

AFD Ep 442 Links and Notes - Carey Act [Bill/Rachel] - Recording Oct 2, 2022

- [Intro - Bill]: At the end of July of this year, I drove on US Interstate 84 from Boise, Idaho, where I was visiting Rachel, to Twin Falls, Idaho, on my way to Utah. That interstate follows the Oregon Trail in that section. The coolest things I saw were Snake River Canyon and Shoshone Falls hydroelectric waterfall. But the most interesting thing I saw, for the purposes of our leftist program on American industrial history and historical capitalism, were the endless fields of green along the highway in the middle of the desert, growing things like sugar beets, potatoes, and corn. This was a demonstration of what I had just learned that weekend at the [Idaho State Museum](#) about the early 20th century “desert reclamation” projects under the Carey Act of 1894. Although this legislation, which we’ll be talking about today, was intended by the federal government to spur the agricultural development of large swathes of publicly owned desert and semidesert regions in the western United States, Idaho ended up being one of the few big success stories of the effort. In fact, that eight-county agricultural zone in southern Idaho in the Snake River Plain was nicknamed the “Magic Valley.” An outright majority of all irrigated Carey Act lands nationwide ended up being “reclaimed” (as they call it) in Idaho. We’ll explain today what all of that means and the broader context of this legislation. But I did want to note first that the official position of Idaho is that this area is actually a very literal reclamation of naturally irrigated lands that were not supposed to be desert in the first place and historically had not been – because the British Hudson’s Bay Company created a deliberate policy of hunting beavers to extermination as fast as possible in what is today southern Idaho with the explicit intent of converting a green area filled with beaver dams into a dried-out wasteland as a deterrent to American migration into the Oregon Country. At the time, from 1818 to 1846, the US and Britain shared control of the territory. (There were of course also many indigenous nations there, too, which we are intending to cover in a separate future episode.) This extermination program is covered in great detail in a 2003 article by Jennifer Ott in [Oregon Historical Quarterly](#) called “‘Ruining’ the Rivers in the Snake Country: The Hudson’s Bay Company’s Fur Desert Policy”. In any case, Idaho believes that Carey Act irrigations in the Magic Valley of southern Idaho are a restoration of the beaver-irrigated ways of the past. And obviously it makes a lot of money for agribusiness. This latter point is going to be a recurring theme of today’s episode. But that is perhaps less fun than the famous parachuting of beavers back into the southern Idaho backcountry to try to restore the population. <https://time.com/4084997/parachuting-beavers-history/>
- [Bill] Great American Desert: To understand the origins of the Carey Act we do need to go back to the era of the “Great American Desert,” which probably contributed to the British policy strategy of deliberate desertification in the Idaho area in the early 19th century. US government geographer Edwin James, after participating in an 1823 expedition to map more areas of the Louisiana Purchase, wrote of the region located approximately between the Rocky Mountains and the 100th meridian of longitude: “Although tracts of fertile land considerably extensive are occasionally to be met with, yet the scarcity of wood and water, almost uniformly prevalent, will prove an insuperable obstacle in the way of settling the country.” https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_American_Desert This vast region was then labeled the Great American Desert because of that relative lack of water and trees, although it was more of a grassland than the modern meaning of “desert” would imply, and things did not improve much on the west side of the Rocky Mountains either, where the desert continued or got even worse until at least the Sierra Nevada mountains between what is today California and Nevada. This all meant that many white (or in some cases Black) American migrant settlers tended to skip over these arid areas of the growing United

