

My Adventure at the Sherman Library

Niland, California sits at the southeast corner of the Salton Sea in Imperial Valley. It is a tired and dusty place. The people living there are much like people everywhere, but many of Niland's homes appear to sag with fatigue. Of the several restaurants in Niland, only one still serves meals; the others are in ruins or marked only by fading signage – a tombstone of sorts. Fire ripped through Niland in June of 2020 and gutted some forty homes. Few, if any, have been rebuilt. The empty lots, some still anointed with ashes, give the town a gap-toothed, forlorn look.

But there is, in the center of town, a grand cement building with fine columns and a proud marquee. Though it is now vacant and boarded up, this opulent structure speaks of a time of promise and prosperity. I wondered at the disparity between the majestic concrete building and the modest town around it.

A search for Niland in the Online Archive of California (OAC) turned up scattered hits from familiar collections such as the Huntington Library, Seaver Center for Western History and USC Regional History Collection. There were also several hits at the Sherman Library, custodian of the Moses Hazeltine Sherman Papers. It turned out to be the gold mine I'd been looking for.

Over a period of several weeks, I traveled to Newport Beach and spent full days at the Sherman Library. On each occasion, the library staff prepared the boxes of correspondence I'd selected from the detailed finding aid; I was able to start as soon as I walked through the door. Gradually I was able to piece together the story of the enigmatic concrete building.

Moses Sherman and his partners owned thousands of areas surrounding Niland. The imposing building was intended to be the First National Bank of Niland...an engine of rapid growth and lucrative land sales. Sherman's letters reveal his thoughts at various stages of the project.

At the start, in 1917, he was optimistic. "We have the plans all drawn up for the new bank building at Niland," he wrote, "I believe a branch bank at Niland will pay well."

Human foibles and the whims of the marketplace undermined Sherman's efforts. By 1925, his mood had soured. "When I think of all the loss and worry we have had there it makes me feel very badly...I wish I had never seen Niland."

In the scheme of things, the wayward Niland investment was a small setback. Sherman and his investors prospered mightily with their development of 47,500 acres in the San Fernando Valley. The communities of Van Nuys, Canoga Park and Reseda grew out of that desirable acreage. Sherman was the force behind a development called Hollywoodland in the foothills above Los Angeles. The world-famous Hollywood Sign is a direct result of that enterprise. Sherman's letters about these momentous projects – as well as ranches, railroads and shipping lines - are treasures still waiting to be unearthed at the Sherman Library.

My work was narrow in focus, so I didn't take full advantage of the library's book collection, other than their spectacular run of early phone directories. But another of my research forays gave me some perspective on the quality of their holdings.

One of the OAC hits was in the Architecture and Design Collection at UCSB. The Papers of David Gebhard – an architecture professor - included one folder about Niland. When I finally visited the archive, I found in the folder a photocopy of a story about Niland from a rare and valuable book entitled *The First Thirty Years – History of the Imperial Valley 1901 – 1931*. But

I already had the article, plus several ancillary pieces from the actual book, which I found in the collection of the Sherman Library!

I'm delighted to share this recollection of my Sherman Library experience. Simply, I had a great time! The space is comfortable to work in. The library staff is friendly, helpful and took the initiative on several occasions to point me towards resources I'd overlooked. And, they made good suggestions for local restaurants. I hope to return someday.