

THE LAST OF THE HOMESTEADERS

by Arthur Whitman

Four years ago, Don Morrison, who farms in Nevada's barren Diamond Valley and lives there with his wife and five children in a primitive, two-room shanty he built himself, had no credit and a cash income of \$17 net. Since then he's moved up in the world. His cash position is not much better, but now he's \$24,000 in debt. In four years, with any luck at all, he may raise that to \$100,000. If he does, Morrison will know that he has it made, that the gamble of his lifetime has paid off.

Morrison is one of the last American homesteaders and the Diamond Valley one of the last places in the country where homesteading free government land was possible. Until 1964, federal lands for homesteading were available in 17 states, including Alaska. Since then, the Department of Interior has called a halt to land entries and it would seem that homesteading has ended, at least within the 48 continental states.

Diamond Valley, about 35 miles long by 15 miles wide, lies at an elevation of 6,000 feet along U.S. 50, about 135 miles west of Ely, Nevada. Frontiers are

always tough, but few can ever have been less amenable to man than Diamond Valley. Dun-colored, ringed with blue mountains and pimpled with small rock outcrops, the Valley is beautiful in a desolate, after-the-Bomb way. Uncultivated, its sun-frazzled soil supports a patchy cover of bunchgrass and sagebrush.

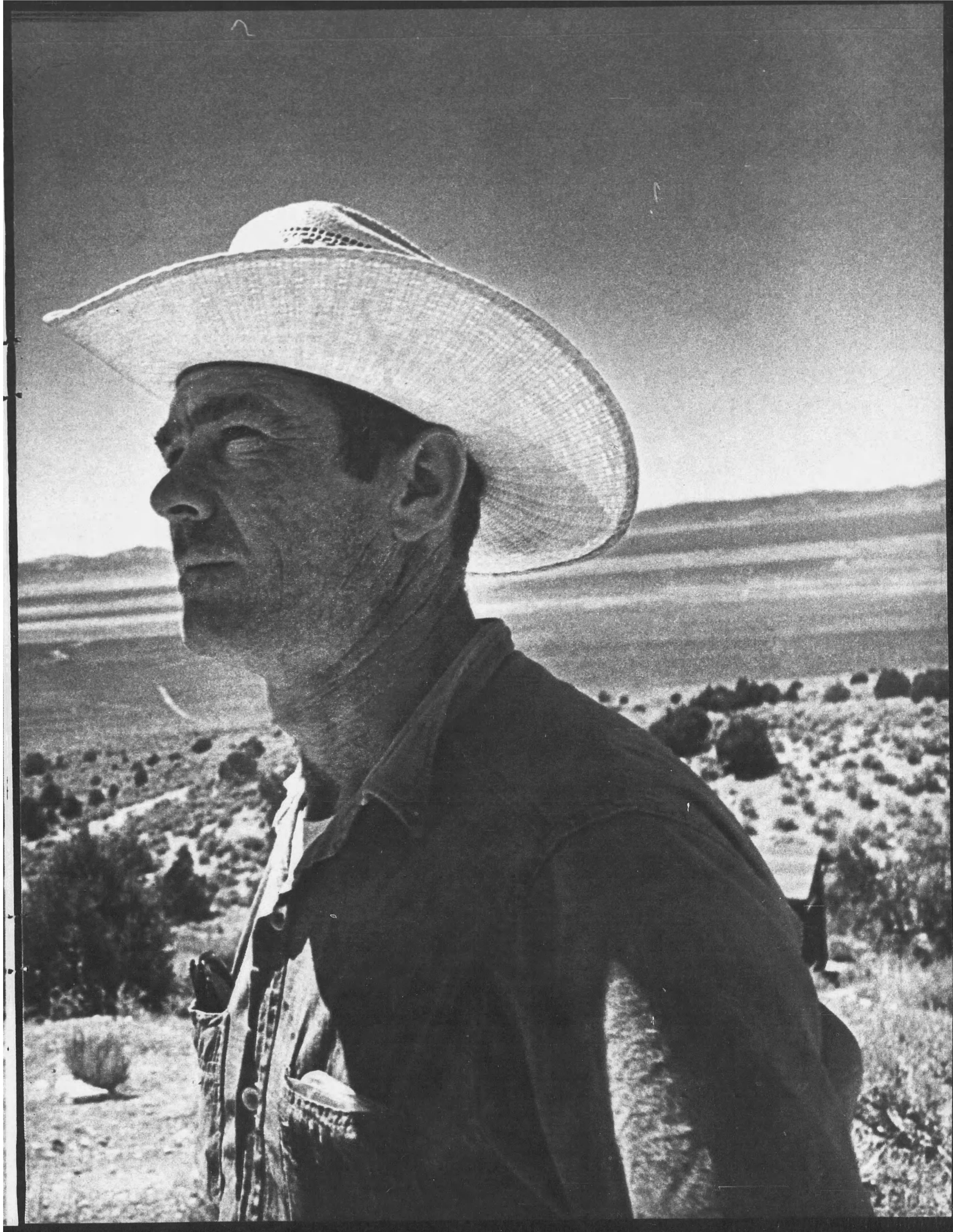
Temperatures range there from 20 degrees below zero in winter to the 90s in summer. Winds frequently hit speeds up to 40 mph in spring. On top of everything, there is virtually no rain. What the Valley does receive—about 7 inches of rain in a good year—is even less heartening than it sounds. Almost none of it soaks into the soil to help crops. Water for farming the Valley comes from underground aquifer—water-bearing rock—and bringing it to the surface costs as much as seed and fertilizer.

