Dan Cooper, Borax Miner, Who ‘Digs’ Valley Need for Water

Valley Living

Water, that precious natural commodity necessary for life anywhere on Earth, has become an important part of the life of Dan Cooper, a quiet, unassuming individual who has lived most of his 45 years in the Boron area of the Mojave Valley.

Dan has been a member of the Antelope Valley-East Kern Water Agency board of directors for nine years and knows of the critical need for additional water, in the valley in the next several decades.

He has traveled thousands of miles locally and to Sacramento to help work out legislative details on a $90-million bond issue facing valley-wide voters Feb. 16.

Resting on the bond issue is the fate of a far-reaching project to bring in water from the nearby California Aqueduct now under construction. The AEVC project would feed water purchased from the state into existing water districts from Pearblossom to Boron to supplement dwindling underground sources.

Thousands of citizens around the valley are urging passage of the AEVC bond issue. They are saying it is a necessity for the area’s economic survival, but none are saying it as boldly as Dan Cooper.

He has seen the valley flourish into one of the most promising spots in the nation and knows that its future now hinges on the continued availability of water.

When Dan moved here from his native Los Angeles in June 1937, there were still adobe wells in some areas. Elsewhere, pumps had to lift water only 20 feet to the surface.

"Today, some of those same pumps have to lift water from as deep as 600 feet. Throughout the valley, water is being used faster than it can be replaced by nature."

With the projected development of the valley, including the Palmadale Intercontinental Airport, engineers say that the future survival of the valley will be dependent upon supplemental water.

Dan Cooper’s position at the forefront of this civic project appears natural for those who know him. In his 35 years on the Mojave Desert, Dan has known that it has a promising future and would one day bloom fully, not only a greener vegetation but economically.

"We have a mild climate, the space, power sources and transportation, 'tis a city,'" Dan noted. "So progress here was as natural as life itself."

"The airport will certainly accelerate the growth, because of the support elements that will be established, but growth will have come anyway. And places like Boron here will benefit just as much, because its growth will be linked to the rest of the valley."

In fact, Dan is extremely optimistic about Boron, the town where he and his two sons and a daughter were raised. He, "the pilot whose work is to lift the U.S. Borax and Chemical Company refinery for over 20 years, and is now safety superintendent.

He feels its proximity to future freeways in that area, along with the railroad, will contribute significantly to its growth. In conjunction with the natural northerly development of the valley.

Dan arrived in the Boron area with his parents when he was a seventh grader. They moved to Junior high school in Muroc when it was still called Cornus. Those were the days when the present site of Edwards Air Force Base was vacant.

Dan’s final school years here were spent at Antelope Valley High School in Lancaster and he made the trip each day by bus. He lettered four years in track and swimming and three years in basketball.

"I never had much slack time," Dan commented, and admitted that part of it was taken up counting a student by the name of Dolores Lugar, who had been living up at Big Fines since she was a tot.

"My parents moved out here from Iowa and a dad worked for the U.S. Forest Service," Dolores explained. "In fact he helped build the first roads in the Big Fines, now lives in Green Valley."

Dan also has a sister, Evelyn, living in Boron, whose mother was a Boron resident until her death several years ago.

Following his school graduation, Dan spent three of the war years in the Navy as a radioman flying air patrols on PBM Mariner flying boats in the Atlantic and in the Pacific.

"I had it made in the shade and didn’t know it,” Dan reflected, "and would love to go back now and visit the Caribbean area."

Of July 6, 1945, Dan and Dolores were married and following his release from the Navy in early 1946, they returned to Boron where Dan worked as a laborer at the borax mine, then owned by the Pacific Coast Borax Company.

It was just an interim job, though, as he had already decided on a career as a mining engineer and entered the Colorado School of Mines - the following September.

Five years later, the Coopers, with infant sons Bruce, now 24, and Gary, 22, returned to Boron where Dan began his successful career at what is now the million-dollar ore refinery.

From it comes the basic substance for the famous 20-Mule Team soap products. Other derivatives include countless industrial compounds used to make porcelain, fiberglass, glass and chimney and fire-fighting hardware.

Dan’s years at the refinery have seen him climb from a junior mining engineer to a foreman, to a senior mining engineer, and to superintendent of the huge open pit borate ore mine, the world’s largest.

His current position as refinery safety superintendent came in November and he once again there were the family "rap" sessions covering all subjects.

Bruce, the oldest, is a former marine who served in South Vietnam and is now using his GI Bill to study law in San Diego, where he is in his second year.

His childhood backyard as a piano, trumpet and flute player placed him in Marine Corps bands in South Vietnam and in Vietnam.

