

CALIFORNIA: THE GREAT EXCEPTION

When Carey McWilliams published *California: The Great Exception* (1949) we were in the midst of a four year drought. In 1948 rain came in March – too little, too late. Losses totaled about 100 million, and only the agricultural giants were likely to survive.

Artesian wells had long since dried up; pumping of aquifers continued unregulated, causing a power crisis. Thousands of acres had been salt-damaged by poor drainage and excessive irrigation. On the coast, saltwater intrusion fouled freshwater supplies. Farmers continued to plant water hungry, surplus, government subsidized crops.

Santa Barbara almost ran out of water. Two L.A. suburbs actually tried to limit population growth, to avoid that fate.

Water is many problems: industrial plants built directly in the path of floodwaters, cement flood control channels keeping desperately needed water from re-charging aquifers, more fires in dry years, to name a few.

Yet there's little coordination among those dealing with drought, fires and floods, and certainly no managing of whole watersheds. Add to that private interests trying to monopolize huge projects and secretive water negotiations because no one wants to be seen as giving up a single acre-foot.

If this sounds familiar, it's because I read these 65 year old words in the midst of an uncannily similar drought in March, 2014.

Carey's mind is much on the weather, but he explores California as a whole, past and present – and much of that was tied up with the Gold Rush.

In 16 years Californians dredged 100 million dollars' worth of gold, and because it came from unregulated federal lands, they paid scarcely a penny of tax on it. That money stayed in California, allowing the young state to avoid control by Eastern banks, to get a head start in industrial growth, and to become financier and supplier to the West.

Because there was plenty of digging room and plenty of gold, there were few conflicts during the gold rush, and no monopolies – a very egalitarian way to get rich, if you were lucky. Every miner was a laborer, so labor was honored by all.

And those who came were mostly young, male, diverse (often foreign born) – and in a hurry. Thus was California settled, and thus was the stage set for it to become “the great exception,” among Western states and all states.

Those who came to farm found the land less than golden. Instead of the homesteads available elsewhere, they found private property. Because the great Spanish and Mexican land

grants had passed to entrepreneurs and the railroads, most small farmers were squeezed out.

In 1948 McWilliams found little difference between agriculture and industry in California. “Farmers” often lived in cities, farmed by phone, and visited their farms in airplanes.

They needed a large pool of unemployed labor, and paid low wages so workers had to stay to survive. Agriculture was very tightly organized, from research to marketing – except for farmworkers. Lowest of the low were Orientals: farmers wanted to exploit them, farm workers feared their competition.

Only Native Americans fared worse. No settled tribes and no knowledgeable negotiators meant most were killed by settlers. Survivors went to a tiny reservation – the worst deal, McWilliams says, in the West.

By 1948 big industry and even monopolies were well established – PG & E and the Southern Pacific Railroad, for instance. Power in California rested with industry, not the people.

Still, McWilliams declares himself a “loyal Southern Californian,” and can’t help bragging – about the world’s largest bank (Bank of America), and the largest and maybe most outstanding university, the University of California. As well as a

grapevine producing 3-4 tons of grapes annually, a 145 pound nugget, and a 118 pound beet.

Folks may be wary of “this great golden dream, this hugely improbable state, this symbol of a cruel illusion.” But they keep rushing to it.