States and proceed instead to the Pacific Coast. That was a harrowing and deadly overland journey in the era before the transcontinental railroad. You can see why the British might have tried to make the Oregon Trail migrations even less appealing by destroying more of the terrain through rapid beaver depopulation. Then something extremely unfortunate happened: the region got a whole bunch of unusual rain in the mid-19th century, [something assumed by the pseudo-science of the day to be a permanent development](#). The shaky logic of this theory - called "Rain follows the Plow" - presumed that human habitation and cultivating land in arid and semi-arid lands increased the humidity in the area, creating a positive feedback loop that increased the fecundity of the land as more people moved in. This convinced everyone in power that the Great American Desert was actually an extremely habitable and farmable territory that should be seized immediately from the indigenous nations and distributed by the government to homesteaders and railroad companies for settlement and development. This period of higher than normal rainfall leading to increased westward agricultural settlement, which also played a contributing role in the Kansas-Nebraska Act crisis leading to the American Civil War, was actually a fluke – and the long-term result of the erratic climate was the collapse of countless independent farmers and the rise of heavily capitalized agricultural business enterprises that could afford to drill for non-renewable aquifer water deep underground, instead of relying on rains and rivers. The federal government then had to shift from encouraging individual small-scale homesteaders to encouraging financial investment in complex irrigation projects on much larger properties.

- [Bill] The Desert Land Act of 1877, which were enacted as revisions to the Homestead Act of 1862, were one of the attempts to change course in federal policy for these arid flatlands and foothills on either side of the Rocky Mountains. (Interestingly, Oregon Territory areas like Idaho had actually always allowed for much larger homestead acreages, and agribusiness or timber industry promoters spent the mid-to-late 1870s pushing for the rest of the western public lands to be given the same large acreage homesteading rules, which often allowed corporations to pay people to stake out a pretend homestead claim on a large tract of land they wanted to farm, ranch, or log and then sell it to them as soon as they were legally able to do so.) The Desert Land Act of 1877 widened the scale of properties being developed and greatly loosened the requirements for actual residency on homesteads, and most critically they added an emphasis on private or community irrigation, all of which facilitated the flow of industrial and financial capital investments from outside the region into developing water resources in the mountain west and plains. The federal government adopted further amendments in the late 1880s after determining that not enough irrigation was being developed as required. (We would also refer listeners back to [our episode on the Long Depression and the Panic of 1893](#) for more on the final deathblow to unconsolidated and indebted smallholder farmers in this region in favor of consolidated agribusiness with access to major Eastern capital formations.) Ultimately, the revised Desert Lands Act was still considered insufficient for promoting irrigation for farming in this region of the US.
 - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desert_Land_Act (I elaborated above a bunch on my own from other things I've read because this was minimal.)
- [Rachel] That determination led in 1894 to the passage of the Carey Act, attached to a larger appropriations bill by Wyoming Senator Joseph Maull Carey. This legislation completely dropped the pretense of smallholder homesteaders somehow being able to irrigate the US public lands of the Great American Desert... Instead the federal government finally handed off that responsibility to private agricultural companies with wage laborers hired from all over the US to work their fields and build water infrastructure to support those fields. That's not to say that homesteading went away,

because as late as 1910, the number of new homesteads peaked at 15,000. But in terms of watering the blooming desert, that would be private capital's job. State governments were also given a significant role in regulating and implementing the Carey Act. Some states did not do much with it because they lacked the financial resources to do so, despite large areas of public desert and semi-desert land, but Idaho and Wyoming took to it with gusto – eventually receiving millions of additional acres of federal lands to work on. From the Wikipedia article on The Carey Act: *Wyoming was home to some of the first projects under the Carey Act, including the Cody Canal financed by a group of investors led by William F. Cody and supported by then state engineer Elwood Mead.*

