

Elmer Hansen

Water was always one of Elmer Hansen's primary interests in life, from his love of rivers to his long career as a founder of Peerless Pumps, one of the first companies in the San Joaquin Valley to pump water from the ground and forever change the way we live and grow our food. He was ninety years old when he told us about his life and the monumental changes he had witnessed. He died soon after, leaving us with his fascinating story.

I remember back when I was a little kid there was no electricity, and everybody had to hand-pump the water out of a well. We carried the water in buckets to the house to wash the dishes and heated it on the stove to wash our clothes. The washtub was our bath; we stood up in it, and mother sprinkled us with a wet rag and washed us from the head down. You had to carry water to the cattle; you had to carry it into the house. If you had a family vegetable garden or a rose garden—all that would be hand-bucketed.

I moved up to the San Joaquin River in 1929 before we had the dam at Millerton. The river looked entirely different in those days. I've spent a lot of time on rivers, pretty much my whole life. I grew up in Reedley, swam at Reedley Beach, and at a great swimming hole on the Kings River, just above Piedra; it's now called Winton's Cove. I was always interested in fishing and boating and swimming—and girls, of course. A river is a great place for all of that.

We bought the ranch where we are now in 1957. We had roughly a hundred brood cows, and we raised calves, but that market really took a beating and we got out of the cattle business. We've had walnuts since 1971. We left the land natural, never leveled it, and it's all under drip or fan irrigation. Originally there were five pumps on the property for sprinklers,

but now we're down to three pumps under the drip arrangement. With the huge power bills we have now, that was a wise move.

The irrigation districts in the valley were formed to help supply water for the grape vineyards that the Italians started planting here in the valley. The more vineyards they planted, the more water we needed, and that's when I came into the picture. I became involved with Peerless Pumps in the early thirties when we started installing deep-well pumps.

By that time, irrigation had already lowered the normal water level by three to five feet. The valley is about 325 feet above sea level, and the gravity lift is right around twenty-eight feet. That's the point where you lose prime on the pumps. So we had to start deepening the wells and get the pumping pillars to *lift* the water instead of *pulling* the water, to overcome gravity. It was new technology.

Pumps changed everything for agriculture; they made it possible for this county to be what it is. First, new grape varieties were introduced, then citrus and nut trees, and they all had to have water. Even after the dam was installed, you weren't assured enough water to irrigate through the entire growing season, not in the summertime. So farmers had to supplement with these well pumps to finish out their crops. I would say that in my forty-seven years with Peerless Pumps we installed over forty thousand pumps in the valley.

I've been retired for years now, but I've kept my interest in water, and especially in this river. I hope that somebody is going to carefully watch what's happening. We have to make a strong plea to keep at least one hundred second-feet of water running in the river year-round, because when you cut it back to fifty or below you're in trouble. A lot of the old trees, the sycamore and the oak, are dying. The river itself is filling up with willows and bamboo. I don't want to point fingers, but I am worried about the wildlife, too. Our whole

neighborhood has dogs and cats that are destroying all the cottontails, and I think we're going to have a real problem with some of the larger birds, like egrets and the blue herons. They don't like people. The ones that were nesting in the sycamore trees along our property have moved somewhere else; they're not there this year.

Thankfully, we're still on a flyway between Millerton and Fresno. We had a mallard duck and his companion in our swimming pool this spring, looking for a place to nest, but we discouraged that move; with the chlorine in the water we thought they'd best fly on. I counted the other day and we have twenty-two Canadian honkers that fly right over our place. At night they nest in one of the San Joaquin lakes, but they leave early in the morning, before people sic their dogs on them because they honk all night. That's beautiful for me to see, and to hear. I think a lot of birds are getting their food at the Fresno sewer farm, especially the sandhill cranes. They come by the thousands every evening in the fall and spring. Thousands of them go north every evening from about four o'clock to sundown. It's just beautiful to watch.

We've lost the badgers and the beavers. We had a fire through here five or six years ago, and the cottonwood trees that the beavers like to build their dams with were all destroyed, so the beavers have moved on. We occasionally see deer. I guess the deer are pretty rough on golf greens, with their sharp hoofs. It's hard on the animals, all the activity, all the people moving in on them.

There weren't many people out here by the river until pretty recently. I'd say I used to know 80 percent of my neighbors, all up and down the river. Now we don't know most of our neighbors. A lot of the old-timers have either passed away or their kids weren't interested in farming, so the land has been sold off to people who know nothing about this area, nothing about farming or the river.

Our farm will be a big beautiful park one of these days. It's under contract to the American Farmland Trust and can never be developed into subdivisions. I wanted to be sure that I locked that in. I imagine it might have opened a door for other people along the river here to consider doing the same. There are lots of people interested in similar arrangements now that we can all see the writing on the wall.

I've got a lot of family history here in the valley. In fact, there's a big picture at the Bank of America in Clovis of a harvester in a grain field—that's my dad out on the deck. He was known as a jack line driver, with a lead horse and thirty-six mules pulling the harvester. That was taken on the ranch that was deeded to my dad and uncle by their great-uncle. We go way back. I've seen a lot of change. I've been through two world wars; I was born when there were no telephones and no electricity. My first radio was a crystal set run with a dry-cell battery. Even yesterday, I was visiting with some of the old-timers and we were talking about some of the changes we've lived through. There was the Victrola, then black-and-white TV, then color. Now there are laptop computers. At the banks, you're just known by a Social Security number. It's a complete change. I'm now ninety years old and the doctor says I've got another ten to come, so maybe I'll see even more changes. Who knows?