Newlands, Old Lands: Native American Labor, Agrarian Ideology, and the Progressive-Era State in the Making of the Newlands Reclamation Project, 1902-1926

The first federal Reclamation Act project, located in the Nevada desert sixty miles east of Reno, depended upon the labor of hundreds of Paiute and Shoshone farm workers. During the first several decades of the Newlands project history, Native Americans provided essential harvest labor and helped to ensure the nominal success of this important federal effort in developing the arid west. This fact has received scant attention, and the Fallon Paiute and Shoshone have remained invisible with respect to this inaugural progressive-era scheme’s history.

The National Reclamation Act of 1902 created a federal bureaucracy to harness rivers in eleven western states. By the end of President Theodore Roosevelt’s second term, this hallmark legislation had sponsored some thirty federal projects. Efficiency-minded engineers and politicians interested in projects for their home districts soon expanded the scope of this western modernization. The early Reclamation Service experience at Newlands and other sites provided a training-ground for the later development of the Bureau of Reclamation’s high dam building bureaucracy, leading eventually to the massive federal projects on the Colorado, Columbia and other major western rivers.

But, in the beginning in Nevada, the Newlands Reclamation Act, steeped in agrarian ideology and abetted by federal technological expertise and capital, wedded the European-American family farm to an underclass of Paiute and Shoshone wage workers. These Indian workers harvested the Carson Sink Valley’s alfalfa crop, maintained the irrigation ditches of the white farmers’ fields, and worked as domestics in those farmers’ homes. Why has our collective memory evidenced a historical amnesia with respect to the American Indian wageworkers on this project in particular, and throughout the West more generally?

Western historians, who claim regional distinctiveness for having “more visible, unvanished Indian peoples,” have not reckoned with Native American wage labor and its role in the development of the American West, especially during the twentieth-century. David Emmons, straddling both labor and western history perspectives, insists matter-of-factly “American Indians did not provide labor…native
peoples were thought to be economically valueless and hence irrelevant.” According to the received narrative, native people, marginalized in reservation “island communities,” either endured in the ranks of the unemployed, subsisting on federal largesse, or vanished into the urban working class and thereby lost their “Indian-ness.” Dismissed as “too few in number,” indigenous people’s “importance as economic producers was minor,” especially during the allotment period, according to many historians. Their importance as economic producers, however, was in no way minor to these laboring Indians. And if, we accept population totals as the delimiter of significance, then we accept the very colonialist rhetoric that deprived indigenous people of their land and political voice in the first place. In this tyranny of numbers, historians perpetuate a familiar domination.

Native invisibility in this region’s labor history stems from an American western historiography that has tended to draw sharp lines between Indian communities and European-American settlement. As Native American legal scholar Charles Wilkinson observes, Indian reservations “comprise a chain of islands within the greater society.” These island communities existed separate from the waves of European-American emigration with their development plans. Considering the Newlands Project and its consequences, Donald Worster in Rivers of Empire echoes this interpretation of native isolation. While he recognizes the presence of proletarianized farm workers arising from the federal irrigation regime, he ignores Indians as workers. “The predicament of the farm workers in the western hydraulic order,” Worster concludes, “was radically unlike that of the Indians.” In the case of Newlands, the field workers were the Indians. By highlighting the omission of Native American wageworkers from this project specifically and from the broader context of American history generally, we may begin to restore the historical connections that tied Paiute and Shoshone workers to this federal water development in the West. In certain places, at certain times, this case-study contends, Native American wage work has been crucial to the viability of local economies, particularly in labor-scarce regions.

In the following pages we will consider the contradictory nature of an agrarian ideology that urged a return to the soil. Boosters sought in the words of the tireless William Smythe, “to guarantee subsistence…with the least possible dependence upon others.” Yet the European-American farming
community founded on these beliefs relied on the financial might of the federal government and the labor of dispossessed Indians. During the first three decades of the twentieth century the federal government, white irrigation farmers, and the Paiute and Shoshone wrestled with the contradictions inherent in the new hydraulic regime in the Nevada desert. But inevitably the contradiction of planting an Eden in the harsh soils of the Great Basin exposed a conflict, not between “culture and nature,” but rather between competing peoples. This essay shows that the concrete relationships by which humans endeavor to exploit nature necessarily involve efforts to exploit human labor. And despite the newcomers’ best efforts to coerce Native labor and control Native lives, the Paiute and Shoshone found ways around the new irrigation regime’s institutions of control.

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In the late nineteenth century the Northern Paiute and Shoshone of the Carson Sink Valley in western Nevada occupied more than 30,000 acres allotted under the provisions of the 1887 Dawes Act. These lands on which the Paiute and Shoshone lived—the desert sinks of the Carson and Humboldt Rivers—had appeared worthless to the mineral-minded invaders on the Comstock. By 1902, however, western irrigation boosters in league with Progressive-minded conservationists sought to establish a more stable agricultural economy in Nevada. The federal irrigation project broke ground a year later in the valley. For turn-of-the-century white Nevadans and government water engineers, the region seemed the perfect place for the initial Reclamation Service venture into community building in the arid west. The waters of the Carson and Truckee rivers, draining off the eastern slope of the Sierras, seemed to go to no beneficial use as they evaporated into the desert skies. The open flatland surrounding Fallon and the proximity to rail lines seemed to suit future farming needs.

In 1900 no one bothered to seriously study the soils. The absence of trees, rocks, and plow-breaking sod freed the farmers of the necessity of difficult field clearing. No one questioned why trees were so noticeably absent. “Owing to the extreme dryness there is but little sagebrush on the project and the growth is mainly of greasewood, rabbitbrush, and other desert plants which are easily removed,” Reclamation Service boosters enthused. The Service never considered publicly why these particular
arid plant species thrived in the region. The desert was passing, according to the Nevada State-Journal in 1906, heralding “the measure which will eliminate the desert and make possible . . . the establishment of prosperous communities where now there is naught but silence and desperation.”

In the first flush of optimism the Truckee-Carson Project seemed destined for success. Eager boosters and government engineers imagined a half-million acres under plow. But with an average annual precipitation of 4.6 inches of rain; a temperature range between 103 degrees Fahrenheit to minus fifteen and with killing frosts as early as September 18 and as late as May 31, this region offered an inauspicious spot for the inauguration of this initial federal public works. Project engineer Thomas H. Means worked relentlessly to present the agricultural potential of the region, despite its harsh climate. “Three cuttings of alfalfa will be obtainable and with a good stand five tons per acre on the average can be obtained,” Means advertised. “When all the land embraced within the project is brought under irrigation,” he predicted, “it should support a population of 100,000 people and make Fallon the leading city in Nevada.”

Federal irrigation development arose with an ecological crisis on the west’s vast rangelands. During the so-called “Great White Winter” of 1889-90, the Nevada State Surveyor-General reported that 40% of the range cattle, 30% of all horses, and 45% of the sheep were lost due to drought and winter weather. The state faced ecological and social collapse. “The present system of grazing the public lands is gradually injuring the capacity of the range to support animal life,” a distressed cattleman observed in a letter to Nevada Congressman Francis G. Newlands. In Nevada the need for winter cattle feed and the political sway of the state’s powerful cattle associations helped dictate the political momentum in support of federal reclamation. The irrigated farms would grow hay. The hay operations would provide vital winter-feed for the state’s cattle industry. Rail links would tie cattle raising to distant urban markets. Thus, the future farms of the Newlands Project would hardly serve as refuges for yeoman self-sufficiency. Instead of rural alternatives to industrial urban centers, the irrigation system and its farms would provide for the political and ecological integration of this previously marginal region into national markets.

In 1907, the government opened most of the Paiute allotment to white settlement, designating to each Paiute a 10-acre parcel with the promise of future irrigation water. Predictably, as one observer
noted, "This land," 4,640 acres, "was selected in a body located on the extreme outskirts of the [irrigation] project, and it would be difficult to find a tract of equal size under ditch upon this project, containing so large a percentage of undesirable and probably worthless land". Despite the government’s claims that it knew little of the area’s soil composition, the carefully selected Indian allotments proved to be the most alkaline and unfarmable. Not surprisingly, the federal government never made good on their promise to provide a dependable water supply to the Indian farms.

