

Water Resources and Community Values:

Utah's Dixie as a Case Study

by Thomas G. Alexander

For many years, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians have recognized the importance of symbols and myths in the lives of people. Since the word myth, which really means something commonly believed in a community, is often mistakenly thought to mean something not true, it is perhaps more useful to talk of symbols and values. By a symbol, is meant the concrete representation of something which the community holds to be important but which cannot in its entirety be represented in a concrete way. By a value, is meant a set of ideals, principles, or beliefs members of a particular community share with each other and hold to be of great importance.

In the United States, we have certain symbols and values which all of us hold dear. We revere symbols such as the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Founding Fathers. Different people interpret the meaning of those symbols differently, but all of us refer to them in our political discourse. We praise such values as self-reliance, liberty, and truth. Since we share these values, we feel a sense of belonging in the community of those who also hold them.¹ On American values see Robert N. Bellah, Robert Bellah, Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-traditional World (New York: Harper and

Row, 1970)

At least since the publication of Henry Nash Smith's Virgin Land, we have recognized the importance of symbols and values to the people of the American West.² 2Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950). See also Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). We associate the West with such concepts as rugged individualism, progress, the garden of the world (many would associate it with "making the desert blossom like the rose"), and transformation of the landscape. Reference to those symbols and to the ideas they represent are a sort of shorthand. When we see a western movie or read a western novel, the symbols and values do not have to be explained to us. We understand them because they are part of our common heritage. They evoke in us certain responses which indicate that we are part of that community or at least that we understand the tradition which spawned those symbols and values.

The Latter-day Saint community in Utah has its own set of values, some of which are shared with other Americans and with other Westerners, and some of which are unique. Some shared values can be represented symbolically in artistic form. Thus, we see representations of the beehive, the Salt Lake Temple, and the all-seeing eye. During the summer, people flock to pageants such as those at the Hill Cumorah in New York and at Manti, Utah. Visitors do not generally learn new things at such pageants, but they share with others a representation of the symbols of the

values deeply imbedded in the Mormon culture.³ 3Davis Bitton, "The Ritualization of Mormon History" Utah Historical Quarterly 43 (Winter 1975): 67-85; Mark Hamilton, "The Salt Lake Temple: A Symbolic Statement of Mormon Doctrine," in Thomas G. Alexander, ed. The Mormon People: Their Character and Traditions (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), pp. 103-127; Hal Cannon, ed. Utah Folk Art: A Catalogue of Material Culture (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1980); and idem. The Grand Beehive (Salt Lake City: University Press, 1980).

If Westerners and Mormons have particular shared symbols and values, so do Utah settlers who live on irrigated lands. A study of the literature produced by those familiar with Southwestern Utah, particularly Washington County, indicates some important values attached to settlement and water development in Utah's Dixie. It is perhaps easier to study the values of that region than other parts of the Mormon commonwealth because knowledgeable historians like Juanita Brooks, Andrew Karl Larson, and Nels Anderson have lived in the region, shared regional values, and written extensively about the people. What may appear on the surface more surprising, however, is that many who live outside the region, but who have written about it, share these values as well. Thus, representations of such values are found not only in the diaries and journals of the settlers and inhabitants and in the writings of Dixie citizens, but also in such sources as proposals for water projects, newspaper articles, studies of rural redevelopment, and articles and books written by outside scholars.

One might wonder why this last set of writings reflect the same values and symbols. There seem to be two answers to this question. In the first place many who write share the same values as people of Southwestern Utah. Secondly many of the works are based on sources produced by Dixieites. People retain in their memories or in their papers, diaries, and journals the things which are most important to them, and historians search for those things which seem most important, either to the people they are studying or to themselves.

History can never be a record of the totality of the past. By the use of primary sources, however, the historian can often determine what was most important to those who lived in the past. Thus, history is--or ought to be--most generally about understanding, either understanding those who lived in past times or understanding ourselves. By examining documents, the historian tries to understand what was most important to those who lived in the past or to his own generation and to make generalizations--some historians have called them "normative hypotheses"--about conditions in human society.⁴ 4 See Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr., A Behavioral Approach to Historical Analysis (New York: Free Press, 1969), especially, chapter 6; Dale H. Porter, The Emergence of the Past: A Theory of Historical Explanation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 37-39; Wilhelm Dilthey, "The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Life-Expressions," in Patrick Gardiner, ed, Theories of History (New York: Free Press, 1959), pp. 213-225; and Benedetto Croce, "History and Chronicle," *ibid.*, pp. 226-233.

