

As the wells run dry, Central Valley neighbors find common ground

By Diana
Marcum

Dec 10,
2014

When a man of 91 is downright cantankerous and has been on his land longer than most everyone else has been alive, he wastes no time speaking his mind.

So after his new neighbor started sinking a well to plant a water-sucking almond orchard in the middle of the worst drought he'd ever seen, James Turner hurried over.

"How deep you going to dig your well?"

Five hundred feet, Davinder Singh told him.

"My well is 300 feet. Why, you're going to take my water!"

Singh, a man of gentle humor, gave no answer on that warm day last winter. Yet he took an instant liking to the fierce old man.

Turner reminded him of his 85-year-old father back in India — he'd been a police officer who stubbornly refused every bribe, guaranteeing his family grew up in poverty in a region known for corrupt authorities.

Now Singh was chasing prosperity in California's almond rush.



Caption James Turner

Michael Robinson Chávez

When his neighbor noticed the shriveling vines and brown shrubs in his yard, he offered to fill James Turner's well every week. But the 91-year-old won't use that water for anything but household necessities.

Caption James Turner

Michael Robinson Chávez

Once maintaining 20 acres of cotton and alfalfa fields, James Turner's well, at 300 feet, has run dry, like many throughout the Central Valley.

Caption Almond trees

Michael Robinson Chávez

Where fields of grapevines and cotton once grew, acres of almond trees now stand; they can be profitable even in a drought.

Caption Davinder Singh and his son

Michael Robinson Chávez

From a childhood of poverty in India, Davinder Singh, on his farm with his son, is chasing prosperity in California's almond rush, where prices have hit \$120,000 an acre, even with a low yield.

Caption Davinder Singh

Michael Robinson Chávez

Davinder Singh has planted hundreds of almond trees on his property outside of Madera. "Everything is going up, up, up -- except the water table," he says.

Up and down these rural Madera roads with fractional names — Avenue 19, Avenue 19 1/2, Avenue 20 — nut trees were going in, wells were going dry and farmers were putting debt-heavy bets on a crop that requires twice as much water as thirsty cotton.

They're doing it not just in spite of the drought, but because of it: Almonds may be California's last crop valuable enough to make a profit if the drought doesn't end.

Turner thought the folks buying up swaths of land for orchards — some of them investment fund managers who had never farmed a day in their lives — were missing the bigger picture.

"You pump all the water out, the land collapses, see? All those pockets where the water is supposed to go, they won't be there when it does rain," he said.

"I've seen so much stupid in my years that I can't remember all of it. But pumping the earth dry? We're killing ourselves, plain and simple."

8

::

All through the summer, Turner's daughter Lorna — he still called her "Lil Bit," like he had since the day she was born — couldn't sleep.

"I'd hear that pump roaring over at Dave's all night every night," she said.

Driving to her job as an accountant at a women's prison in Chowchilla or over to Fairmead to visit her Aunt Zel, she'd gape at a land so quickly transformed.

"Growing up, there was nothing but grapevines, cotton fields, a few animals grazing and then, overnight, nothing but nut trees," she said.

Zelma Baker, 91, had come to California during the great Dust Bowl migration of the 1930s.

"I don't know nothing about anything called the Dust Bowl," said Baker, Lorna's maternal aunt. "But I do know we left Okemah, Okla., on April 7, 1936, and we arrived in California on Oct. 20."

Turner's family, sharecroppers, had come from Oklahoma 10 years earlier. He was only 3, but he still has an accent thick as butter on corn bread, like many of those raised in the Central Valley.

He bought the farm the year he married and paid off the land in seven years — he didn't believe in owing money. Growing cotton and alfalfa on the 20 acres didn't feed five children, so he worked construction and grew grapes and fruit trees.

In late April, Turner's well went dry. Across the street, his neighbor, a beekeeper, also ran out of water.

"He told me, 'James, we're looking at a reverse Dust Bowl.'"

Turner had water trucked in. Lorna washed the dishes as quickly as possible and made her 15-year-old son, Travon, keep his showers to four minutes.

Turner's daughter and grandson had moved in after his wife, Ernestine, died in 2008.

36

"We'd been married 60 years when she died," he said. "We never split. Not once. She was a good woman. She helped me a lot."

On the day he spoke of Ernestine, he was hauling wood in a cart hooked to his 1955 tractor and listening to a news station on a transistor radio of apparently similar vintage. The topic turned to unrest over an unarmed black teenager killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Mo. Turner — a black man — turned off the radio.

Rage was one of the things Ernestine had helped him with.

He was a soldier about to ship off to the Pacific Theater during World War II when the train stopped in Texas and he got off to get a hamburger.

"I was clean, pressed — I believed in having my clothes nice," he said. "I had a bruise on my shoulder from sharpshooter practice. I could feel the spot. A man in a dirty shirt looked at me and said, 'You want anything to eat, then you go over there and get it,' and he pointed to a corner that said 'Negroes.' There I was in Uncle Sam's uniform maybe going to die for him and this man wouldn't sell me a hamburger."