At Newlands, the Paiute and Shoshone on their allotments, numbering about 400, and an uncounted number of nearby off-reservation Indians, found themselves amidst a suddenly growing white farming settlement. In Churchill County—the county encompassing the irrigation project lands—the European-American population exploded from 829 in 1900 to 4,702 by 1920. For the Paiute and Shoshone this alien force accomplished the task of what several historians have termed “incorporation”—the “assertion of national authority, the penetration of a national market, and, finally, the establishment of the national culture and settlement of citizens from the national core.”

Settler households could not provide sufficient labor, especially during the harvest season in the mid- to late summer. The Reclamation Service estimated that 3.65 people resided on each farm within the Newlands Project in 1914 and 3.47 per farm in 1916. The white farmers desperately needed to hire hands to complete their seasonal fieldwork. And farm households sought Paiute women to relieve the drudgery of the home economy. White farmers needed a source of labor and the government had just created a group of displaced people without the ability to maintain their own farms and who could not remain outside of the paid labor system. The Fallon allotment Indians provided the perfect solution to the white farmer’s labor problems. Given this situation, the Fallon Indian superintendent observed that, "Public sentiment is favorable to the Indian--his labor is a necessity to the development of the Valley, but there is no social intermingling."

Waged work was by no means novel to the Paiute during the first decades of the twentieth century. A half-century of contact had provided ample time to negotiate the boundaries of new customs. Local Native people had pursued far-flung jobs for some time, job-hunting north into Oregon and
Washington and west into California. Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, a Paiute from nearby Pyramid Lake, in her Life Among the Piutes, chronicled the extensive mid-nineteenth century travels with her father and family, following harvest jobs into California, and later northward to farm labor in Northwest.\(^31\)

Labor characterized the Paiute relationship with the newcomers from the start, as evidenced by the observations of the Utah territorial Indian Agent Garland Hurt visiting the Carson River Paiutes in 1855. He found that the Paiute “have become domesticated, and are employed by the settlers of the Carson Valley as herdsmen and laborers on their farms.”\(^32\) In July 1859, the San Joaquin Republican reported that about forty “Pah Utahs” from Carson Valley had camped near Stockton, California for two months and were on their way to the San Jose area to work.\(^33\) William Wright in his Washoe Rambles noted that in 1861 Carson Valley Paiute spoke some English and Spanish, indicating a worldly Paiute people.\(^34\) Even the British explorer Richard F. Burton remarked on the business acumen of Carson Sink Paiute in his narrative of his travels across the West in 1860. “At Sink Station [Carson Sink] an Indian standing by asked $20 to herd the stock for a single night,” Burton complained.\(^35\) Decades later hop harvest employment in the fields of the Columbia River plateau introduced the nearby Walker River Paiute Jack Wilson--also known as Wovoka--to labor migrancy.\(^36\) “Indians dominated the hop-picking labor force in the [Washington] territory from the industry’s inception, and the annual hop harvests became grand reunions for Indians from all regions of the Northwest,” notes historian Brad Asher.\(^37\)

These Native Americans created and maintained connections of work and kinship over a wide area. Clearly, the Paiute had extensive knowledge of regional opportunities. This information traveled along exchange routes antedating Euroamerican intrusion. No doubt the efficiency of this information exchange and the ability to move within this regional economy increased with industrial innovations like the train and later the automobile. But this mobile search for wages emerged early in the contact period and it arose out of Native initiative, long before the more systematic intrusions of the colonizing state.

By 1910 the Paiute had reproduced themselves as wageworkers.\(^38\) They effectively integrated waged labor with other survival tools; continuing their circuitous seasonal movements, hunting game, harvesting wild foodstuffs, and landing jobs in an increasingly far-flung subsistence range.\(^39\) As access to
local forage resources became limited, the region’s indigenous population turned increasingly to farm work. “The principal industry of these people is farming for the white rancher, they do almost all of the irrigating and hay harvesting, the women are employed as domestics, a few of them make baskets for which they find a ready market,” the Fallon Indian agent observed.40

Wage work strengthened the Paiutes’ hold on subsistence activities, even as it drew them into the region’s cash economy. To be sure, the effects of overgrazing, tree cutting, and hunting by whites reduced significantly the region’s former abundance. As Martha Knack found of the nearby Walker River Paiutes, wage labor became part of a mixed seasonal economy. “Waged labor was seasonal and short term, nearly always by the day or week. It demanded high mobility,” she notes.41 It was so for men, but Paiute women maintained yearlong employment and often earned the greater proportion of Fallon Paiute families’ cash income.42 According to a 1915 Indian Agency report, “The Indians find employment through the summer on the farms and the women work more or less throughout the year at domestic work with white families. Through the winter there is very little work for the men. A few may find employment in feeding cattle, cleaning irrigation ditches, cutting wood etc. but that work is very limited.”43 Paiute men and women worked within the new settler economy in different ways. They balanced strategies of mobility—the men often following seasonal work opportunities—with the year-round domestic labor of Native women.

Where indigenous people sought out wage-paying jobs, the European-American irrigation community imagined the opposite. They envisioned their employment of the Paiute as a form of welfare assistance. An Anglo-American descendent of one of the project’s early settlers insisted that there were few Indian workers on the region’s farms and ranches.44 Instead, she noted that the farmers “helped” the local Paiute by giving them something to do. Disease and malnutrition had wasted their ranks and the white farmers sometimes fed and clothed the destitute Paiute, or, at least, this was the perception of the white community. This paternalism reached into the Paiute community itself as the EuroAmericans sought to educate Native American children. “The Indians will be required to reside upon their ten-acre allotments in the reservation. Their colony should be provided with schools and other conveniences at the
expense of the department.” The Indian Service and the white settler community quickly defined the boundaries of native activity in the region’s new irrigated geography.

The government wished to restrict Native movement and thus create an ideal situation for the reforming work of education. A front-page article in the Churchill County Standard in 1906 highlighted the locals’ concern for Paiute education. “While we are bending every effort to establish school for our children, we forget the urgent need of like institutions for the nearly one hundred Piute children who reside near Fallon. Their parents have been a considerable factor in the development of this section, by reason of their thrift. If the children are to follow in their parents’ footsteps, they must be educated [sic].” The article went on to connect Paiute schooling with Paiute working. “By teaching them some idea of cleanliness, morals, and hygienic law and giving them instruction in domestic science and the common school…their working efficiency can be greatly increased, as can also their power to resist disease and its common cause—dissipation.” These were not schools aimed at engineering social equality, any more than the project farms were designed to foster yeoman independence. They performed the contradictory task of educating Indians for independent lives even as they trained them for subservient positions in the region’s emerging agricultural economy.

The federal Indian service already anticipated the need for an Indian school. And the standardizing education of the Indian agency school supported the needs of the irrigation community for specific laborers. Schools instructed Paiute boys in the use of farm implements and the girls learned to clean, cook, and sew. “Many of your advanced ideas on methods of Indian work I believe may be gradually put in practice here,” urged an Indian Office agent, “especially the plan of the larger boys going to school in winter. They are in great demand on the ranges and ranches in the summer time…. Four months combined school room and shop work for these larger boys, with the privilege of going out in summer, would certainly be of great advantage.” The so-called “privilege” of these summer work commissions may have been lost on these boys. This seasonal “out work” prepared Indian youth for more permanent jobs on the white-owned farms. Such “educational opportunities” also extracted free labor
from unpaid Indian youths. School with its time-discipline and hierarchy of rules and order trained Indian boys and girls in the discipline of wage labor.

But, European-American paternalism apparently had its limits. Local whites generally did not mix with the Indian community. “Aside from their labor no attention is paid to them by the whites, socially, morally or religiously, even in extreme cases,” according to Indian agent Lorenzo Creel in 1908. Fallon School Superintendent Van Voorhis observed this segregating culture, noting that, “In the first place I believe that I am justified in saying that the Piute Indians [sic] are looked upon by the white people as an incidental to the desert the same as the sagebrush and the jack-rabbit and are given about as much consideration, except when the squaw is needed to do the family wash, or the man is needed in the hay field.”