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carey_Act
- <https://idahopotatomuseum.com/history/irrigation-and-land-development/>
Idaho benefited from the Carey Act far more than did any other state. About 60% of all lands irrigated in the United States under the Carey Act are in Idaho. Over the period of forty years, the state of Idaho received 618,000 acres of previously desert, arid land. The overall benefit from the construction of dams and canals, the settlement of farms, the birth of towns and cities and the production of crops on the economy of Idaho is impossible to measure. Carey Act reclamation projects have put substantial tracts of land under cultivation that became family farms and were utilized to grow Idaho potatoes. Without this one piece of legislation many of today's potato fields would be range for cattle and sheep. High-lift pumping opened up even more of the desert lands to farming. Several projects were developed to bring water from the Snake River. The water was pumped 500 to 725 feet up from the river. The combination of private citizens and private lending institutions expanding the agricultural economy of Idaho by adding significantly to potato production must certainly be included in the history of the industry. It is one of the noteworthy eras in the story of the potato in Idaho, an era, however, that belonged to the past when there was plentiful desert entry land, cheap energy and lower development costs.
- Utah: <http://www.waterhistory.org/histories/delta/t1.html> Utah only had one successful Carey Act project, near the modern day town of Delta. *The Delta Carey Act project ultimately developed approximately 30% of the Delta area agriculture. There are three primary reasons why this project succeeded where other Carey Act projects failed. First and most importantly, the Oasis Land and Water Company bought a basic, prior water right. Second, the developers were private investors who started with the hopes of making substantial profits. The tenacity of good businessmen determined to protect their investments was an important factor in staying the course. Finally the third reason, the settlers demonstrated a great deal of tenacity of their own during some very difficult times. Such will to succeed assured the successful development of water resources in the Delta area.*
- As we have said, however, most western states did NOT take advantage of the provisions of the Carey Act from 1894, and the federal government continued to be frustrated by the slow pace of private and local irrigation in the region. This led in 1902 to the creation of the US Reclamation Service of the US Geological Survey to oversee major public works projects for irrigating the American West and delivering drinking water to the growing cities in these states. This agency, renamed the Bureau of Reclamation and moved to the Interior Department in 1907, would be funded in part by the continued sale of the extensive federal public lands in the western states.
https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/R46303.html#_Toc36812490

- *In the Reclamation Act of 1902 (the Reclamation Act), Congress for the first time approved federal efforts in the large-scale planning and construction of irrigation works for the storage, diversion, and development of waters in arid and semiarid western states.⁵ Under the act, federal Reclamation projects were funded by a newly established Reclamation Fund in the United States Treasury. Initially, the fund received receipts from the sale of federal land in the western United States, along with repayments by beneficiaries for Reclamation's construction costs for water projects.⁶ Authorized activities under the Reclamation Act were limited to 16 designated Reclamation states on lands west of the Mississippi River: Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. A seventeenth Reclamation state, Texas, was added in 1906.⁷ Under the Reclamation Act, Congress allotted settlers up to 160 acres of lands to be irrigated by a Reclamation project, provided the lands were reclaimed for agricultural purposes and water users repaid the federal government for project construction expenses and associated operations and maintenance (O&M) costs.⁸ Congress established a 10-year repayment period for Reclamation projects in the Reclamation Act and directed the payments into the Reclamation Fund for new and ongoing project investments by the bureau.⁹ Pursuant to reclamation law (i.e., the body of federal law that informs the development and management of projects by the Bureau of Reclamation), interest payments were not required for the repayment of construction costs by agricultural beneficiaries.¹⁰*
- Ultimately, these projects continued until the end of the 1960s or the end of the 1970s as environmental opposition and other considerations and criticisms mounted against federal dam projects, especially in the wake of the 1972 Teton Dam collapse. We'll probably be coming back to this in a future separate episode. But Bureau of Reclamation aside, southern Idaho remains a verdant agricultural area because of the Carey Act irrigation projects of the early 20th century... and now you know the history of that and the context in which it happened. But those ecological questions linger...

Other links:

- Our episode on Southern agriculture and the role of soil and climate in slavery: <http://arsenalfordemocracy.com/2021/03/14/mar-14-2021-the-cotton-gin-and-southern-capitalism-arsenal-for-democracy-ep-358/>
- <https://modernfarmer.com/2016/10/kudzu/>
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snake_River_Plain
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magic_Valley
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oregon_Country
- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prairie_madness
- https://scholarworks.boisestate.edu/under_showcase_2020/83/ Hougard, Nick M.; Thom, Katelyn M.; and Wakild, Emily, "Restoration of Idaho's Lands: Why Beaver History is Important to the Wellbeing of Idaho" (2020). 2020 Undergraduate Research Showcase. 83.