With all this, the Valley would seem good for nothing so much as picking settlers clean, and it's done quite a job of that. About 600 people have filed claims there since government surveys located the underground

Continued



Photographs by Curt Gunther





Hewing a living from their 320-acre spread in Diamond Valley, Nevada, is full-time work for Don Morrison, shown inspecting his massive sprinkler system, below, and his wife Alberta, driving the family tractor, above.

HOMESTEADERS Continued

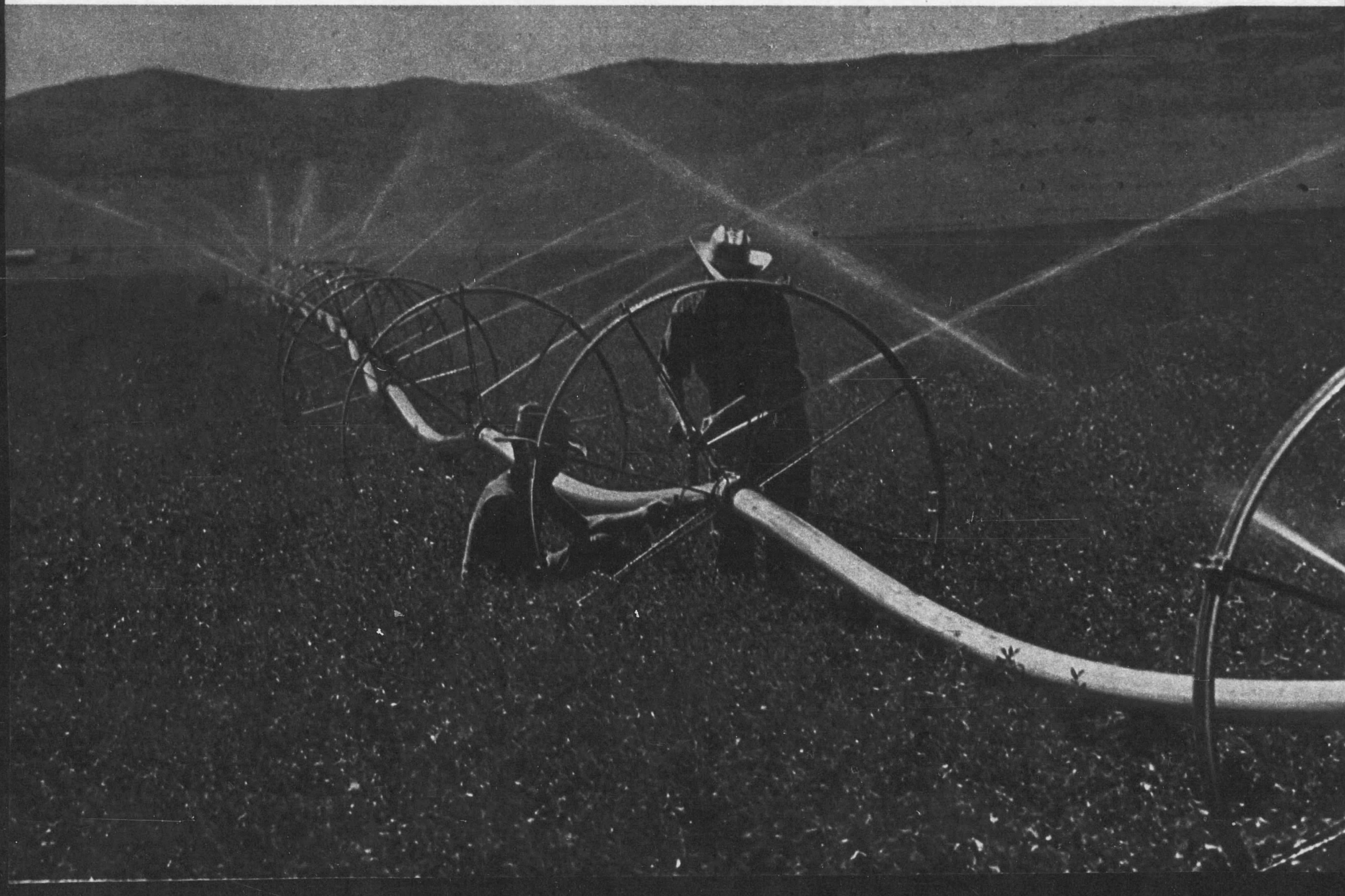
water table there in 1958. More than 500 have gone broke and left. Of 180 settlers who were first on the land and filed what are called original claims, seven are left. The tribulations most have suffered would make Job blanch, yet somehow they bulled things through and hung on, driven by the same hungers that drive Don Morrison.

Don might have been cast in his land-tamer's role by Hollywood. He's medium tall, well-built, in his late 30s. Even now, with the years of mulework and worry beginning to show, his face has the lean, open good looks of a Jack Armstrong. He's been in the Valley more than six years now, and figures he'll be there for life. This is a prospect most people would greet with the joy of a three-time loser facing his fourth sentence, but this hardy homesteader loves it.

Don Morrison grew up on a farm in Oklahoma, left it for the Army just after World War II, and settled in Seattle after his hitch. He joined the machinist's union, married a beautiful girl named Alberta Conaway, and settled down to raise a family and watch it grow. This is mainstream America, the solid, secure life millions of people dream about. But it was driving Don Morrison nuts. "I was doing just fine and I hated it," he says. "I was a master machinist, bringing down close to \$5 an hour, barring overtime. But what would my sons ever have to show for it? Nothing. Not one thing."