Normative hypotheses are not laws of human behavior. Instead, they are generalizations about the human conditions, and about symbols, and values. Since, however, historians and other scholars have learned through experience that many groups of people in divergent parts of the world share similar values, symbols, and conditions, normative hypotheses can be used to make statements about things we usually expect to find at other times and under similar conditions. Thus, if we find particular symbols and values among LDS settlers in Southwestern Utah, we would normally expect to find them among other Mormons in the arid regions of the West, and perhaps among other western settlers as well. Some or all of the values may be absent in particular communities, but that does not disturb the historian because he knows that he is not dealing with general laws of human behavior, merely with statements about normal conditions.⁵ For those who do not accept this view and who believe that historians ought to be producing or using general laws or that history is poorer because it does not see: Karl Popper, "Has History Any Meaning," in Hans Meyerhoff, ed., The Philosophy of History in Our Time (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 300-311; Carl G. Hempel, "The Function of General Laws in History," in Gardiner, Theories of History, pp. 344-356 and Morton White, "Historical Explanation" *ibid.*, pp. 357-373.

With that as a background, we can discuss the sorts of symbols and values relating to water resources found among the people of Utah's Dixie.

In that connection, the literature, seems to contain six

values generally associated with life in Washington County. They are: 1. A Deep Religious Faith; 2. Self-reliance, Hard Work, and Perseverance; 3. Struggle with Nature; 4. Material Progress; 5. Improvement of Technology; and 6. Rural Lifestyle. The remainder of the paper will discuss each of these ideas in turn, drawing upon the literature written by historians and others about life in Utah's Dixie as it relates to the use of water and irrigation.

The idea of Deep Religious Faith is evident in a number of incidents recorded by those associated with life in Utah's Dixie. Elijah Averett, for instance, is reported to have told how his father came home from a hard day in the fields only to learn that he had been called to St. George. "He dropped into a chair saying, 'I'll be damned if I'll go.' After sitting a few minutes with his head in his hands, he stood up, stretched, and said, 'Well, if we are going to Dixie, we had better start to get ready.'"⁶ Juanita Brooks, "The Cotton Mission," Utah Historical Quarterly 29 (July 1961): 206. Charles L. Walker wrote that "This is the hardest trial I ever had, and had it not been for the Gospel and those placed over us, I should never have moved a foot to go on such a trip."⁷ ⁷ *ibid.* Similar statements of faith are attributed to Robert Gardner and others.⁸ ⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 206-07; and Nels Anderson, Desert Saints: The Mormon Frontier in Utah (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 232.

The people of the Cotton Mission ritualized this value of faith and associated it with irrigation by the first act of the Cotton Missionaries after they arrived at the site of St. George

in 1861. William Carter, using the same plow which had broken the first furrow in the Salt Lake Valley plowed a ditch at the present site of the Dixie College Campus to catch and direct the waters of the East Spring. This was a community ritual in which wagons lined up on each side of the ditch. The settlers pitched a large Sibley tent near the site which was used as a community center until the people could move to the townsite.⁹ 9Brooks, "Cotton Mission, p. 209.

The historian finds water development associated with faithfulness in other contexts as well. When the Dixieites decided to construct the dam at the Virgin Anticline in 1890, the Presidency of the St. George Stake through Anthony W. Ivins, then a counselor in the stake presidency, appealed to the First Presidency of the Church for assistance from tithing revenues. Ivins made part of the appeal on the basis of the faithfulness of those in the Virgin River Valley who had remained in the mission instead of leaving for other areas like Arizona, New Mexico, or Garfield County. The First Presidency allowed the Saints to use tithing funds to construct the dam. In the process, Dixieites believed, providence intervened further since Andrew Gregerson had moved a large cache of otherwise unavailable construction equipment to Pioche, Nevada which Dixieites needed for building the dam.¹⁰ 10Andrew Karl Larson, "I was Called to Dixie": The Virgin River Basin: Unique Experiences in Mormon Pioneering (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1961), pp. 368-73.

A similar set of circumstances was apparent in the construction of the Hurricane Canal. In this case, James Jepson

who was sent to make the plea for tithing assistance, "prayed earnestly to God that I might acquit myself well in the interview." He secured the assistance, and the canal helped five wards to bring water onto the Hurricane Bench. Later, President George H. Brimhall of Brigham Young University traveled over the canal with Jepson from its Virgin Canyon source to the fields at Hurricane. He marveled that the people could accomplish so much. "Jepson answered him by asking the question, 'Do you remember how Brigham Young called a group of people to Dixie and only about half of them responded?' Yes, President Brimhall had heard something like that. 'Do you remember that of the half who came, only half remained?' 'Yes.' 'Well,' said James Jepson, 'the men and women who built this canal are the children of those who stayed!'"¹¹ Larson, "I was Called to Dixie," pp. 396-401.