If the irrigation community shunned the Paiute and Shoshone in the town of Fallon, then they quietly welcomed their residence on the nearby allotments. Ever since the 1893 depression, serious concerns had been raised over the ubiquitous presence of transient laborers—hoboes and tramps, as they were called. The valley’s farms produced a highly seasonal crop where the sudden demand for labor raised important issues. In the early 1900s most agricultural wage labor was not local but long-distance. The most pressing question was whether farming communities would tolerate a transient labor force of ‘outsiders’ as “a permanent, institutionalized feature of American agriculture.” The proximity of the Paiute allowed the white irrigation community to depend on the Indians as a local labor force available on a permanent basis. The exclusion of Chinese workers from all Reclamation project construction helped to insure that “Mongolian” workers would not move into the local labor force. And the persistent racism aimed at Mexican-Americans also prompted the irrigation community to rely on the local Paiute and Shoshone. The availability of these local native workers mediated the social stresses posed by transient hoboes and racial outsiders.

The Indian Service sought to inscribe a new moral geography onto these local Indian communities, whereby the indolence thought to be the natural exponent of the “Indian character” would be reformed. Indian agents put their faith in the reforming power of classical economic theory. The Indian
service believed that by forcing property ownership and market relations upon the Paiute, they could be made into rational economic. This wage labor regime began to organize other levels of Indian life, as well. Supposed idleness would be replaced by efficient habits of thrift and productive toil, according to the government agents. Curfews banned Paiute from the town of Fallon at night (the allotment farms were about ten miles from the white town) and laws prohibited Indian “loitering” during the daytime. The government agents targeted a number of Paiute cultural practices that it viewed as obstacles to effective management. Bans on dancing and gambling attempted to control what the agency believed were “improvident” behaviors on the part of local Paiute and Shoshone, with an aim to increasing their laboring efficiency. In 1923 the Fallon Indian Agent passed a ban on gambling except on Sundays. “Since my efforts at curbing gambling things have been much improved, Indians are working much better, I have been told by a number of people that the Indians are working much better than they have for years, they asked me what I had been doing to them to get them working as they are.” Superintendent Joseph Taylor enthused. In the eyes of government overseers, gambling helped to confirm these Indians as irrational beings operating at the society’s margins. Gambling, turn-of-the-century social theorists maintained, showed the taint of “the barbarian temperament.” “It is recognized,” observed Thorstein Veblen, “to be a hindrance to the highest industrial efficiency of the aggregate in any community where it prevails.”

The white farmers, by contrast, worked steadily and “earned” their wealth and independence, according to the prevailing orthodoxy. Meanwhile, the Paiutes’ penchant for gambling indicated the Indians’ supposed profligacy. “The Indians living at Fallon are nearly all day laborers and most them can get steady work in Fallon; however they are very improvident and usually spend their money as fast as they can earn it, with little thought of the future,” the Fallon superintendent noted. This irreverence towards the new regime of moneyed property concerned the government bureaucracy charged with acculturating the Paiute and Shoshone. The Paiute, however, resisted the money logic, at least the logic that whites wished to impress upon them. They had their own self-interest in money transactions. The federal government and white settlers might reconfigure Paiute lands and labor, but they could not in the
end control the *meanings* that the Paiute gave to their own lives and the wages they earned working the farms.

The Indian agency also sought to control Indian use of alcohol, opium, and peyote. Inter-ethnic activity was believed to be a cause of the Indians’ corruption, as “Mexicans” provided liquor and “Chinese” sold “yen-shee” or opium to the Paiute.\(^{56}\) The government worked to keep the Indians separated from these other communities. As early as 1913 Indian agents expressed concerns about the corrupting influence of these other ethnic groups upon local Native Americans, reinforcing the paternalistic notion that the Paiute were victims of this contact. “A large number of Indians are camped near the town of Fallon, where they are easy victims for the Mexicans,” an agent wrote to Commissioner Cato Sells in 1913.\(^{57}\) Concerns about the spread of peyote on the reservations prompted an Office of Indian Affairs circular in the spring of 1919.\(^{58}\) The circular revealed the concerns that the government had with respect to the spread of peyoteism with its potential for forging a pan-Indian movement that might ignite a more subversive political movement. The fact that the Ghost Dance had spread from the nearby Walker River Reservation just three decades earlier was not lost on the government agents.

Controlling what the Paiute *put in* their bodies expanded logically to efforts to control Paiute bodies through the Indian Service’s medical regime. When European diseases shattered the ecological isolation of Native American communities the political consequences of these “virgin soil” epidemics could extend beyond the important demographic impacts.\(^{59}\) Biological susceptibility served for whites as a marker of indigenous “inferiority.” Susceptibility to infection segued into a susceptibility to political conquest.\(^{60}\)

In Fallon, quarantine and segregation became the means for controlling diseases *and* Indian movement. A smallpox outbreak at the Fallon Indian colony in the winter of 1910 alarmed white residents, particularly because of the peculiar intimacy of Paiute women working as domestics, washing, cooking and cleaning in white homes. Ironically, while many native workers maintained the cleanliness of white homes, European-Americans expressed concerns about Indian cleanliness. “The Indian village near Fallon was placed under quarantine in Feb. by March the outbreak had quieted down,” according a
The government report. The tensions between the Paiute and Euroamerican communities was particularly acute because some of the tribal members, when they discovered the lands they had been allotted could not be farmed, moved off the reservation and established what the whites called the Fallon Colony. But the proximity of potentially pestilent Indian camps prodded authorities to give some order to Paiute “colonization.” An Indian Service agent urged in a November 28, 1916 letter “careful consideration should be given to the settlement at Fallon. There are a number of families there, who have not found it possible to make homes on their allotments some ten miles from town, and still live near the town of Fallon making their living working about town and on the adjacent farms.” The white community had a vested interest in securing land locally for these workers. “We should probably secure a small tract there,” the agent advised, “on which their homes could be somewhat protected, though I would not recommend much more than a camping place for that bunch, as we do not want to make the place too attractive as the efforts should be continued to get more of those Indians on their allotments [sic].”62 In 1917 the federal government reserved 40 acres of land for the so-called “Fallon Colony”. Increasingly the government made the Paiute more legible, bounding their settlements and circumscribing their movements.63

At Newlands, the threat of epidemic spreading to the European-American community provided the rationale for separating Indian from white. Quarantine with its guise of scientific-medical authority served as the implement of segregation. The instrument of quarantine, regular medical inspections, the discipline of hygiene, and the regimen of the Indian schools established a medical rationale for new and less visible forms of political control.64 But the Paiute resisted by continuing traditional healing practices. The Paiute “prefer to be treated by the Indian medicine men. We have a number of these fakers practicing their witchery,” an Indian Affairs inspector observed.65

Between the years 1910 and 1930, the off-reservation Churchill County Indian population nearly doubled, rising from 231 to 449. In 1922 employment figures showed that Paiute men earned a total of $37,500, while women, working as laundresses and domestics, earned $19,000 that year.66 “The Indians did only the drudgery such as washing and scrubbing floors. Though some people had a washhouse, others did their laundry out-of-doors, using a scrub and boiling the clothes in a huge iron pot with three
legs,” a Paiute woman recalled. It is difficult to arrive at accurate employment figures for this period. There were always a significant number of Paiute and Shoshone who were either absent at the time of the census or who otherwise avoided the government agents. Paiute men from nearby reservations at Walker Lake and Pyramid Lake and the Humboldt Valley Paiute and Shoshone mixed with Fallon Paiute and Shoshone in the harvest gangs on the white-owned project farms.

Women in particular organized to protect their access to employment. As the white community came to depend on the labor of Indian women in their homes, the Paiute and Shoshone women increasingly exercised some control over the terms of their employment. “When the Indians worked for the white women regularly, each considered it as her job. If a white woman discharged her help, the other Indians would not work for her,” recalled a Paiute woman. Their increased wage earning testified to their often-unrecorded labor organizing strategies.