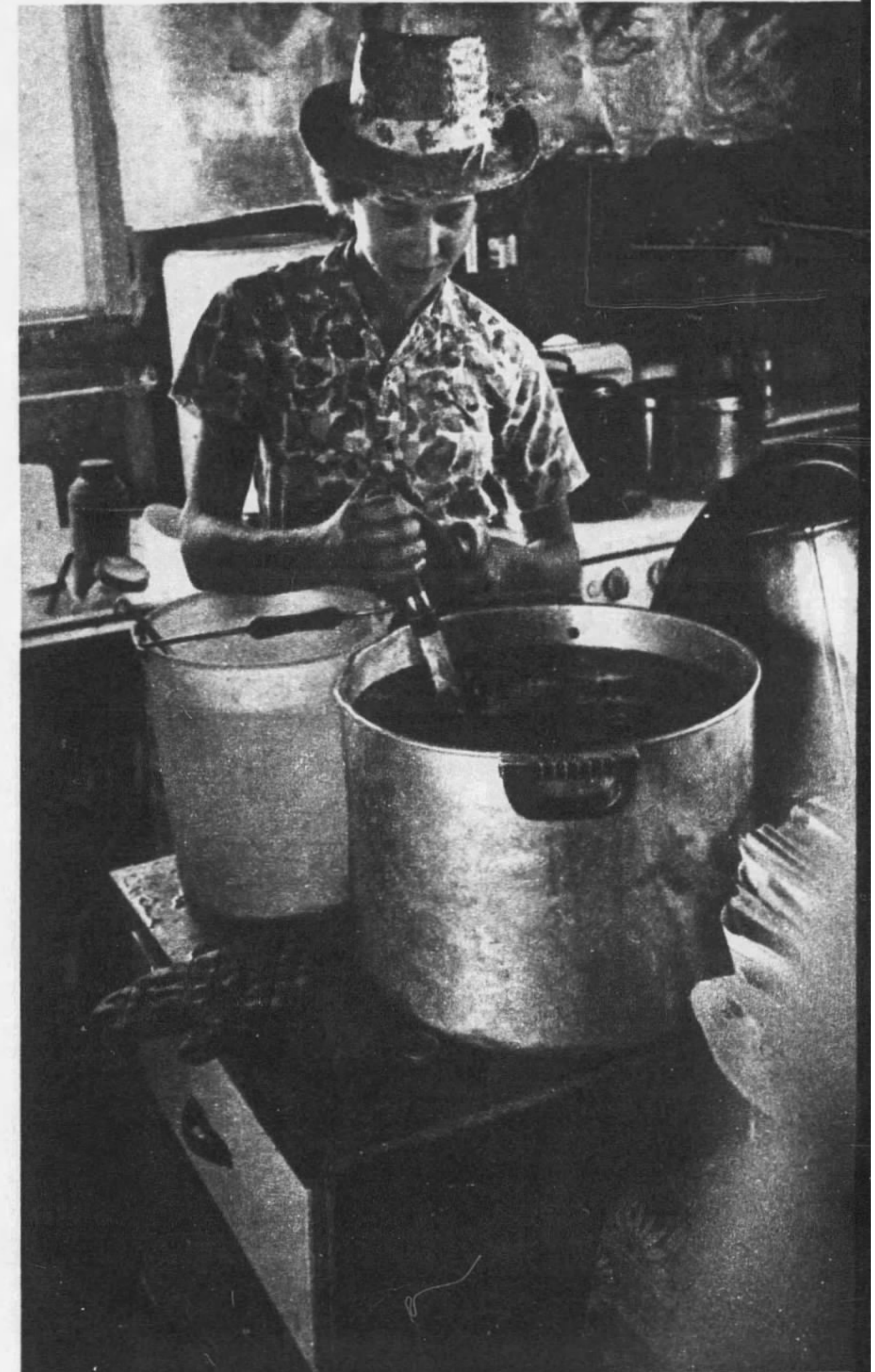
He wanted land—needed it, for himself and his kids. It was in 1958 that he first found out how he could get some. A friend told him about this place in Nevada—Diamond Valley—that was open to settlers under the Homestead Act of 1862. Instead of filing on the 160-acre sections of Midwestern lore and legend, de-

Continued





Don Morrison and wife Alberta pause for a cup of water, above, outside their two-room ranch shanty. Below, the family waits for dinner in the combination kitchen and dining room. Right, oldest Morrison daughter draws water from the the only source in house, a handy garden hose.





Morrison children attend Sunday School in the backseat of a car because church has no quarters.