In this same connection, one could mention a number of other incidents in which faithfulness was associated with water development. Perhaps the best known is portrayed in the film "The Windows of Heaven" which associated badly needed rain with faithfulness as evidenced by tithe paying. In this case, the story is associated with President Lorenzo Snow instead of Joseph F. Smith who was connected with the Hurricane Canal incident.

The second value associated with irrigation and water development is Self Reliance, Hard Work, and Perseverence. Some of the examples mentioned before could be used in this connection. ¹² We can, however, mention others. By the end of 1862, the Dixie Saints had constructed a six foot wide ditch for six miles across the Washington County landscape. Within four years,

the people at St. George had spent countless hours of time and more than \$26,000 in repairing and replacing dams and sections of the ditch. 12 12Brooks, "Cotton Mission," p.210. Diary entries and modern historians writing on the basis of them record that the Virgin often overflowed its banks, filling the ditches with sand, destroyed crops and buildings, and impregnated the soil with silt. At Santa Clara, settlers faced the problems of drouth since stream flow in the Santa Clara River was often irregular and uncertain. Even there, however, the Saints remained in spite of the hardships. God helped them because they were faithful, yes, but his help was effective only because they persisted and worked hard.13 13See Andrew Karl Larson, The Red Hills of November: A Pioneer Biography of Utah's Cotton Town (Salt Lake City:Deseret News Press, 1957), pp. 100-118.

Construction of the Hurricane Canal required not only tithing assistance from the Church, but also backbreaking labor on the part of those who carved the canal from the side of the Virgin River Canyon.14 14Larson, "I Was Called to Dixie," pp. 392-93. Wilhelmina W. Hinton's doggerel verse portrays that perseverance with a great deal of feeling, if with little literary style.

Their families were left in the care of the Lord,
Twas thirteen years before they realized any reward.
The work on the canal was sure everlasting,
But progress was made by continually blasting.
Often vexed words escaped, with a taint of profane,
Meantime they were hoping and praying for rain.

The rain when it came, often bust out home ditches,
Then they would say with a sigh,
"That means another patch on our britches." 15

15Larson, "I Was Called to Dixie." p. 393.

All of these incidents were associated together in the third value, the Struggle With Nature. Robert H. Woody, business editor of the Salt Lake Tribune, summed up the feeling of the people of the region in an article published in 1973 while the Interior Department was still considering construction of the Dixie Reclamation Project. According to local lore, he said "the so-called Virgin River is wont to act like a fallen woman. And this project could reform her. This less than affectionate view of the river is born of years of grief and the cost of controlling it."16 16 Salt Lake Tribune, March 8, 1973. In this, Woody echoed Juanita Brooks's 1941 Harper's article. "For seventy-four years," she wrote, "this struggle has gone on. The people cannot conquer the river; it cannot shake them from its bank. It is like an endless war wherein first one side then the other is victorious. The relationship is exactly as it was when the first settlers arrived."17 17Juanita Brooks, "The Water's In!" Harper's Magazine 182 (May 1941): 611.

During the 1960s and 1970s, many hoped that the people might win this struggle by the construction of the Dixie Project on the Virgin River. The project planning report on the Dixie Project in 1963 summed up the feelings of many when it said that "Development of such facilities would enable the conservation and orderly release of water that is now largely wasted as flood

discharges and would also permit the conservation of those portions of normal flows which are in excess of immediate requirements for irrigation and other uses."¹⁸ 18U.S. Department of the Interior, Regional Project Planning Report--Dixie Project, 1963 (Denver, Colorado: Regional Office, USDI, 1963), p. 34. Thus, the idea of Struggle With Nature can even be translated into bureaucratese by outsiders familiar with and perhaps even sharing local values.

In all of these efforts, the people expected the fourth value, "Material Progress" to follow their labor. In 1861, Brigham Young visited the settlements which had already been founded on the Virgin and its tributaries. He traveled to the future site of St. George, swept his arm across the vista and is reported to have said that: "There will yet be built, between those volcanic ridges, a city, with spires, towers and steeples, with homes containing many inhabitants."¹⁹ 19Larson, "I was Called to Dixie," pp. 101-02.