Women worked year-round, in close proximity to their kin. And the Reclamation Project, by creating jobs locally, kept the Paiute men from moving away and reduced the strain on families caused by long absences from the reservation. Competition for laborers in mining, railroad construction, ranching, and farming drove up regional wage rates. In 1913 daily agricultural labor paid $1.50 and by 1919 an Indian field worker could earn $4.00 per day with board. This high wage fell during the post-war period to $3.00 in 1921 and leveled off at almost $2.50 during the depressed agricultural period through 1926. Regardless of these swings in regional wage rates, the Paiute earned competitive wages on par with other manual laborers in the region.

Before detailing the struggles of the Paiute and Shoshone engagement with this early twentieth-century irrigation district, it is important that we not overlook a competing Paiute interest—their own farms. As the Newlands Project created European-American farms, the government promised to foster Paiute farmers as well. Paradoxically the government’s insistence upon indigenous agriculture ran at odds with the needs of the white irrigation scheme. If the Native Americans worked their own farms, then how could they labor on white-owned acres? And all of these government efforts discounted the initiative of the Paiute themselves. Contrary to the stereotype of former hunter-gatherers statically resisting farming,
the Paiute had serious agricultural ambitions.71 It must be noted that while these Great Basin communities had not produced for a market in the pre-contact era, they had practiced various forms of irrigated agriculture.72 And during the early contact period, John Wesley Powell’s ethnographic survey reported in the 1870s that “All the Pai-Utes subsist in part by cultivating the soil, some of them raising the grain and vegetables introduced by white men, others cultivating native seeds…they also collect uncultivated seeds, fruits and roots…”73 With the advent of allotment the Paiute and Shoshone intensified their efforts to farm their land. In spite of the poor soils and alkali-bogged fields, many Indian farmers persevered in their efforts to turn not just a subsistence living, but a profit from farming. But this proved increasingly difficult.

The commitment of one Paiute man to his community's farming efforts offers a vivid example of the Paiute and Shoshone’s perseverance. During the winter of 1913 Robert Dale made a personal call at the Indian Commissioner's office in Washington, DC, where he delivered a letter signed by 136 Paiute.74 The letter raised a number of issues—complaints about the superintendent's performance, concern about disproportionate land holdings among the Fallon reservation Paiute, and the need for more farming equipment. "Most Indians stay in the town and earn $1.50 per day for farming [on European-American farms]," the letter explained. The Paiute insisted that they "should have implements to farm with so that they can stay on their farms. Only 31 Indians are farming, and there are 300 Indians on the reservation. I would like to have them all fixed so that they can do their own farming." Dale's letter continued, "So we don't do much on our land. It keeps us rustling to get food to eat. We want to find out if we can't get a little help which we need bad."75

Dale had already had several run-ins with the Indian agents. For some time he had served as an interpreter for the Fallon Paiute and Shoshone in their discussions with the local Indian agents. The agency often required the Indians’ unpaid work in return for farming assistance. The government’s demand that the Indians fulfill these obligations spurred vigorous protest. As the Indian superintendent advised Dale in a letter, “In regard to the mowing machine you are advised that it is the practice at all reservations to require the Indians to give something, either cash or labor, in return for the things the
Government furnishes them. This is done as an object lesson to the Indian and to prepare them to take their place among, and on an equal footing with, the whites when the Government withdraws its supervision of their affairs. This corvee labor practice was, however, an affront to the Paiute, who watched as the government propped up the white community with its generous subsidies, extending their repayment schedules and asking little in return.

This practice of enforcing native labor went beyond the reservation allotments. The local jail served as a clearinghouse for white farmers in need of cheap laborers. “It has been the custom at Fallon to arrest an Indian for being drunk and then the next morning some farmer who needed a man would pay the fine and the offender would be turned out, but I believe that the city contemplates a chain gang this year so that there will be some punishment connected with being found drunk.” These abuses of Paiute labor, the lack of seed and farming implements, and the suggestion that allotted lands be leased or sold to whites if the Indians could not farm the land—these situations gradually made farming conditions on the reservation intolerable.

Dale's journey east and the letter he carried demonstrated that, contrary to much of the official testimony, at least some of the Paiute wished to succeed with their own agricultural endeavors and would not remain silent about government abuses. A government inspection of the Fallon reservation farms in 1913 concluded that "The Paiutes of the locality...have shown a great indifference in the acquiring of land or improving it after it has been allotted." This observation conformed to the pervasive European-American determination that Native American cultural rigidity made the transition to agricultural life especially difficult. A popular journal at the time summarized the era's dismissive attitude towards Indian farming, concluding that, "As an agriculturist the Indian has not been altogether a success...he cares little for tilling the soil."

But Paiute farming failures resulted from Anglo designs, not any predetermined cultural rigidity. Indian agricultural ambitions were uniformly frustrated. By 1915 even the government’s own reports recognized that “the Fallon Indians had nothing to start with. They lacked teams, implements, seed, and food upon which to live and it was necessary for them to work for wages, at every opportunity, to support
their families.” And given the Reclamation Service’s own estimations of the capital costs of starting and maintaining a farm, it would be unlikely that any Indian could have succeeded on the allotment lands. “The amount of capital required to reclaim a homestead on this desert varies, of course, with the individual, but we believe that the average man with a thousand dollars, or better with two thousand, is safe in taking up a homestead…” according to Project Engineer Thomas Means. Despite lack of capital during the first years of the project, 1909 to 1914, average cultivation for the entire Paiute allotment was 1,200-1,500 acres. Given their difficult circumstances some Paiute farmers achieved modest early success. But between 1915 and 1929 tribal allotment farms suffered approximately 10 crop failures because of the Reclamation Service refusal to deliver promised water. By 1929 the total cultivated acreage had dropped to just 800 acres.

The perspective that survives in the Paiutes' written appeals to the Indian Office suggests that their agricultural aspirations were not absent, but, rather, uniformly frustrated. Contrary to the received narrative, it appears that the potential for Paiute farming success encouraged government policies pushing Paiute to abandon their own farms and work for the irrigation settlers. During the first several years of the Fallon reservation irrigation effort, the Indian office actively supported Paiute farming, at least in spirit. When in 1913 the Fallon Paiute won a number of agricultural awards at the Nevada State Fair in Reno, the Indian office responded enthusiastically. "The Office feels that this is the very thing needed to stimulate the Indians to greater efforts in modern farming, whereby they will be brought directly in competition with the white farmers for premiums offered by the County Fair itself." But the white entrymen realized the dilemma posed by allotment goals that rested on the foundation of Indian market farming. No great leap of the imagination was required to understand that county-fair competitions also meant eventual market competition that financially strapped European-American irrigators could hardly afford. Efforts to insure Indian subsistence ran at odds to the success of the white settler's irrigation scheme.

Early optimism on the part of the project’s irrigators soon succumbed to reality, as serious droughts took a toll on the Paiute and the white irrigation community’s crops alike. But nature was not a
uniform force, as white farmers enjoyed greater access to scarce water resources during these periodic droughts. Drought for the Paiute was not a natural event. “During the summer months there was not water to irrigate our hay, we got no water at all. My land was seeded to hay and J.J. Taylor [Fallon Superintendent] would not give men water [sic],” allotment farmer Lucius Whitefeather wrote in a 1925 complaint sent to the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, DC.85

The Indians’ farming “failures,” like the occasional failures of their white counterparts, were perceived as the result of character weakness. But the roots of these character “flaws” exposed a particularly racialized logic. White farmers’ failures were seen as proof of an individual’s inadequacy, a lack of will, but Indian failures were seen as inherent to what Euroamericans perceived as their racial character. Hard work led to success according to agriculture’s supposed social ladder. And anyone who could not make a decent living at farming should get out, according to the Reclamation Service’s work ethic. Indeed, difficulties pushed many white farmers off the project in the early years. The Reclamation Service asserted that “where settlers have remained on their places and pursued their business…with diligence and intelligence very encouraging results have been obtained [emphasis added].” White failures indicated an individual’s incompetence, not the inherent contradictions of flooding the alkali thick soils of these Great Basin valleys. Indian failures merely confirmed the deficiencies of their race in the minds of white Americans.

During the first two decades of the Newlands project, success was by no means guaranteed. The Fallon Indian superintendent wrote to his superiors that, "The white men of the valley do not seem to have succeeded and a good many of them seem to be on their uppers, the reasons being apparently lack of market for such products as they raise, and their inability to make loans of their property to experiment with other products. Alfalfa hay is stacked up, one two, three years old, and no market.”86 The white irrigation pioneers had a shaky hold on the project lands and scarcely needed any additional pressures.