HOMESTEADERS Continued

sert homesteaders filed on 320 acres. After presenting water maps and other evidence to show that farming was feasible, they were permitted entry to the land for four years. They didn't have to live on their claim during this period, but they did have to bring in wells according to a pre-arranged plan, and farm it successfully. In practice, this meant taking one crop off 40 acres. If they did all this in four years, then they were "proved up" and received their patent, or land title, from a grateful and slightly awed government. If they didn't prove up by deadline time, they had to get out.

Don studied this all out and agonized for a while, then made the only decision he could make. "Unless I wanted to count on miracles, this was the last chance I would probably ever have to own some land. I *had* to do it." His wife Bertie agreed. Don *did* have to do it. But it costs about \$1,000 to survey a claim, prepare a water map and file for entry, and, like most fathers of young families, Don didn't have two spare nickels to rub together. To raise the money he needed, he made an agreement with his friend. If the man would put up the money to map and file on two claims, one for Don and one for himself, Don would come to the Valley and work both. Don had no idea what he was getting into.

"I was here 90 days in the summer of '58," he says, "and made out so bad you couldn't even call it no good. It was worse than that. People had already busted out on the claims we had in previous years. On one claim, there was some beat-up equipment, mortgaged so deep a bank owned it and wouldn't let it be operated until they were paid off. On the other there was nothing but one well and a pump that drew 40 gallons of water a minute. You

might brush your teeth with this amount, but you sure won't get any farming done. And that's what happened—I got no farming done."

But Morrison did learn a few things during that blighted summer, mostly about the economics of irrigating in the Valley. Getting water to the surface is an expensive proposition. It costs about \$7,000 to put in a well, a pump and engine that can deliver 1500 gallons of water a minute, enough to irrigate 40 to 60 acres, depending on the crop.

Distributing the water is even more costly.

The preferred methods are to use monstrous, quarter-mile-long sprinkler systems. One type sits on huge wheels and is hooked into a central well-and-pump system. Driven by water pressure, the sprinklers rotate over the field at the rate of one revolution every 7 to 9 days. The other system employs hand lines. These, too, are seemingly endless lengths of sprinkler pipes, but they're not automatic. Each sprinkler line is attached to an outlet on a main line and left to water a given area for 8 to 12 hours, then detached and moved by hand to another outlet down the field. The minimum cost of a 40-acre installation of either system is \$15,000.

With all this new information under his hat, Don filed a new claim for himself, and two for his wife Bertie's brothers back in Seattle, then he went back home to make a living until he was granted entry. In a typically confused Valley situation, he developed boundary problems on his claim, and never did receive his entry. Impatient to get started, however, he returned in 1960 anyway, to work the claims he'd filed on for Alberta's brothers.

After a long series of bewildering deals and trades, he now owns one of these claims in partnership with Dale Conaway, one of his brothers-in-law, who lives on the land with him today. But the road to even this partial ownership led through enough shattered hopes and last-second brinksmanship to make even a Nick the Greek take a 9-to-5:00 clerical job.

The climactic deal came about because the partners were in a classic bind. With no capital to speak of, they had to go slowly in devel-

Continued



Morrison, center of back row, and wife, right-hand corner, listen to church services in Eureka, Nev.



Morrison and neighbors get together late on Sunday afternoon for a picnic and songfest in mountains.

oping their land. Yet the four-year deadline for proving up meant they couldn't be too slow. To raise the cash that they needed in order to accomplish anything at all, they accepted a proposition made by another settler, (a man we'll call Jones) who offered to finance the work on one claim if they would turn the other over to him.

Don, busy scrabbling around at odd jobs to keep Bertie and the kids fed, tried to ride close herd on the deal. But every time he'd ask how things were going, Jones would have some plausible reason for having done nothing. He was waiting for cash from a crop sale, he was waiting for well-drillers, he was waiting for equipment. Always something, always plausible, always just a few days more.

Then one day he told me that he just wasn't going to do anything," says Don, with a calmness he surely couldn't have felt at the time. "He said he'd spent so much money developing the land that we gave him, that he had none left to do anything on what we kept." This was as plausible as all the other excuses, but by now the situation was critical. There was exactly *one month left* before Morrison's water permit expired. If he didn't get his well in before then, goodbye claim.