Settlers in Utah's Dixie experimented with bee keeping, silk culture, wine making, and numerous other ventures in an attempt to find crops which would expand the wealth of the region. All of these came to a sorry end. They finally succeeded in planting alfalfa which provided feed for their livestock and which, in the mild weather of Utah's Dixie produced three or four cuttings per season. Following the generally held local point of view, A. Karl Larson opined that "it would be difficult to overestimate the difference for the better wrought by the introduction of this wonder plant."²⁰ 20A. Karl Larson, "Pioneer Agriculture," Utah

Historical Quarterly 26 (July 1961): 279-80, and passim.

Nevertheless, other sources indicate that the situation remained less than optimum for Dixie farmers. Outmigration had been heavy there as it was in most of rural Utah, and prosperity seemed an empty dream to many.²¹ ²¹Edward C. Banfield, Jr., "Rural Rehabilitation in Washington County, Utah" Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics, 23 (1947): 269. At Bunkerville, Nevada, even minimal prosperity eluded the settlers during the period before the 1930s. Nostalgia coupled with some disillusionment is apparent in Juanita Brooks's "Water's In." At the same time, she noted that the progress denied faithful Saints had been realized by New Deal Agencies like the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Bureau of Reclamation. Tap water replaced "Virgin Bloat," and "all the coal-oil lamps were scrapped. A new way of life was opened. It was almost pathetic," she wrote, "to see the delight of some of those grown old; my grandmother, in her eighty-sixth year, was like a child with a new toy."²² ²²Brooks, "Water's In," pp. 612-13.

Still, the expectation of material progress persisted. The planning report on the Dixie Project argued the need of reclamation on the basis of lack of progress demonstrated by the absence of "essential resources needed to provide means of livelihood for even its normal population increase." Adequate electrical power, flood control, increased employment, and improved agricultural conditions were all expected from the project. ²³ ²³USDI, Planning Report--Dixie Project, 1963, pp. 31, 32, 35, 36, 172; Salt Lake Tribune, September 15, 1970, May 20,

1971.

This persistent expectation of progress through irrigated agriculture, continued in spite of the fact that by the early 1960s 76 per cent of the operators of farms in the Dixie Project area were ^{part} part-time farmers. These generally owned 18 or fewer acres and earned the "greater part of their income from sources other than their farming operations." They worked in "state and county agencies, commercial businesses, construction firms, industrial firms," or the mines or they owned businesses of their own.²⁴ ²⁴USDI, Planning Report--Dixie Project, 1963, pp. 172-73.

A fifth value connected with water resources was improved technology. The historians cite the crude wing dams that gave way to pile dams, that in turn yielded to earth and rockfill dams. The writers exhibit considerable pride over the invention by Benjamin Jarvis of the sand gate which helped to filter suspended sand from the Virgin River water. Jarvis also pioneered in the use of the spillway in Washington County, which protected the dams from erosion caused by water flooding over their crests. The pride in local technological advancement is apparent when one notes that local lore credits Jarvis with the unlikely achievement of being the first to use the spillway in the West.²⁵ ²⁵Larson, "I was Called to Dixie.", pp. 360-62

Jarvis introduced the spillway in the mid-1870s, but by the time Dixitites constructed the Washington Field Dam in the early 1890s, technology had improved even more. The literature tells of the use of steel drills and dynamite to construct a dam which, which A. Karl Larson said, controlled "the heartbreak caused by

the river."²⁶ ²⁶Larson, "I was Called to Dixie", p. 375. This statement undoubtedly contains some hyperbole since the both the 1963 Dixie Project planning report and Robert Woody's 1973 article mention the continued need to tame the wicked Virgin.

Improved technology is, of course, related to material progress, but it is generally held to have some value in and of itself and has become a source of pride in the community. People note the introduction of electricity, paving of streets, the adoption of electric appliances, and other trappings of a technologically advanced civilization. The movement from subsistence to commercial agriculture marked an important advance for the people of the Dixie region. All of these things, which the people of the region view with pride, are examples of technological improvement.²⁷ ²⁷Banfield, "Rural Rehabilitation," pp. 262, 265-68; Brooks, "Water's In," pp. 612-13.