Turner said if he'd had his rifle, he would have shot the man dead. He kept thinking about that until he told Ernestine.

"She wasn't one to let people walk over her, but she could make a man look forward instead of back," he said. "I miss her."

Abruptly, he changed his attention to a fluffy dog darting around.

"I don't like dogs, never have," he said. "Lil Bit and T., they sneak this one in the house at night. They think I don't

know. I'm old, see? So they think I'm stupid. But I know."

::

Turner couldn't remember a hotter year. It ended up being the hottest on record in California.

The grapevines growing at the edge of his property had leaves that were dark and curled, but the stress somehow made the Thompson grapes taste better. He told Singh to help himself to the fruit, and he did.

Singh's wife, Balwinder, offered Turner cups of fragrant, sweet chai, which he always refused. He thought it was strange they drank hot tea in the summer.

He paid almost \$400 to have water trucked in every few weeks. He had the delivery man fill a 2,500-gallon tank and sprinkle a bit on the garden.

Turner loved his rose bushes best.

In 1979, when he was recovering from a heart attack, Ernestine brought him a single-stemmed red rose from the grocery store.

"I'm laying in the hospital bed and I looked at that rose and I said, 'Boy, that rose is pretty.' That made me love my wife even more. I said to myself, 'If I get out of this hospital I'm going to plant me a garden of roses.'"

In July, his rose bushes were dry and had few blooms, but they were alive.

In the almond groves, harvest was starting when the nuts should have been just cracking open. The clouds of pink and white blooms had arrived at the beginning of February, earlier than anyone could recall. Farmers ran pumps throughout the ominously warm spring as well as the summer.

You could say almonds, heralded as an anti-aging super nut (technically a seed), are a doomsday food: If aquifers in the world's farming regions continue to go down and food supplies falter, they're a source of protein that requires fewer resources than meat or dairy.

Prices were already around \$4 a pound — or about \$120,000 an acre even with low yield.

"Everything is going up, up, up — except the water table," Singh said.

::

At the end of July, when the heat hung still and heavy, Turner decided to stop watering.

There was no guarantee the fall rains would come. His well driller had a waiting list so long that he didn't expect to get to the wells that had run out in April until December.

Turner went to a family reunion in New Orleans, and when he was gone, Singh looked across and saw the shriveling vines, the brown shrubs.

"What's going on over there?" he asked his workers. They said the family was gone for a few weeks and their well was dry.

Singh halted work on the orchard and hooked up a hose to his domestic well. He dragged it over and watered Turner's plants.

When Turner returned, Singh told him he should have let him know he was out of water. They were neighbors. He would fill his tank for him every few weeks.

The gesture hasn't saved Singh from Turner's occasional scoldings.

In October, Singh invited Turner on a trip to Home Depot. Turner found out it was in part to use his military discount on \$3,000 worth of farm equipment.

"Why, you had me out after dark. I don't stay out after dark. I have a cold now," Turner told him sternly through a closed screen door the next time his neighbor visited. Singh looked down at his feet, hiding a smile during the chiding.

8

They don't know a lot about each other.

Singh doesn't know that Turner's children talked him into a reverse mortgage so he and Ernestine could travel in their senior years. Instead, the money went to Ernestine's hospital bills and, now, a well.

Turner doesn't know that Singh drove a truck for someone else, then bought his own truck, then a fleet, saving for years to fulfill a dream of raising his family on a large farm, the way his wife had grown up in India.

But as to why Singh gives water to Turner, and how Turner feels about the neighbor delivering water, they give the same answer:

"He's a good man."

::

It smelled like it was about to rain — a sweet, earthy musk rising from the ground, a fresh breeze beginning to stir.

Singh and his workers and family sat outside drinking chai and looking at the orchard on a December day. In less than a year, the trees had gone from slender, foot-tall sticks to taller than a person.

Turner watched from his dining room window.

"Them trees sure look pretty. Green, topped off nice and straight," he said. "And hot tea makes sense today."

One or two storms wouldn't make a dent in the drought. By most measures, there would have to be a good soaking every three days for the next six months to fill California's reservoirs. Snow would have to pile up on the Sierra mountains, shining white well into spring, before a vast system of aqueducts and canals would deliver promised water.

California had recently passed the first legislation to manage its groundwater, but Turner said he wasn't putting much store by that. It didn't kick in until 2040.

36

He hadn't felt right about using the water Singh gave him for anything but household necessities. One orange tree in the garden had survived, but was struggling. He missed the way it usually looked this time of year. Covered with bright orange balls, shining like Christmas lights.

He was pretty sure his favorite rose bush — the one out by the mailbox, that grew big red roses just like the one Ernestine gave him — was dead.

But he'd noticed a speck of green down at the bottom. January was the best month to cut back roses. He'd read that once in a newspaper gardening column. Come the new year he was going to cut it all the way down. Maybe it could still come back.

diana.marcum@latimes.com

[@DianaMarcum](#)

Copyright © 2014, [Los Angeles Times](#)