"I had to go some to manage," is the way Don understates what happened in the next few weeks. Everybody around the Valley is pretty much in the same shape for cash, and he talked to five well-drillers before he found one who could wait for his money. But that only solved part of the problem.

Deep wells consist of casings and pipes drilled down into the water table, and no driller could afford to advance the cost of casings as well as service. Knowing it was hopeless, Don tried the bank and was turned away,

then spent another 10 days driving to one town and another trying to find a casing supplier who could wait for even part of his money. The balance Don raised from friends—\$100 here, \$100 there. Four days before the permit expired the well was into the water table. On the last day, its capacity was tested and proved.

"Was it worth it?" The way Don repeats the question, you know he thinks you're crazy for asking it. "It was water. We took 2,160 bushels of wheat off 50 acres of land the next year." At an average price of \$1.70 a bushel, this meant a year's gross of \$3,570. If Don's economics match the rest of the Valley's, about \$1,600 of this gross went for seed, fertilizer and fuel for the water pump. The balance—\$1,970—represents equipment cost, debt repayment, labor for Don and his whole family for a summer, and profit to be split among three partners for a year's work.

For the privilege of sharing in these benefits and clinging to the abiding hope that some day there will be more, Don's typical work day in summer starts at a little after 4 a.m., when he gets up to milk the cow the family has acquired recently, and to put in a couple of hours checking equipment and getting things in shape for the day. At 7:30, he goes to work moving hand lines on another farmer's land, a job he handles under contract, and an exceptionally good job for the Valley. In leaner years he has sorted potatoes and done odd repair jobs.

Meanwhile, Alberta and the kids do the Morrison family's farming, putting in a full day in the fields while Don is away. Alberta, a pretty girl who might weigh 100 pounds in sweat-soaked dungarees, drives a tractor in the shriveling heat and somehow remains

cheerful about it. "It helps keep my figure," she says, "better than a fancy sauna bath." The kids haul hand lines, carry fertilizer, tend the one-acre family garden and do other necessary chores, for as much as 10 hours each.

Don joins them when he knocks off work, at around 6 or 7 in the evening. If necessary, he takes over the tractor while Bertie goes to fix supper in the waterless, lightless kitchen. Sometimes he works on equipment, to forestall possible pump breakdowns, which mean almost certain crop failure. In a pinch, he rigs lights and works after dark.

However tough this regimen sounds, Morrison counts himself lucky. He's still in the game, still hanging on, and the beatings he's taken could all somehow be coped with. Like many of the other settlers, he sometimes talks of the Valley as if it were some primal creature with a mind of its own, and so far the creature itself has given no evidence of a desire to destroy him as it has so many others. The Valley has an incredible assortment of tricks for busting people out.

One of its meaner caprices was played with wind. Everyone knows that though the winds blow up to 40 mph. and can last for days on end, this happens only in the spring. But in 1961, the wind lasted through late July, by which time it was baking crops with a flow of 90-degree air. Don had nothing planted that year, but a man named Lyle Greenwalt had 100 acres under wheat. Every day for weeks he said the wind would surely let up tomorrow. By the time it did, his entire crop was worthless, dried-out straw.

The Valley has turned even more capriciously on others—Mel Bailey, for example. Bailey came to Diamond Valley with his brother Stan from Burley, Idaho, where they'd spent 25 years building up a large and successful potato farm. They'd reached the lim-

Continued

Add a Room or Remodel...

and we'll send you to



WE'RE GROWING!!

White Home Improvement Centers makes this limited offer to introduce their custom building service to ALL of Southern California!!

If you've longed to add to or remodel your home "some day" . . . if you've dreamed of a glamorous Hawaiian vacation "some day" . . . act now and enjoy it all! White Home Improvement Centers will give you a round trip to Hawaii for two, via world-renowned Pan American Airlines, including a week's stay at the luxurious Reef Hotel on Waikiki Beach, an exciting flower-lei welcome, sightseeing and special events. It's the vacation you always dreamed would come true!