Of all the values, perhaps the most difficult to explain to city dwellers like myself is the belief in the value of rural life. In a sense, all of the other values are bound up in this one. Part of the value is associated with love of home, family, and community. Part of it has to do with the belief in the virtue of the life of the farmer and the value of the contribution he makes to the community and the nation. After observing the results of rural rehabilitation in Washington County during the 1930s and 40s, Edward Banfield wrote that he did not "doubt many Dixie people will accept living standards lower than they might expect elsewhere as the price of participating in what they consider a unique and valuable

culture."²⁸ Banfield, "Rural Rehabilitation," p. 269. It is difficult to read the works of Juanita Brooks or A. Karl Larson without sensing that same pride and love for the values of rural Utah and her people.

It is on the basis of such values that politicians tried to sell the Congress on extensive appropriations for the Dixie Project. As Senator Frank Moss put it, "This section of our state is in dire need of adequate irrigation facilities and, until the Dixie Project becomes a reality, southern Utah Citizens will continue to suffer."²⁹ Salt Lake Tribune, September 15, 1970.

Ironically, Moss expressed these views at a time when rural life had become increasingly an artifact left over from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Estimates connected with the environmental impact statement for the Allen-Warner Valley power and reclamation project indicated that only 13.9 per cent of those employed in Washington County in 1980 worked in agriculture. Larger percentages of the population worked trade and governmental services, and an equal percentage were engaged in providing other services.³⁰ U. S. Department of the Interior, Final Environmental Impact Statement on Allen-Warner Valley Energy System 2 vols. (Cedar City, Utah: Bureau of Land Management, ca.1980), 1: (3-36). The growth of these sectors were attributable to tourism and the sunbelt lifestyle rather more than to rural life.

Finally, it is instructive, to compare the Department of the Interior's Project Planning Report on the Dixie Project with the

Environment Impact Statement on the Allen-Warner Valley project. The text of the Planning Report reflects many of the values formerly associated with water resources in Utah's Dixie. While many of the exhibits, in the Environmental Impact Statement, reflect some of the same values, the text of the Final Environmental Impact Statement and many of the other letters, particularly those from outside the region, are based on a set of values emphasizing environmental protection, improved air quality, tourism, and possible destruction of endangered wildlife. In the text of the Environmental Impact Statement, questions relating to economic development are played off against these environmental values, but an appeal to the preservation or enhancement of the values previously associated with water resources is conspicuously lacking. In part, this is a reflection of the format and content dictated by the environmental impact statement concept, but this too is a reflection of changing values.³¹ For some of the letters favoring the project see: Ray J. Palmer to Bureau of Land Management, July 13, 1980; R. J. Peebles to David F. Everett, July 19, 1980; Vern R. Thomas to M. S. Jensen, July 22, 1980; D. Spencer Esplin to Dear Sir, July 31, 1980; Effie Montes to District Manager, August 17, 1980; Washington County Commission to Morgan Jensen, August 18, 1980; Final Environmental Impact Statement,²: 13, 15, 16-17, 83, 88-89. For a sampling of those raising environmental concerns and generally not reflecting the values mentioned above see: A. Brooks Pace to Morgan Jensen, July 15, 1980; Steen Smith to Morgan Jensen, August 5, 1980; Comments of Friends of the Earth, August

1, 1980; Linda L. Lewis and C. John Lewis to Morgan Jensen, August 19, 1980, Final Environmental Impact Statement 2: 10, 29; 30-50; 289.

In reviewing those exhibits favoring the project, however, and comparing them with statements supporting the Dixie Project, it seems clear that even the values previously associated with water resource use have undergone a significant alteration. The principal value absent from arguments for the Dixie Project was a deep religious faith. Nevertheless, support for the Dixie Project included appeals to the values of Self-Reliance, Hard Work, and Perseverence; Struggle with Nature; Progress; Improvement of Technology; and Rural Lifestyle. By the time of the Final Environmental Impact Statement in 1980, however, virtually the only values mentioned among those who supported the project were Progress and Improvement of Technology. Even the discussion of a Rural Lifestyle was conspicuously absent.

Thus, it seems, any unique combination of values associated with water resources in the 19th and early 20th centuries has been largely altered by late 20th century conditions. Secularization had eliminated the religious component by the 1930s, and urbanization and styles of life associated with business and service industries had reduced the emphasis on Self Reliance, Hard Work, and Perseverence as that value related to the use of water resources by the late 1970s. Other concerns have replaced the Struggle with Nature; and Rural Lifestyle is irrelevant since most Dixietes now live in cities and larger towns and have little contact with irrigated farms where the

value of a rural lifestyle might still obtain. Progress and Improvement of Technology remain, but they do not necessarily relate to water resource use. In short, Utah's Dixie has become indeed, "The Other Palm Springs," and the people have adopted other values more in accord with their new condition.