

The California Sunday Magazine

By Mark Arax

Dry

Lawyer Cooper's family left Arkansas in the 1940s for a country life in the San Joaquin Valley. Seventy years later, their water is disappearing— not from the sky, but from the earth. Now he and his wife have to decide what they're willing to give up for this place.

Photographs by Matt Black

The old, skinny preacher, the one they're accustomed to seeing in his black Stetson, black vest, black jeans, black cowboy boots, doesn't know what more to tell them. He knows their water has gone dry, and they're measuring now whether to stay or leave. He can sense in their song that they've come together this Sunday, in their little country church, the Galilee Missionary Baptist, in the colony of Fairmead, for something to hold on to.

As a man of the cloth, Reverend R.L. Walker can't help but see what's happening to the San Joaquin Valley as biblical Paradise is burning. The orchard is going back to dust. Faucets are turning to sand. When nature's having its fit, only a whisper in God's ear has the power to stop it. In the meantime, get used to fetching water in a barrel the way they did when they came here a long time ago.

The Coopers, Annie and Lawyer, sit in the third pew from the front singing "I Keep on Toiling." It's better than crying, which Lawyer did at the board of supervisors meeting a few weeks ago. The Coopers, too, would like to believe that what they're enduring in this patch of Madera County, alongside Highway 99, is just another of the drought's thefts. No need, then, to assign any human blame. Shake your fist at the hard sky and be done with it.

Only this isn't the way the water went dry in Fairmead. No disrespect to the reverend, but the way it went dry is that one day last June, Annie Cooper was looking outside her kitchen window at another orchard of nuts going into the ground. This one was being planted right across the street. Before the trees even arrived, the big grower— no one from around here seems to know his name— turned on the pump to test his new deep well, and it was at that precise moment, Annie says, when the water in his plowed field gushed like flood time, that the Coopers' house went dry.

The kitchen faucet, the fancy bathtub, the washing machine, the toilet— all drew back into themselves. A last burble. Her husband of 55 years told her what she already knew: Their old domestic well, sitting 280 feet deep, could no longer reach the plummeting aquifer, could no longer compete with the new farm wells sunk hundreds of feet deeper.

"I thought we were just alone, and then you get to talking, and it's the whole community," Annie says, standing in the kitchen. "We're all drying up. The orchards are draining everything. We've changed our whole way of living. Hauling water in the back of a truck. Not being able to cook. Not being able to take a decent bath. Driving your clothes five miles to the wash house."

Two dozen homes in this community of 1,400 residents— those on private wells nearest to the nut orchards— have come up dry since summer. A few families have already left. Just packed up and walked away. No "For Sale" signs. No goodbyes. Scores of others, black families like the Coopers, white and Latino ones, too, who rely on two community wells and a shared water system, teeter on the same edge.

“Outside is so dusty. So dusty. The wind picks up at night, and it just blows right on through these little cracks,” Annie says, pointing to the windows. “I sweep and sweep and look in the dustpan. It’s shocking how much dirt. If I didn’t have plastic covering the living-room furniture, it would be black. No kidding.” She looks over at her husband, gray head down, silent. “I told Lawyer, ‘We got to go. We got to go.’ But this land, for him, ain’t so easy to leave.”

The number of new ag wells in Madera County has nearly doubled in the past few years.

In case it matters, the black families of Fairmead were here before the almonds and the pistachios. They were here when the land was barren, when their Great Migration bypassed Detroit and Chicago and Los Angeles and Oakland and came to a stop in the San Joaquin Valley. They were looking to keep alive their rural souls, right down to the cotton fields, and this gopher-and-horned-toad ground seemed as good as any. All through the Depression and beyond, they kept trickling in—cousins and uncles and aunties. What they didn’t know was that the dream of Fairmead as a place of agrarian ideal was already behind it. The high-water mark had come and gone.

“Fairmead Colony,” proclaimed the 1912 ads in the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Pacific Rural Press*. Fourteen thousand acres in small farms just placed on the market. Deep, rich sandy loam. “Abundant and cheap WATER SUPPLY.” What made Fairmead a colony and not a town? That was the genius of land speculators who controlled so many millions of acres of valley from their offices on Spring Street in Los Angeles and Market Street in San Francisco. No need for sidewalks and gutters, sewer and water systems if the place wasn’t incorporated. The earth alone was sufficient.