Carefree days...



You'll be delighted to find how inexpensive your home improvement can be. Twenty years of experience building more than 2000 room additions enable us to provide custom building at moderate prices.

NEVER BEFORE — A LIFETIME GUARANTEE ON CONSTRUCTION

Backed by 20 years of sound successful operation and proved financial stability.

**NO DOWN PAYMENT • 100% BANK FINANCING • 10 YEARS TO PAY
LOWEST INTEREST RATES • COMPLETE INSURANCE COVERAGE**

Buy Now — Pay Nothing Until May, 1967



White Home Improvement Centers

**Call Collect Today! • LOS ANGELES: (213) 966-4524
• SAN FERNANDO VALLEY: (213) 984-0207 • ORANGE COUNTY: (714) 892-3381
• RIVERSIDE COUNTY: (714) 689-2195 • SAN BERNARDINO COUNTY: (714) TU 4-5907**

NOTE: White Home Improvement Centers is a wholly-owned private firm, directly responsible to you, and not a franchise company.

HOMESTEADERS Continued

it of expansion in their own area when they heard about Diamond Valley. "We flew down to look it over and liked what we saw," recalls Mel. "The soil was good, deep sandy loam, and there was shallow water available on a section we could claim. We decided to give her a whirl."

The Baileys did reasonably well with a small crop in 1961. The next year, they sold out in Idaho and put every cent they had—\$400,000 of their own, and close to that amount of borrowed money—into potatoes planted on their own claims and on rented land in the Valley. It was a huge risk, but it appeared worth it. Through June, July and August, Mel and Stan could see their plants come up and grow hardy, with good tuber formation.

Then on the night of August 23, without warning, the temperature fell down into the 20s. It lasted only a few hours, but that was enough. The Valley had done its work. "I went out in the field next morning," says Mel, in a voice that will never know emotion again, "and somewhere between one-third and one-half of the plants were completely withered. The rest were so damaged they couldn't come back. On conservative figures, we should have taken out 200,000 sacks of first-quality potatoes. We ended up harvesting 70,000 sacks of marbles. We couldn't even get rid of them for seed."

Having escaped all such calamities, it's little wonder that Don Morrison feels the Valley likes him. Assuming that it doesn't take a notion to bat him down in some unforeseen way, what can he look forward to when the worst of the struggle is over and he has achieved everything he wants?

Most likely, what's happened to Lavern Machacek, who came to the Valley from Idaho. In nine years, Machacek has survived a fair share of calamities himself. His first year, he knew so little about the Valley that he planted wheat and sprinkled it during the heat of day—then watched in wonder as the sun turned water to steam and cooked the standing plants. Another year, a pump engine broke down and had to be sent to a distributor for repairs. It left a wheat field without water for a week—long enough to cut the yield from an expected, profitable 60 bushels an acre to a disastrous 21.

Somehow, taking his losses and learning his lessons, Machacek managed to patch and work his way through it all. Today he plants nothing but alfalfa, which seems to be the crop best suited to the Valley. He takes a fine yield of high-protein hay from his land and feeds it to cattle shipped in from nearby ranches, for which he charges so much a ton. His cash income is substantial. In addition, he has 320 successful acres, worth somewhere around \$300 an acre and sure to go higher.

Given prospects like this, it becomes less difficult to understand why men like Machacek and Morrison pit themselves against the Valley. Machacek has almost certainly made it and Morrison very likely will. His hunch long ago was right. He took what turned out to be one of the last chances ever for Americans to farm virgin soil and make it into productive farms and so far, at least, he's surviving. Maybe one day soon he'll be able to take his sons for a walk on the family land and say, "Boys, this is all ours, we're rich."

And maybe one of the boys will answer: "Yes, we are, and by God, we've earned every penny of it."