In 1913 the superintendent had noted that "The Indian farmers are doing good work on their farms, many of them have good showings this season; equaling in many cases the crops of their white
neighbors. Such observations should dispel any notion of conservative, “traditional” hunter-gatherers resisting the pace and logic of farming. During these same years, the local newspaper happily observed that, "There are but few of our residents who fully realize what wonderful progress is being made by the Piute Indian farmer since the government set apart the 10-acre allotments, and supplied them with free water from the Truckee-Carson canal system...they have over 700 acres of growing alfalfa and this season put in upwards of 100 acres of new alfalfa." Given the precariousness of the hay market, the newspaper’s readers probably did not share this sense of “wonderful progress.” Instead of seeing an impoverished and disappearing Indian, the newcomers recognized competitors. In 1915 an Indian agent inspecting the Fallon allotments observed stalwart Paiute "who have their places under cultivation, are interested in them, and say with considerable pride, that they do not expect to go out to work through the summer, that they will work their own land."

The goal of self-sufficient Paiute farmers collided head-on with the successful operation of the new federal Reclamation Service project. The reply from the Washington office could not have been clearer about the needs of the Reclamation Service for labor. "I should like to have a report," the assistant commissioner demanded, "concerning the encouragement you are giving the Indians of your jurisdiction to take advantage of every opportunity to earn money throughout the summer when work is to be found in the neighborhood, in abundance." With an office-bound appreciation of farming realities, the assistant commissioner continued, "I am anxious to know something of your efforts to induce the Indians to cultivate more of their own and develop their farms during the winter," consequently leaving these same Indians “free” to labor on white farms during the summer.

Irrigated haymaking posed a tricky economic proposition. The often-indebted farmers required a number of workers to harvest a low-value crop. Typical haying crews, consisting of between 14-20 workers and handling teams of twenty or more horses, worked an average summer season of almost two-and-a-half months, cutting, raking, and stacking up to three harvests per farm. It is difficult to estimate the percentage of Paiute laborers on Churchill County farms, but it is clear that local farmers considered these as "Indian jobs." "The Indian was," according to one contemporary observer, “universally
acknowledged to be the best laborer in the West. Employers unite in the statement that the Indian is the most reliable and efficient laborer they can find.

Far from being unskilled jobs, reliable haying crews depended on practiced expertise. The proximity of native reserves guaranteed Fallon farmers’ peak-load harvest workers with the requisite skills. Since they had no obligations towards the Indians the white farmers could take on workers when necessary and release them at the harvests’ end—no need to advertise for workers outside of the region.

Labor scarcity encouraged government policies pushing the Paiute towards wage work for white farmers. Poor soils and inadequate equipment had not prevented Paiute from striving to establish themselves on their own farms. But a discouraging pattern of indebtedness had begun early for the Fallon Indians. Following the 1893 allotment, the Fallon agent provided farming equipment to the Paiute. Paiute Helen Bowser Stone recalled, “the men got in line and stopped before the agent and told him what they needed, and the agent wrote it all down. A year later, all of them received a letter with a bill. What could they do? They were having a hard time on the reservation as it was, so most of them returned the equipment to the Agency and left the reservation to work for the white farmers and ranchers.”

Later the Indian office set up a disbursements fund known as "Industry Among Indians", designed to create a reservation credit system. Ostensibly, this access to cash loans aimed to support Paiute farming. The funds were not intended as outright gifts; the Indians were due to pay back the loans promptly. This credit policy helped to achieve what poor soils and inadequate farm equipment could not.

The reservation superintendent recognized the Paiutes' predicament. "Under our present reimbursable plan, we too often let the Indian become burdened with a debt that even an energetic white man would not think of assuming." The stringent payback obligations met with strong opposition from the Paiute. But even as loan periods were lengthened, a cycle of debt had been established. The government credit program inadvertently created a situation of debt-peonage. Wage labor on the white-owned farms offered a means out of indebtedness. “Where possible, it is desired to encourage the Indians to purchase under the reimbursable plan, as this is deemed the better method of assisting them in getting
started on the road to self-support.”97 Ironically, these credit structures had the contradictory effect of creating Indian debt that could only be paid off with cash wages earned on white-owned farms.

By 1919, the new superintendent, Harry M. Carter pushed for the leasing of most of the Indian farms. With fewer and fewer Indians farming their own allotments, forced as they were to wage labor on local white-owned farms, the government agent reckoned that leasing their properties might open the Indian acreage to white farmers.98 The Churchill County Eagle responded accordingly and ran a story in 1920 regarding the efforts of local town boosters to open the reservation to white settlement. The Commercial Club of Fallon urged: “We can think of no one improvement of a public nature…than to remove this blot from our valley, lighten our burdens to that extent and improve our future prospects.”99 The blot was, of course, the Fallon Indian reservation allotment. The white community did not recognize their own complicity in rendering this land uncultivated. The would-be Indian farmers, in debt and without adequate irrigation water, were too busy harvesting crops for white farmers to care for their own farms. In reply the Fallon superintendent responded that the townspeople if truly interested in “removing the eyesore of uncultivated land from the midst of our fair valley” should “sign up an agreement that…they will not employ an Indian, male or female, to accomplish any labor of any sort for them.” This policy would force the Paiute back to their own lands and force them to pursue their own farming. The superintendent predicted that the townspeople would never consent to such an agreement. “There is a dusky gentleman in the winter’s fuel supply,” he stressed, emphasizing the white community’s reliance upon Native labor.100

Pushing Paiute into wage work accomplished two tasks. First, competition between white and Indian farmers diminished. And second, white farmers gained a cheap and local source for their seasonal labor needs. Such a view of Paiutes pushed into the wage system gives little insight into the Paiute experience of this work. There were other compelling reasons for Paiute to sell their own labor, reasons that were their own. When the ethnologist Robert Lowie visited and wrote about the Fallon Paiute in 1914, he offered no evidence of Indian wageworkers and noted little about reservation market farming. He either did not observe, or more likely, did not think it important, that most Paiute worked for wages or
farmed for cash. Lowie's “science” prompted him to look for replicas of the pre-capitalist past in the Great Basin. Instead of working-class Indians, what struck Lowie was the remarkable endurance of subsistence activity. "Among the Paviotso of ...Fallon, the old foodstuffs and apparatus pertaining to them are still very much in evidence," Lowie wrote, using an early ethnographic category for the Paiute. The ethnologist noted that the Paiute continued their subsistence rounds, gathering rice-grass, harvesting cat-tail roots, netting waterfowl in the desert marshes, and traveling into the mountains, "pine-nut gathering for up to a month." Centered on the productive marshes of this Great Basin sink, these subsistence rounds lay at the core of these Northern Paiute people’s identities. Lowie ignored the degree of Paiute incorporation into the local European-American economy and chose to emphasize those enduring subsistence strategies he observed during his 1914 visit. Lowie’s ethnographic paradigm had trained him to salvage evidence of “traditional” Paiute practices, while ignoring presumably “non-Indian” activities like wage labor. Their entrance into the market economy added a powerful strategy for maintaining both individual Indian lives, the continuity of kin and clan, and Paiute social practices.

The destruction of the subsistence ecology of the Paiute made reliance upon these forage resources difficult. Subsistence gathering and hunting practices lost a significant percentage of their productive capacity during the late-nineteenth century. The industrial miner's demand for timber, the cattle ranchers’ and sheep herders’ reliance upon native grasses, and the introduction of invading species like cheat grass, the sport hunter's pursuit of the region's waterfowl and big horn sheep, all combined to utterly reshape local ecologies. And, yet, Paiute subsistence practices endured. While these pursuits lost their material importance, organized hunting and gathering continued because these activities reproduced vital social ties. In spite of the challenges posed by the destruction or loss of control over aboriginal resources, Paiute adjusted to this new state of affairs. As late as 1964, "this population retained communal rabbit hunts and piñon nut gathering, as well as shamanism," according to an anthropologist studying Fallon at the time. This researcher emphasized that "kinship as a basis of economic and social cooperation has not merely persisted but ramified." Wage labor, performed at particular times of the
year, helped insure family survival while protecting valuable leisure time. The income allowed families to continue subsistence practices that reproduced ties to kin, clan, and environment.