The dreamers of small farming took the bait, first among them, the German Mennonites. In no time rose fields of alfalfa, a Fairmead Mercantile, a Fairmead Inn, a *Fairmead Herald*. The Mennonites built a church. The Presbyterians built a church. The dairymen built a cheese factory. The German kids attended the local Munich School, which they renamed the Dixieland School after World War I was declared. The abundant water, pulled up from the ground by windmill-driven pumps, stayed abundant, at least for a while. Then the water table dropped, and the whole experiment withered. The wells, the land, the businesses.

“What earth isn’t parched?” is how the black families from Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Texas greeted Fairmead. If they had an idea of living in a nearby city, it got squelched by the real-estate covenants that locked them out of towns up and down Highway 99. There was one man, a Jewish farmer named Jacob Yakel, who paid no mind to local codes. He let it be known that he would sell his acreage in Fairmead to white, brown, or black.

First came the Ameys in the 1920s and then the Wheelers, the Wards, the Bells, the Whittles, the Mitchells. They dug their wells deeper and hooked up their pumps to a new electrical grid. The Williams family, who fled Louisiana in a school bus, bought 80 acres and set to work building the largest black-owned dairy in California. By mid-century, the African Americans of Fairmead neared 400 strong.

“It was just open pasture, with maybe a few cows,” Lawyer Cooper says, describing his land when he first set eyes upon it as a young boy in the 1940s. He had driven out with his grandmother Elizabeth Miller, in her brand-new 1942 Lincoln Zephyr, all the way from Frenchman’s Bayou, Arkansas. “She was quite a lady,” Annie says. “She knew what she wanted. She saw Los Angeles and wanted no part of it.”

She bought five acres and raised cows, sheep, rabbits, peacocks that roosted on telephone poles, and chickens that she sold to the slaughterhouse. When her own well started acting up and her five-horsepower pump went kaput, she jury-rigged a system with a new pump and tank and a garden hose hooked up to the farmhouse. Right there, she opened Miller’s Store and made a nice living until the white folks who owned a nearby market burned it down. The sheriff in Madera wasn’t curious in the least. By that time, Lawyer had gone to live in Alameda with his parents, who had landed good jobs in the Bay Area. “I’d come back every summer. From 1945 to 1958. My uncles Patrick and Tommy Miller bought 20 acres in Fairmead. Raising cows.”

You could say the country life got in his blood. That year in Vietnam, those years working as a telephone-equipment operator at Naval Air Station in Alameda, he kept thinking about this place. How it felt. Annie hadn't lived on the land since she left Lexington, Mississippi, when she was 5. She was a city girl, Oakland true. Lawyer, though, kept pestering her. He retired early due to seizures from the Agent Orange that rained down on him in Southeast Asia. When it came time for Annie to retire in 2001, after years working in the legal department at Bechtel Corporation and operating a day care, she felt the itch, too. If this wasn't the promised land, it was something.

"I never even knew what a well was," she says. "Until we moved into this house. I never even knew what a propane tank was. Until we moved in this house. I never even knew what a cesspool was...."

She enjoys jabbing Lawyer this way. She considers him her best friend. That's why she takes so long finding the right birthday card. "To my husband—and best friend," it has to say. They have four children and a gallery of grandchildren hung up on the wall. They planted roses and St. Augustine grass, a Mississippi magnolia and a weeping willow to civilize the front yard for their family reunions.

"This yard right here was beautiful. Oh God, you should have seen it. Just like a park," she says. Lawyer is standing off to the side, shaking his head. It's all singed now, like some fire hit it. The nectarine and apricot and Santa Rosa plum, its sweet and sour hitting your tongue in the same burst, died months ago. "Look at the weeping willow. It's almost gone, too."

We're standing not 20 yards from the new orchard going in across the rutted road. The trees have yet to be planted. Almond or pistachio, Annie and Lawyer figure. It's a good guess given the stampede of farmers willing to satisfy the world's insatiable appetite for nuts. Since 1994, in Madera County alone, the land planted to almonds and pistachios has tripled—to 176,000 acres. "It's just nuts, nuts, nuts," Annie says, laughing at her double meaning.

To our left and right, across the valley, farmers and hedge-fund managers and investors from India and China are growing more than 1 million acres of almonds and pistachios, a mind-boggling monoculture. The Nut Rush. It's true that nowhere else on the globe do nuts grow with the fecundity and taste that they do here. It's true, too, that if you're going to spend nearly a million dollars sinking a new well a thousand feet deep, you might as well do it in the name of a crop that can turn you into a fast multimillionaire.

