and when the ship reached the port at Colon, in Panama, we were kicked off. Having no money for train fare across the Isthmus, we had to walk the forty-seven miles through some pretty thick jungle. When we arrived in Balboa, on the Pacific side, Hugh and I signed on to a Peruvian man-of-war that was headed for Acapulco. From there we were lucky enough to catch a northbound ship headed for San Francisco. In San Francisco, we bought two horses and food with money earned on the Peruvian ship. That left us with ten dollars and some change, which is all we have with us right now.”

A silence fell over the trio when Bill finished speaking. After a moment Mitchell said, “I’m curious, just how old are you two? You can’t be much older than nineteen or twenty, and yet you seem to have crammed so much experience into such a short period of time in your lives.”

“Well, Hugh here is twenty, and I’m twenty-one. I’ll be twenty-two in September.” Following another brief pause, he continued, “You see, I ran away from our home in Dublin when I was fourteen and became a merchant seaman. A year later I joined the British Merchant Marine. By the time I was sixteen I had crossed the Atlantic half a dozen times, between England, Ireland, the Bahamas and America. After a while I got tired and decided to leave the sea, so one day I just walked off the ship and didn’t return. Thankfully, we were in an American port at the time.

“I moved about quite a bit, doing odd jobs, then I ran into Hugh. Seems our father enrolled him in the British Navy right after Hugh turned fifteen. When his ship came into port here in America, Hugh decided that he had had enough of the Brits, so he jumped ship. We’ve been together ever since.”

“So, what is your next move?”

“Our next move is to try and find the whereabouts of our aunt Catherine.” Bill stared at the undersheriff for a long moment, then a thought occurred to him. “Say, Mr. Mitchell, as the undersheriff you must know a lot of important people around here – perhaps someone who deals in house rentals and the like, who might have come across our aunt. Do you think you might be able to help us locate her?”

Undersheriff Mitchell thought for a minute before replying, “I’m sure I know a few people who may be able to locate the Deakers family – that is, if they made it to Los Angeles.” He motioned the bartender over, and when the man with the handlebar mustache arrived Mitchell said, “Homer, these two gentlemen are my guests. I am going to ask them to remain here until I return. Let them have whatever they want and charge it to me. I’ll be back shortly.”

“Yes sir,” the bartender said before withdrawing.

“Is this all right with you fellows?” Mitchell asked. “I shouldn’t be more than an hour or so. Hopefully, when I get back I will have the information you need on your kinfolks.”

“Yes sir, this will be fine,” Bill said, with Hugh nodding in the affirmative.

Mitchell arose and headed for the door. Bill called after him and the undersheriff turned. “Mr. Mitchell, we sure appreciate what you’re doing. It means a lot to us.”

Mitchell smiled and nodded to the brothers, then walked out of the saloon.

2

IT WAS ALMOST two hours later when Mitchell returned to the saloon. He was accompanied by a man who appeared to be a year or so older than the undersheriff. The man was a few inches shorter than Mitchell, and not as formally dressed. The star-shaped badge of a deputy sheriff was pinned to his shirt just above the left breast pocket.

Mitchell approached the Mulholland brothers with a smile. “Good news, gentlemen,” he said as he moved to their table.

The brothers both stood as the undersheriff arrived with his companion. “You located our aunt?” Bill asked.

“Yes, we did.” Mitchell paused then added, “At least I’m ninety-five percent sure we’ve located the right Deakers.”

Bill and Hugh exchanged glances. When neither of them spoke, Mitchell continued, “I believe you mentioned that your aunt was accompanied by six children.”

“That’s right.”

Mitchell’s smile faded and he cleared his throat. “Well, we’ve located a Catherine Deakers, having recently arrived in Los Angeles with her *four* children, now living in a small cottage on Pico, a few miles from here.”

Bill glanced at his brother, who stared disbelievingly at the undersheriff. “Four children? Not six?”

Mitchell nodded solemnly.

“Is it possible your source could be wrong about the number of children that were with Catherine Deakers?” Bill asked.

Mitchell took a deep breath then exhaled it in a long, weary sigh. “I suppose anything is possible, William.” After a pause he added, “But don’t get your hopes up. My source was quite certain of his findings.”

Following a long moment of awkward silence, Henry Mitchell said, “Please forgive my rudeness, gentlemen, but I failed to introduce you to Deputy Jim Boyer. Jim, this is William and Hugh Mulholland.” Addressing the Mulhollands he said, “I’ve asked Jim, here, to escort you fellows over to your aunt’s house down on Pico. It’s only a couple miles from here, but I thought having someone to show you the way would be easier than drawing a map or giving directions.”

The brothers looked at Deputy Boyer and he smiled and nodded. Bill and Hugh returned the nod.