The Newlands project farms concentrated Paiute and Shoshone labor locally. At one time highly mobile, working Paiute chose increasingly to remain in the valley, pursuing jobs on the white-owned farms and ranches. The reservation helped as a geographic locus for the Paiute sense of community. Their involvement with wage work strengthened native social structures. Focusing narrowly on the economic relationship and accepting the relationship as solely exploitative, obscures important aspects of the wage labor interaction. For example, the incongruities of the allotment system might lead us to assume that Indian involvement in wage work was primarily a matter of coercion. To be sure there were degrees of coercion—destruction or control of subsistence resources, and government credit policies—but these pressures were complemented by Paiute initiative and negotiation. The Paiute world was structured but not determined. They negotiated a fragile stance during the first three decades of this century, working increasingly within a capital economy in order to maintain other more accustomed patterns for ordering their lives. And the allotment reservation served as something of a refuge from the full effects of the new pressures.

In 1914 water was delivered to 504 Euroamerican farms with a population of 1,867. By the 1920s the irrigated acreage had expanded to some 60,000 acres and the county’s population had swelled to 4,700, still a far cry from the boosters’ anticipation of a future city of 100,000 with 450,000 irrigated acres. Visions of such growth withered in the saline soils of the Carson Sink. Irrigation waters filled the basin soils, raising the water table and thereby raising soil salts to the roots of the farms’ crops. Intent on opening as much new acreage to settlement, the engineers ignored their own soil studies. The waterlogged fields soon proved fatal to crop production and yields dropped precipitously. Engineers, who had focused their energies on simply providing water to the valley, soon found themselves engaged in a massive drain digging project. According to a project engineer in 1918, “In the lower portions of the project, large areas of land have already gone to seep and even in the higher portions in many localities the ground water is dangerously near the surface. It is apparent that the project must be drained unless the
The Newlands Project, designed to remedy the inadequacies of the desert flatlands, quickly exaggerated them.

The ideology of agrarianism, manipulated by boosters and the government promoters, held forth the promise that hard work would ensure success. As the waterlogged fields proved increasingly unproductive, that success proved elusive. Recognizing that, in the words of the project manager, their “salvation depended upon adequate drainage,” project farmers voted to begin the costly drainage work. But even as late 1921 these efforts had not had the desired effect. In that year a project supervisor described the Newlands Project as “practically an alkali bog.” By 1926, with 178 miles of wastewater ditches, 192 miles of deep open drains, and four miles of closed drains, the project had begun to lower the water table. In 1926 the Bureau of Reclamation (formerly the Reclamation Service) turned control of the project over to the project farmers. Reluctantly the government wrote off nearly two-thirds of the project construction and drain digging costs.

The Western future did not lie with small-scale endeavors like the Newlands project and the thirty other federally-sponsored Western irrigation communities funded during Theodore Roosevelt’s two terms. Rather, the high-dam era, beginning with the Boulder Canyon Project (Hoover Dam) on the Colorado in 1928, would dominate the Bureau of Reclamation’s future energies. But small-scale projects like Newlands served as a training ground for this novel federal bureaucracy. “The history of development of the Truckee-Carson Project is one that will probably will be duplicated in almost every other portion of the great western desert,” a Reno newspaper had predicted in 1914. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, government engineers and planners had learned the techniques for managing labor and materials, techniques that they would apply to much larger schemes.

The future for the Fallon Paiute and Shoshone proved more troublesome. The Fallon Indian superintendent painted a rosy picture of the successful integration of the Paiute and the white community. “A friendly feeling exists between the White and Indian of this community—there is not a rancher within miles of the reservation who does not employ, and prefer, Indian help for a considerable portion of the
year,” according to the Fallon superintendent in 1922. But, the tribe’s water rights, supposedly guaranteed by the federal government, ran into trouble when, in 1926, the government transferred operation and management of the Newlands Project to the newly formed Truckee-Carson Irrigation District. Not surprisingly, the white farmers of the district failed to maintain the reservation ditches and refused to provide any water to the reservation. Perhaps the lack of water merely confirmed what local Native Americans already knew. Without adequate machinery to make critical improvements like field leveling, or the necessary funds to seed and farm their lands, the Indians had little recourse but to turn to the white-owned farms for work. “A 10-acre allotment is insufficient to make a proper living upon, and the able-bodied and more aggressive farmers should have from 30 to 40 acres each,” the Fallon Indian superintendent insisted in 1928. Conditions on the reservation farms appeared bleak following the turnover in federal management to the local irrigation district. The Depression compounded these difficulties. According to a Senate investigating committee in 1932 the condition of lands on the Fallon allotments were so bad that a government witness testified, “I would not turn a wild burro on it, let alone a civilized human being.”

* * * * *

The Carson Sink Valley entered the national Euroamerican memory during the California Gold Rush as a formidable obstacle on the trail to the gold fields. Within a half-century, the Paiute had fought vigorously against white intrusion, routing an armed militia with ease in 1860. Wovoka, a Paiute farm worker, had spawned the widespread pan-Indian Ghost Dance movement a little more than a decade before the Newlands Act’s passage. Most Nevada Indians avoided reservation confinement and struggled to steer clear of white society’s controlling impulses, even as they labored increasingly in the white-run agricultural enterprises. In this region’s history the Indian workers disappeared into the landscape. In order to see Indian workers in the Newlands fields and homes, cutting the hay, clearing the laterals, and doing the wash, we must understand why our histories have not seen them. As the Fallon Paiute and Shoshone avoided entanglements with whites, so they also left little trace in the historical record. While
these Indian voices have often escaped the archive, the shadows of their laboring lives were cast in the official records of this project.

A family-farming project grounded in the ideologies of democracy and independence masked the process of rural exploitation. Histories of Native American interactions with the new wage labor regime have generally portrayed this invading economy as destructive to Indian communities, a system of “coercive subordination” where white farmers extracted surplus value from underpaid Native American workers. By concentrating on the theme of Indian abuse, historians have told us more about whites than Indians. Recounting the forgotten history of working Paiute and Shoshone on this pivotal reclamation project helps to efface the narrative of elimination and the received history of tragic destruction.

Despite the promises of the agrarian ideology with its visions of yeoman self-sufficiency, cash-strapped white farmers relied on an underclass of Indian laborers. Under the aegis of a neutral technical mission, the Newlands Project engineers performed a political action, involving, as James Ferguson observes in another colonized region, “the entrenchment and expansion of institutional state power almost invisibly.” Grounded in the ideal of economic self-sufficiency, irrigation was to re-enfranchise a population of independent farmers. Yet instead of creating a decentralized community of farmers, national reclamation inaugurated new systems of control, built initially in Fallon on the labor of the Paiute and Shoshone.

Fallon Paiute-Shoshone women and men were not pawns to incorporating forces. They embraced certain changes in order to resist others. They balanced their wage earning with subsistence foraging, and preserved some earlier life ways amidst the tumult of their incorporation into the European-American economy. Indian wage work, whether compelled or self-initiated, proved vital to the survival of this indigenous community during the first several decades of the twentieth century.

There can be no easy opposition between the forces of assimilation and resistance. In certain places, at certain times, Native American labor proved vital to the economic success of European-American economic enterprises. But, instead of focusing upon the irony of Indians contributing to a
project that reproduced their subordination, we should recognize that these Native Americans were not only an oppressed group within white society. But they also lived outside of Euroamerican society, laboring for reasons that were their own.\footnote{1} As the Newlands Reclamation Act nears its centennial, it is vital that we remember the working lives of the Paiute and Shoshone pioneers on this federal irrigation project.

