

AN EXPOSE: THE GHOST OF LAMAR JASPER

By J. Robert Eckley

It's the damndest, most unsavory secret in the country, but I think it's time to stop the nay-saying and get down to the brass tacks. No, it's not Bush's questionable military service or Kerry's uncolorful anti-war protesting. It's not even Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan's remarkable recent proposal that the nation "save money" by turning the clocks back to 1933 and "wind down Social Security," just as the major depositors to it--the Boomers--are cuing up to draw on their trillion-dollar deposits. No. It's worse than that for us in Arizona. It's a genuine, 12-alarm disaster in a process of slow-motion but inevitable happening. I'll give you a hint: Just WHO WAS Lamar Jasper and why in the famous 1974 movie "Chinatown" did big, nefarious interests want him to buy oranges? If you know the answer to that question, then you know the tragic issue and need to read no further.

For those whom the hint still leaves clueless, a tour of some companion realities: The prosperity of Arizona and most of the southwest is based upon a national demographic push to the southwest which has funded miles of construction, a huge companioned service and supply sector and, of course, promoted a heavy and profitable tourism. They come here out of the snow and sleet for the sun and the lifestyle, i.e. the "liveability." Often coming from highly regulated, high tax and high cost-of-living states, they often enjoy the relative political freedom and price breaks here, as well. They bring their money and they spend a lot of it; moreover, they settle here and spend even more. Arizona has had it all, advertised it, and the world has flocked to get it. But that's going to change when "The Word" gets out, I assure you.

Yep. Blight this elysian image with even a shadow of a severely foundering environment and even hypothesize the direct and consequential consumer regulation, high taxes and high costs it would take to fix it and I believe Arizona will just as categorically lose it all. Without the key ingredients of "liveability," the flocks will turn back or go elsewhere and The Arizona Success Story will implode as thunderously as it got started. All it takes is "The Word" and it will inevitably come out. For some Big Players who look at Big Pictures, it already has. It's scared the hell out of some. Others see pure gold. Still in the dark? Okay. Get real close and I'll whisper it to you.

It's WATER. More to the point, it the water that isn't here.

Getting even more precise, it's the water that may never again be here in the amounts required to sustain either growth or even the indigenous population! And it's the conservation we are not doing and the serious shortages, critical rationing, astringent regulation and high water rates and oppressive water-oriented taxes that are coming down the pike to try to fix it just as surely as the Barron's article (or like) that will sooner or later erupt to "red line" The Great Arizona Water Disaster. Remember the article Barron's published in the mid-80's that "red lined" the real estate slump? True or not, that article made our market the "real estate tanking heard around the world." The market dumped and a lot of the deeply-invested Arizona citizenry, even the old time local brahmins, financially disappeared with it. Population influx and local investment--already troubled--went to a trickle over night.

Okay, so that panic passed, but that was because the Fed turned on the money again. It's not that

easy when the product is water--something finite which only Nature makes--and we've drained her only wells down to dust.

So now for the first time anyone can remember, we have a "water watch" as a regular column in the newspaper and a long series of articles on it's meteoric diminishment. The published charts (for those who take time to read them) show massive, sustained, increasing drought across 80% of Arizona and spreading. The reservoirs have melted to lower lows than at any time in history; Las Vegas, Denver, Albuquerque and even formerly water-abundant cities like Flagstaff have all gone to rationing. Mormon Lake, a few years ago a large water, riparian and wildlife area, just plain disappeared down a muddy hole a while back and has never reappeared. The valley aquifers, filled during the last ice age 10,000 years ago and likely requiring another one to ever fill again, are plummeting every year unless recharged by an entirely unreliable CAP allocation meandering in from other similarly parched states and sources. The smarter, old time well-drillers are telling people for the first time to "buckle up for trouble" by drilling as deeply as they can and sinking their pumps to the bottom of the shafts NOW. The utilities are secretly beefing up emergency plans for drastic rationing and cut-offs when the politicians finally "give them the green light." But it's the light that politicians are not going to give until it's too late, as the repercussions for whomever finally "goes green" will be suicidal.

No pools, no grass, no washing cars, bathing only on appointed days, water bills that are as large as mortgage payments and, finally, no water at all except on Tuesdays? Far fetched? It's already happening elsewhere in the southwest. Does anyone have any idea of the impact of this once it gets past a whisper and into the national newspapers? What will the social, economic and political upheavals generated by the political neglect of this terrifying challenge be, when the "crash" arrives? Nothing less than a socioeconomic bloodbath.

So who the blazes IS "Lamar Jasper!" Okay. In "Chinatown," he was a "shill" (a dead one at that!) used by dark, vastly wealthy powers to secretly buy up what otherwise appeared as relatively cheap agricultural lands in early Los Angeles--when most of the area was little but orange groves--and the orange market was down the tubes. The hero, Jack Nicholson, playing a detective, Mr. Gittes, hired to find out why, finally confronts John Houston, playing one of those dark, wealthy powers, and asks him "why anyone would want all of those dead oranges?" John Houston responds "...we could care less about those oranges or the groves or the farmers..what we want for a thirsty, growing, and ultimately desperate city is what lies under them. Water, Mr. Gittes. In this part of the country, it's the only true gold and he who owns it controls everything else..."

The brass tacks: Who says that the Right Vision for Arizona has to be to "Los Angelize" it? Even Los Angelinos justly think that city is a living hell! And, moreover, who is paying people to support a bankrupt social proposition for Arizona as ridiculous as becoming that place? The water-guzzling developers? Has anyone asked how the developers are finding the requisite "100 year water supplies" to get permits for their shake-and-bake communities when the entire wisdom, power and might of the State of Arizona can't even find those reserves? Or is this "paper water," i.e. gushing on politically-greased paper, dry as a bone in the ground? Or are they finding these gushers with the new water-hoarding "Lamar Jaspers" who are quietly politically-gerrymandering or buying up at bargain rates soon-to-be multi-billion-dollar private water rights

as fast as they can so they can extort us all with them when the public domain runs out? You heard that revelation first, here. It's happening.

The bottom line to stave this off? At the very least, serious, responsive conservation and regulation RIGHT NOW. That means letting the cat of this problem out of the bag of political damage control. We cannot cope with what we cannot acknowledge and by getting this on the table we take the shock and awe out of that inevitable shrieking, negative national headline that will, after an expose of the neglect that led to it, kill a lot of careers and suffocate a lot of investment. At best, what we really need is an immediate reconsideration about the wisdom of boundless, for the most part mindless development and expansion as the only "Future Vision" for this state. Last, we need to cut off with pre-emptive legislation skullduggeries of Lamar Jasper in every political or economic disguise he might assume as, without that, conservation alone is unequivocally doomed. And then we really will go back to the national conception of us popular in the early 1900s as that "hellhole sand pile on the border."

'Nuff said.

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