“As a matter of fact,” Mitchell continued, “if you fellows want to arrive at your aunt’s house before dark, you should leave now. Sundown comes pretty early this time of year.”

Ten minutes later the Mulholland brothers, along with Deputy Boyer, were astride their horses in front of the saloon.

“Thanks for everything, Mr. Mitchell,” Bill said, addressing the undersheriff, who was standing on the boardwalk in front of them.

“Same here,” Hugh added. “If there’s anything we can do for you, just let us know.”

“Well, it’s funny you should mention that, Hugh,” Mitchell said with a grin. “There might be something you can do – that is, if you boys decide to stick around and settle here.”

“Name it.”

“Well, I don’t want to sound too premature, but, if our current sheriff, good man that he is, chooses not to run for

another term, I aim to run for the office myself.” He grabbed the lapels of his coat politician-style and moved up and down on the balls of his feet. “Well, now, I would consider it a great favor if you could see your way to vote for me this coming fall.”

Both brothers returned the grin, then Bill replied, “I’ll tell you what, sir. I honestly can’t tell you where we will be this coming fall, but if we are in Los Angeles you can count on my vote, that’s for certain.”

“The same goes for me,” Hugh added.

Mitchell ceased his politician antics and became serious. “You fellows have a safe trip, and my prayers go out to the Deakers family.”

The brothers nodded, then the three horsemen turned their mounts southward and rode down Main Street.

Deputy Jim Boyer and I had been close friends for years. In fact, I stood up for him at his wedding. And it was from him that I learned everything there was to know about the trip to the Deakers' house.

SOUTH OF TOWN looked much like it did on the north side. Orange groves graced much of the landscape, with frequent outcroppings of desert growth. Adobe dwellings appeared here and there along the roadside, and to a lesser extent, the riders passed occasional wood-framed structures. The leaves on the orange trees, though still green, were turned inward, a sure sign of the drought that Los Angeles was experiencing.

The road turned in a southwesterly direction south of the more densely populated part of town. After riding along in silence for several minutes, Deputy Boyer asked, “You boys planning on settling down hereabouts?”

“We’re not sure yet,” Bill answered. “We thought we’d look around and see what kind of work might be available to us.” Silently, he was gradually reaching the conclusion that he was not impressed with anything he had seen so far.

“I know we’ve been going through some pretty rough times lately,” Boyer said, “and Los Angeles ain’t much to look at right now, but I do believe that this place has a lot to offer.” He paused and looked around. “Yes sir, some day this place is gonna grow.”

“What makes you so sure?” Bill wanted to know.

“Well, because we got the resources to make something big of this place.”

“What kind of resources?”

“For one thing, we got two seaports: one in Santa Monica and one in San Pedro. And recently the Southern Pacific Railroad completed laying tracks all the way from San Francisco to Los Angeles, meaning that we are now connected by rail to the rest of the country. And third, just look around you, at all the citrus groves. They’re all over the place, for miles around. We could be the biggest producer of citrus crops in the country.” The deputy then frowned and heaved an audible sigh. “That is, if we had one other natural resource.”

“And what might that be?” Bill asked.

“Water.” He motioned with his thumb back toward town. “There’s a river that runs along the east side of town. It’s pretty shallow as rivers go, but it provides enough water for the town folk. But if we continue to grow, it will not support us.” He paused again then added, “Even now it doesn’t provide enough irrigation for the trees around here.”

Mulholland offered a wry smile. “I would say water is a rather significant natural resource to be considered. I admire your hope for the growth of the town, but how do you propose to solve the water problem?”

Deputy Boyer thought for a moment then shrugged his shoulders. “I don’t know, Mr. Mulholland. I’ll save that for someone to come along who’s a lot smarter than I am. In the meantime, I’ll just continue to hope.”

Several minutes later Deputy Boyer brought his horse to a stop in the middle of what appeared to be a wide intersection of three roads. The southwest-bound road on which they had been traveling had met a wide west-bound road, as well as a third road heading south.

When the brothers reined up alongside the deputy, he explained, “Off to the west is the stage route that goes out to the Pacific Ocean at Santa Monica. To the south is the stage route that runs down to San Pedro. The stages come this far from the ports then follow the road we’ve been on the rest of the way into town. The main stop in town is the St. Charles Hotel, formerly the Bella Union Hotel. It ain’t much now, but when it was the Bella Union, there was no place like it around.” After a brief pause, he added, “I guess the stages ain’t found any reason to change locations, so they still stop there.”

When the brothers offered no comment, Boyer resumed, “We’ll go south on the San Pedro stage road for a short ways then turn west on the Pico road. That’s the road your aunt lives on. It shouldn’t be too much longer.”

Shortly after resuming their journey, Hugh asked, “Do you think Mr. Mitchell was serious about running for sheriff, or was he just kidding us?”