\footnote{1} The level of Native American participation in regional agricultural labor may be estimated from several sources: the Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth United States Censuses (RG 29: 1900, T623, R943; 1910, T624, R 858; 1920, T625, R1004); Fallon Reservation Annual Reports, MS 1011, RG 75; and Fallon Indian Census, M595, R 104, R36; and Joy Leland, \textit{Great Basin Indian Population Figures (1873-1970) and the Pitfalls Therein} (Reno, 1976). The federal government initiated several reservation irrigation projects prior to the National Reclamation Act. As early as 1865, according to Ann Caylor, the federal Indian office made an under-funded and ill-conceived effort to irrigate a portion of the Colorado Indian Reservation in Arizona. See her article, \textquote{\textit{A Promise Long Deferred}: Federal Reclamation on the Colorado River Indian Reservation,” \textit{Pacific Historical Review}, 69 (2000), 193-215.}

\footnote{2} The project, officially named the Truckee-Carson Irrigation Project, was later dubbed the Newlands Project.

\footnote{3} John M. Townley, \textit{Turn this Water into Gold: A History of the Newlands Project} (Reno, 1978) and Townley, \textquote{\textit{Reclamation and the Red Man},” \textit{The Indian Historian}, 11 (1978), 21-28.} The Northern Paiute and Western Shoshone share lands allotted to them in the late-nineteenth century. The Paiute have historically outnumbered the Shoshone and in the following pages I will refer to Paiute as shorthand for the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone tribe.

\footnote{4} Named the Newlands Act for its principal author, Nevada Congressman and later Senator Francis G. Newlands.

\footnote{5} The U.S. Reclamation Service was initially a division within the U.S. Geological Survey. In 1907 it became a separate agency within the Department of Interior. It was renamed the Bureau of Reclamation in 1923.

\footnote{6} Albert L Hurtado has highlighted Indian wage labor in his work on mid-nineteenth century California. See his \textit{Indian Survival on the California Frontier} (New Haven, 1988), 2-11 and his \textquote{California Indians and the Workaday West: Labor, Assimilation, and Survival,” \textit{California History} 69 (1990), 77-79.} This essay’s conclusions differ in several respects from Hurtado’s findings in California (see footnote 70 and 108). Sociologist John Walton’s,


11 William E. Smythe, The Conquest of Arid America (New York, 1900), 43.
Historian Mark Fiege in his recent work—*Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle, 1999)—insists on this simple dialectic of culture and nature.

Allotments at Fallon were not allocated until 1890 and 1894. Leland cautions that it is difficult to arrive at accurate population figures for the Carson Sink. Indian Agent Franklin Campbell noted in 1865 that approximately 800 Indians lived around the Lower Sink of the Carson River and Dodge had earlier estimated (1859) a population of 1,625 for the three bands located in the Carson Sink. See *Conditions of the Indian Tribes: Report of the Joint Special Committee* (Washington, 1867), 516. The Fallon allotments divided the land amongst approximately 400 Paiute. Leland suggests fatality rates due to epidemic disease running at approximately 40% for the Great Basin during the period 1873 to 1910 and for the Northern Paiute the rate of decline was likely more than 50% (Leland, *Great Basin Indian Population Figures*). The Northern Paiute population began to recover after 1910; and one might speculate as to the relationship between rising fertility and wage work.


Donald Pisani, "Reclamation and Social Engineering in the Progressive Era," *Agricultural History* 57 (1983), 46-63; Pisani, *To Reclaim a Divided West: Water, Law, and Public Policy, 1848-1902* (Albuquerque, 1992) These works provide useful introductions into irrigation boosterism and its relationship to this initial federal project.

Farmers already had some 20,000 acres under irrigation in Fallon prior to the federal project.

"Truckee-Carson Irrigation Project," Reclamation Service Advertising Publication, 1914, Reclamation Service Project Histories, Newlands, 1906-1914, Vol. 1, Box 98, 35/13/5, Records of the Bureau of Reclamation, Record Group 115, National Archives, Denver Regional Center (hereafter cited as RG115, NAD). Ironically, by avoiding the more difficult task of field clearing—"grubbing"—sagebrush, the settlers also passed up more fertile soils where the sagebrush and, especially white sage or "winter fat", indicated lower alkalinity and better drainage. Instead, the newcomers farmed the more level, easier to clear, but less fertile flatlands.


Newlands Project, Annual Project History, Vol. 1, 1906, 2, RG 115, NAD.

21 Figure drawn from Townley, “Reclamation in Nevada,” 255.

22 Newlands letter January, 23, 1902, Francis G. Newlands Papers, Folder 37, Box 4, Group 371, Sterling Memorial Library, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University. [hereafter cited as Newlands Papers, SML.]

23 Newlands Correspondence, Group 371, Series I, Box 4, Folders 37-38, Newlands Papers, SML.

24 See correspondence between Newlands and William Herrin (legal counsel to Southern Pacific Railroad), especially letter dated February 5, 1902, Group 371, Folder 38, Box 4, Newlands Papers, SML.

25 Amendments to the reclamation law passed in 1907 and pushed by Senator Francis Newlands had allowed for such reductions. Secretary of the Interior James Garfield to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, November 22, 1907, quoted in Senate Select Committee on Indian Affairs Report, October 5, 1990, 101 Congress, 2nd sess. (1990), Report #101-555, Calendar 1023.


27 4,010 acres were allotted in 10-acre units, another 630 acres remained part of the reservation, but not allotted. The Indian Office census for the Fallon Allotments counted 445 Paiute and 52 Shoshone in 1924 (RG 75, M595, R 104). Figures from the previous year indicated that 100 Paiute-Shoshone men worked as farm or stock hands and 75 women worked as domestics or laundresses. However, off-reservation Paiute also participated in the regional wage economy and these Indians did not often receive attention from the census takers. Leland notes that with respect to the off-reservation census “under-counting of Indians would seem to be the main direction of error in the US census” (Leland, 18).

28 David Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986 (Austin, 1987), 75.

29 Project Histories, Newlands, 1906-1914, Vol. 1, Box 98, 35/13:4, RG 115, NAD.

30 Report on Fallon School, Annual Report 1918, MS 1011, RG 75, NA I.

31 Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims (1883, reprint Bishop, Calif., 1969).

32 Letter of Garland Hurt, September, 1856, quoted in Sam P. Davis, The History of Nevada (Reno, 1913), 32-34.


34 Dan De Quille, Washoe Rambles (1861, reprint, Los Angeles, 1963)


Lewis, *Neither Wolf nor Dog*, 5. Lewis delves into this theme, writing "Change is not just something that happens to someone or something, it is a negotiated response to the situation. Culture change is best described as a process of adaptation, cultural reproduction, and structured transformation" (p. 5).


Reports on Fallon School, July 20, 1910, M1011, R 36, RG 75, NAI.


Relatively little attention has been paid by historians to these female Native American domestic workers. See Albert L. Hurtado, “‘Hardly a Farm House—a Kitchen without Them’: Indian and White Households on the California Borderland Frontier,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 13 (1982), 245-70.

Special Agent C.H. Asbury, Inspection report, March 1, 1915, Reports on Fallon School, M1011, R 36, RG 75, NAI.

Personal communication, Churchill County Historical Society, Fallon, Nevada, June 1995.

C.F. Hauke to C.H. Asbury, April 20, 1912, Fallon, Box 5197, File 313, RG 75, NA I.

*Churchill County Standard*, Fallon, Nevada, Sept. 8, 1906, 1.

As Paul Willis argues in another context, the indisputable function of schools is the reproduction of labor power. See Willis, *Learning to Labor: How working class kids get working class jobs* (New York, 1977)


Lorenzo D. Creel to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Creel December 17, 1908, correspondence, 82-1/II/1, University of Nevada at Reno, Special Collections (hereafter cited as UNR)

Creel to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, December 17, 1908, Lorenzo Creel Correspondence, 82-1/II/1, UNR

Van Voorhis to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, January 17, 1913, Fallon, Box 5193, File 162, RG 75, NA I

Taylor to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, May 5, 1923, Fallon School, Box 5193, File 155, RG 75, NA I.


Van Voorhis to Indian Affairs Commissioner, July 15, 1913, File 56, RG 75, NA I.


Horace Wilson to Commissioner Cato Sells, August 13, 1913, Fallon, Box 5197, File 162, RG 75, NA I.

Reno Indian Agency, Box 2, File 822, National Archives, RG 75, NASB.