The math is simple: Each acre of nuts produces 3,000 pounds of crop. Each pound sells for more than \$3. It takes only 100 acres to make a million-dollar harvest every year. So farmers have pulled out cotton and stone fruit and grapes to plant nuts. They've bought hog wallows and coached up the ground to plant nuts. They've gone into the hillsides, mostly because drip irrigation lines can take them there, to plant nuts. It's as if middle California has undergone a change of civilizations.

The trucks rattle on by day and night, kicking up that crazy dust, Annie says. "Almond harvest is a mess. I have to get a shot every fall for my sinus." The trucks bear names, but they're not the names of the farmers. "We don't know who they are," Lawyer says.

After his well went bust, Lawyer erected a system in his front yard that stores water that he hauls from a nearby relative's house.

When it comes to wells and farm fields, county officials aren't able to provide much information. Yes, the number of new ag wells has nearly doubled in the past few years. But where those wells are being drilled, how deep and by whom, the county cannot say because it doesn't keep those records. A farmer looking to turn open ground into orchard needn't fret that the government will say "No," because no one regulates such things. Not even when the groundwater he's pulling is draining his neighbors dry. The spoils here go to the one with the deepest hole, the highest horsepower.

The young executive director of the Madera Farm Bureau, Anja Raudabaugh, couldn't stand seeing Lawyer Cooper break down in tears in front of the board of supervisors. She immediately went to some of her member farmers and persuaded them to donate bottles of water to the Coopers and 25 or so of their neighbors whose wells have gone dry, too. "It's a heartbreaking story, what's going on in Fairmead," Raudabaugh says.

The farm bureau chief blames the drought, of course. She blames Madera County because it receives federal and state funds to oversee Fairmead, and it hasn't done nearly enough to fix the broken water system. She blames the farmers, whose bottom line has driven them deeper and deeper into the ground for water. "The farmers have a moral obligation to help. We want that community to stay intact," she says. "But my growers are private guys. They've got big hearts, but they just don't want their names in the paper."

Deep in the county pesticide reports, the names appear. There's James Maxwell and his Agriland Farming Company, Cavalletto Ranches, Campos Brothers Farms, Golden West Farming Cooperative, L.G. Merriam, and Russell Harris, and there's even the California Prison Industry Authority, which grows its own 350 acres of almonds outside the men's and women's penitentiaries just south of Fairmead.

"If we're pinning the blame," Raudabaugh says, "let's not forget the people of Fairmead. If ag finds itself in an unsustainable and indefensible situation, what about the residents? They purchased those houses knowing the wells were old and shallow. They knew the situation wasn't sustainable."

A 280-foot well isn't exactly shallow, Lawyer says. Unlike some of his neighbors, he can afford to dig deeper, to 600 or 700 feet if need be. Heck, he could sell Annie's 2006 Mercedes to pay for a new well. But he sees the \$25,000 to \$30,000 price tag as a poor bet. He would need to dig a lot deeper to compete with the farms surrounding him. How long would a new well last? Three years? Five years?

A better bet—as heart-aching as it would be—would be to sell the house and its 8.9 acres of empty dirt and move back to the city. So many black folks have died or left over the years, no one would even spot them gone. But who's going to buy a stucco-and-brick ranch house in the middle of nowhere with no water? Lawyer has a hunch. Farmers are already making offers to some of his neighbors. They'll tear out the house and yard and turn the whole thing into an almond grove.

In the meantime, Lawyer has set up a water system in his front yard, built with tanks and rubber hoses and a two-horsepower sump pump, not unlike the contraption his grandmother had going all those decades ago. Every other day, he fills it up with water he's fetched from a relative's house across the fields.

"I don't know how he does it," Annie says. "Dragging that water. He's got diabetes, and his legs aren't good. He fell off the truck the other day. He's worn out, and there's nothing I can do to help him."

Lawyer trudges to the canal that separates his land from his uncle's old farm. The local irrigation district constructed it years ago, taking a full acre and more from his uncle to build it. The canal is where his cousin drowned when she was 8. In good times and bad times, the water flows right on by.

Out back stands the dead well next to his idled tractor and the chicken pens with no chickens and an Arabian horse named Sunshine who's there to keep the grass down, if only they had it. He knows now why a grown man could cry at a board of supervisors meeting.

"I thought about no runoff from the mountain, and they're still getting all this water from the earth. I thought about the people who are doing without, just for someone to get rich. I thought about the rivers going dry and the lakes and everything. I thought about those things, and it hurt. For us to come and try to live a decent life here ... it's not our

fault the water's going dry.”

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