“Oh, he was serious, all right,” Boyer said. “Alexander – he’s our current sheriff – has made no secret of the fact that he ain’t all that interested in running for another term, and it’s fairly certain that Henry Mitchell is the man to replace him.”

“Why do you say he’s the man to replace the current sheriff?”

“Well, he’s well-liked around the county. Most of the former sheriffs support him, including Sheriff Alexander. He’s proven that he can do the job, and he’s one of the smartest men around.” The deputy looked at the brothers. “Did he happen to mention to either of you that he was a lawyer?”

“A lawyer?” Bill asked. “No.”

“Well, if he’s a lawyer, why would he want to run for sheriff?” Hugh wanted to know. “Why don’t he just practice law?”

Boyer grinned. “He tried that when he first hung out his shingle.” He chuckled before continuing. “He was in his mid-twenties when he began practicing law, but he had such a youthful appearance no one seemed to take him serious as a lawyer. That’s why he grew that awful looking mustache and goatee – to make him look older. In the meantime, he not only took on other jobs to support himself, such as deputy sheriff, but he also became a notary public and a volunteer fireman. He’s now known all over the county, and now has a fairly good law practice, but I guess sheriffin’ has sort of gotten in his blood.”

“He does seem friendly enough,” Bill said.

“And he sure dresses nice,” Hugh added.

“Well, don’t let them fancy duds fool you. Henry Mitchell is as tough a lawman as you’ll find anywhere. Why, just a couple years ago, when Billy Rowland was sheriff, he and Mitchell and a few other deputies went out and captured Tiburcio Vasquez and brought him in for trial. Him and his gang was holed up in a shack owned by a fellow known as Greek George. There was a big shoot-out and most of the gang got away, but not Vasquez. He was wounded in the arm, but he survived – that is, he lived long enough to be hung.”

The Mulhollands exchanged glances before Hugh said, “Tiburcio Vasquez? I never heard of him.”

The expression on the deputy's face was one of disbelief. "What?" he asked as he stared from one brother to the other.

The brothers both shrugged their shoulders then Bill spoke. "Deputy Boyer, we just got into town this afternoon, and only recently arrived in California from Pennsylvania." He paused before adding, almost apologetically, "I don't think anyone back east has ever heard of Tiburcio Vasquez."

About this time the riders arrived at the Pico road, and they turned west, but Boyer was too vexed to make any comment about the change of direction. "Well, let me just educate you boys on Mr. Vasquez. This man was the most despicable, meanest, murdering, thievingest outlaw that ever roamed this part of the country. Every lawman south of San Francisco was looking for him. Tiburcio Vasquez was known to shoot down man, woman or child – Chinese, Mexican or white – made no difference to him. He was as slippery as they come. But he was finally caught, and it took the likes of Billy Rowland and Henry Mitchell to do it."

For the next several minutes the three men rode in silence. Bill was caught up in thoughts of sheriffs' posses and outlaw bands and shootouts. There was an excitement about it that seemed to awaken a call for adventure that was in his Irish blood. There was so much life and energy in this land, and where there was life and energy there was adventure, and where there was adventure, there would be challenge. As he pondered this, he began to realize that it was a challenge that he longed for, perhaps even more than the adventure that would inevitably accompany the challenge.

The sun was a big orange ball dropping slowly somewhere behind the horizon of the Pacific Ocean, the coast of which was twenty miles west of where they now rode, when Deputy Boyer reined his horse in front of a modest wood framed house on the south side of the dirt road. It was more of a

cottage than a house, and had once been whitewashed, but now had a grayish appearance. Between the road and the small front yard was a sun-bleached picket fence. The grass, what there was of it, was brown, as it was everywhere in the area.

“Well,” Boyer said, “according to my directions, this is where your aunt lives. Would either of you boys like to go up to the porch and make sure these folks are your kin?”

Without comment both brothers alit from their mounts and proceeded to the front of the house. Hugh was in the lead, and when he arrived at the door he knocked without hesitating. A moment later a girl in her early teens opened the door. She took one look and her eyes widened, but she said nothing.

Hugh smiled and said, “Hi, Ella!”

Ella turned and ran toward one of the back rooms. “Mama! Mama!” she shouted. “Hugh and Willie are here!”

Hugh looked at Bill and grinned broadly. A moment later their Aunt Catherine appeared at the door. She was a woman of medium height and weight. As she approached, she wiped her hands on her apron. “Mary, mother of God!” she exclaimed. “You made it!”

WILLIAM NEIL MARTIN

A Thirst in Babylon



In 1928 a dam near Los Angeles collapsed, sending 12 billion gallons of water into an unsuspecting community. Several hundred lives were lost. This is the story of that disaster.

A Thirst in Babylon

By William Neil Martin

Order the book from the publisher Booklocker.com

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/13398.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.**