Ann F. Ramenofsky, Vectors of Death: The Archaeology of European Contact (Albuquerque, 1987)


Report to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Fallon, Box 5202, file 731, RG 75, NA I

Creel correspondence, November 28, 1916, 82-I/II/1, Box 8, series 1, UNR

James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed. (New Haven, 1998)


Inspector Elsie Newton to E.B. Merritt, August 3, 1915, Fallon, File 150, RG 75, NA I. Many Native Americans lived off-reservation, and a significant number migrated into the region during the hay season. For these reasons, it is difficult to arrive at firm figures on incomes earned and the total number of Indian laborers. The above-
mentioned figures should be viewed as a good estimation of income and participation in the local economy. Fallon Annual Report, 1922, File 150, RG 75, NA I

67Helen Bowser Stone, In Focus, (1987-88), 50.

68 Stone, 51.

69 This conclusion differs from Albert Hurtado's findings for the California Indians. Hurtado observes, "Whether forced or free, Indian labor provided only for individual survival. Far from becoming a basis for the persistence of native communities, the market economy tended to break down the native family and rancheria society" (Hurtado, Indian Survival, 213). Evidence from this Great Basin Indian community, coupled with other regional studies suggest the wide diversity of indigenous response to incorporation.

70Reports on the Fallon School, MS1011, RG 75, NAI


73 J.W. Powell and G.W. Ingalls, Report of Special Commissioners J.W. Powell and G.W. Ingalls on the condition of the Ute Indians of Utah, the Pai-Utes of Utah, Northern Arizona, Southern Nevada, and Southeastern California;
the Go-Si Utes of Utah and Nevada; the northwestern Shoshones of Idaho and Utah; and the western Shoshones of Nevada. (Washington, D.C., 1874), 2, Beinecke Rare Books Library, Yale University.

74 Van Voorhis to Asbury, Feb. 12, 1913, Reno Agency, Box 10, Folder 55, RG 75, NASB

75 Letter dated Wed. 3, 1913 [sic?], signed by 136 Paiute addressed to the Land Office. Letter delivered February 1913. Fallon, File 154, RG 75, NAI.


77 Van Voorhis to Commissioner, May 5, 1913, Fallon, File 162, Box 5193, RG 75, NA I; Lorenzo D. Creel to the commissioner of Indian Affairs, Dec. 17, 1908, Correspondence, 82-I/II/1, United States Indian Service, Box 8 series 1, Letter dated University of Nevada, Reno, Special Collections; Asbury to the Indian Office Commissioner, January 8 1913, Office of Indian Affairs, File 313, RG 75, NA I; Horace Wilson to Cato Sells, August 13, 1913, Fallon School, Box 5193, File 162 RG 75, NAI

78 Asbury to Indian Office Commissioner, January 8, 1913, Office of Indian Affairs, Box 5193, File 313, RG75, NAI


81 Annual Inspection Report, March 1, 1915, Fallon, Box 5192, File 150, RG 75, NA I.

82 Thomas Means to Mrs. L.V. McCullough of Wash. DC, Nov. 12, 1907, TCID files, Churchill County Historical Society, Fallon, Nevada.

83 Supt. Ray Parrett to Commissioner, June 19, 1928, Walker River Agency [note that the Fallon jurisdiction was placed under the Walker River Agency in 1925], Box 28, File 052.2, NASB

84 F.H. Abbott to Van Voorhis, May 14, 1913, Fallon, File 056, RG 75, NA I.

85 Chief White Feather to Commissioner, Feb. 10, 1925, Fallon, File 154, RG 75, NA I

86 Inspector Elsie Newton to E.B. Merritt, August 3, 1915, Fallon, File 150, RG 75, NA I.

87 Reports on Fallon School, Annual Report 1913, MS 1011, R36, RG 75, NA I. Colin Bundy, The Rise and Fall of the South African Peasantry (Berkeley, 1979). Bundy shows that white settler agriculture could ill-afford the competition brought on by more efficient African farmers. By segregating the African producers from land and markets, the settler population reduced Africans to wage labor on the white farms.
Alfalfa constituted more than 80% of the average yearly harvest. "Irrigation and Crop Results, Government Reclamation Projects Annual Reports," Bureau of Reclamation Project Histories, Vol. 1, Box 98, RG 115, NAD.

Asbury Inspection Report, January 1, 1915, Box 5203, File 916, RG 75, NA I.

E.B. Merritt to C.H. Asbury, March 15, 1915, Box 5203, File 920, RG 75, NA I.


Annual Report, 1918, Report on Fallon School, MS 1011, R36, RG 75, NA I. “The Fallon Indians have an outstanding reimbursable indebtedness at the present date of $4,046.18, of which $3,788.95 is delinquent,” the superintendent’s report highlighted.

E.B. Merritt to Van Voorhis, Dec. 9, 1915, Box 5194, File 255, RG 75, NA I.

Harry M. Carter to Commissioner, November 1919, Fallon Agency Report, File 313, RG 75, NA I.

Churchill County Eagle, July 16, 1920


Lowie, Notes on Shoshonean Ethnography, p. 203.

The Paiute bands living in the Carson Sink called themselves Toidikadi [pronounced toy dú kadú] or Cat-tail Eaters, referring to their dependence upon this plant for food. See Fowler, In the Shadow of Fox Peak, p. xiii.

Martha C. Knack, in her discussion of the Walker River Paiutes observes this pattern, writing, "Like the Native subsistence economy, the wage labor was carefully scheduled into a balance of multiple resources." Native Americans and Wage Labor, 167.

Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (New York, 1972), 14, 27. Sahlins argues that an African hunter/gatherer group, the Hadza, "tutored by life and not by anthropology, reject the neolithic revolution in order to keep their leisure."

The situation in the Great Basin differed from that described by historian Albert Hurtado for the California Indians, who wrote "Free labor tended to produce Indian migrant agricultural workers and further weakened native social structures." (Hurtado, *Indian Survival*, 3). This assertion, of course, does not challenge Hurtado's findings. It does though illustrate the diversity of Native American response and resistance to incorporation. The observation that the reservation served as a refuge draws on similarities described by Harold Prins in his study of the Mi'kmaq of northern Maine. See “Tribal Network and Migrant Labor,” in the Knack and Littlefield volume, *Native Americans and Wage Labor*.


The *Irrigation Age*, August 15, 1892, 136.

Office of the Chief Engineer to B.A. McAllister, Land Commissioner, Southern Pacific Railroad, Feb. 5, 1918, General Correspondence Files, Box 864, 115,54-a-81, RG 115, NAD

Hydroelectric power, like that generated by the Newlands project dams, served as a harbinger of future public works in the arid west. The Federal Town-Site Act, passed in 1906, allowed the Reclamation Service to sell electrical power generated by its dams.


Superintendent Carter to Indian Affairs Commissioner, May 22, 1922, file 806, RG 75, NA I.

With the majority of the Newlands Project “upstream” of the reservation, seepage and run-off with its accompanying alkalinity and pollution flowed onto reservation lands.

Walker River Agency, Box 28, File 052.2, RG 75, NASB

Walker River Agency, Fallon Miscellaneous, Box 28, File 052.2, RG 75, NASB

Walton, Western Times and Water Wars. Walton, in his study of the Owens River Paiute, finds similar relationships between white settler agriculture and indigenous labor. However, he adheres too narrowly to the tragic theme in which Indian peoples are seen solely in decline, as subordinated and destroyed by market incorporation. This line of narrative privileges a pristine image of indigenous groups awaiting dissolution. Walton emphasizes that the Owen’s Valley Paiute resisted wage work. I do not dispute, nor do I want to dismiss the incredibly destructive aspects of this incorporation. However, such an interpretation cannot account sufficiently for Paiute adaptation and endurance.

George H. Phillips, Chiefs and Challengers: Indian Resistance and Cooperation in Southern California (Berkeley, 1975)

It is difficult to gauge how the Fallon Paiute-Shoshone experienced the labor market. My effort here is to substantiate their participation in the local economy as field and domestic workers.


James C. Scott, Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance (New Haven, 1985), 113. Also see Scott’s Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts. (New Haven, 1990), 73. Paul Carter in The Road to Botany Bay (New York, 1988) writes provocatively, “We have no grounds for presuming that aboriginal history can be treated as a subset of white history, as a history within a history” (325).