During his overseas tour, 1967 Bruce traveled throughout Vietnam’s northern provinces, taking part in hundreds of civil and recreational activities there, often driving the people. Gary, with plans to become a pastor, is in his final year at Occidental College in Los Angeles. His goal has been to attend Santa Barbara College City College, will be enrolling at Antelope Valley College this semester. She is still trying to decide whether it will be more practical to live near the campus or attempt to commute from Boron. Her goal has not been set yet and the former Miss Boron runner-ups of 1967 admits she is “trying to find herself still.”

All three youg Coopers are musically inclined, and with Gary also playing guitar and keyboard strings. It is not uncommon to hear all types of music drifting from the home any evening they are together.

Looking back at their younger years in Boron, all three are thankful they were raised in the valley.

“We all learned to develop family interests and appreciate our surroundings,” said Gary. “We were extremely close then, but naturally, now that we’re grown up, we’re even closer now.”

The Coopers also use these now-infrequent reunions to recall the countless family outings they used to go on throughout the Western United States.

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THE GREEN FAMILIAR SCENE—The world's largest Cherryhill Drive in Boron is highlighted by many varieties of cacti brought in by Dolores, who likes to experiment with vegetation native to other regions.

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His current position as refinery safety superintendent came in November and he calls it an extremely challenging assignment. His first major project has been compiling a comprehensive document establishing refinery-wide safety policies and the procedures with which to carry them out.

Dan and Dolores now complain that their own green home on Cherryhill Drive in Boron is as "quiet as a mausoleum".

Daughter Kathy, 26, and the only one of the three young Coopers to have been born in California, and her two older brothers are in college now. However all were home for the holidays and are enjoying...

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If the Coopers were not off on an automobile trip, they were over on the coast or exploring desert mining areas or ghost towns.

All five enjoyed both winter and summer sports and Dolores was such an advanced amateur ice skater at Big Pines as a youngster she once offered a professional position but declined.

For her though, two brushes with death have curtailed what was once an active outdoor life for the former physical education major at UCLA. Out of the near tragedies has come, however, a new avocation and a more meaningful outlook on life for both her and Dan.

Ten years ago she was stricken with heart trouble brought on by damage to one of the organ's valves. Her first closed-heart surgery was followed by a second four years later.

"We feel our lives have been enhanced by it," Dolores said, as she explained that due to her confinement in bed and initial activity she began oil painting.

What began then as a hobby is now more than a casual pastime and she is presently teaching art at her home twice a week in a studio that once had been their garage. Her own instructors over the past years have been some of the southland's best, including Ralph Love, John Wilcox and Charles Lemon.

She couldn't guess at how many paintings she has completed, but said it was well over 200, and they have been exhibited at many places throughout the valley.

The travels of Dan and Dolores now are made with ease and motels have replaced a camp stove and tent, and a good pair of their trips now find them both taking color slides that can...
Miner, Who for Water

from Iowa and dad for the U.S. Forest Dolores explained.

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ollowing his school Dan spent of the year years in the Navy as a radioman patrolling on PMB flying boats in the Aleutian islands and the Caribbean. His work made it in the shade of this experience and he didn't know it, Dan said, "and would love to do this work now and visit the area again."

June 7, 1945, Dan and his wife were married, and this June he received his release from the Navy in early 1946, they moved to Boron where Dan was a laborer at the mine, then owned by the former Boron Copper co. It was just an interim job, as he had already taken a career as a miner and entered the AV Valley School of Mines in 1945.

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"We all learned to develop family interests and appreciate our surroundings," said Gary. "We were extremely close as children, but naturally, now that we've left home, we're even closer now."

The Cooper's also have to make use of the 20-year breaks to develop their careers, the first as a junior mining engineer shortly after graduation from the Colorado School of Mines. The two younger Coopers worked at the refinery during their holiday breaks from college.

A BREAK WITH THE "BOSS" — Bruce, 18, left, and Gary, right, chat with their father during a lunch break at the Boron refinery in Boron where Dan is a safety superintendent after a 20-year career that began as a junior mining engineer.

Engine both at home and at work, Dan Haley kept in contact with the family, arranging for mail to be used for the basis of paintings.

"Dad was happy and proud I used this for that painting," she remarked, pointing to a large oil of a rocky spire by Monument Valley in Arizona that she calls her favorite. "More than anything, we have learned to relax and not worry too much about tomorrow," commented Dan. "Our family now is closer than it ever was, but now we enjoy music, her art, and reading more.

"And Dan foots the bill," Dolores tossed out, humor-ously. "When you've faced death twice, Dolores continued, you suddenly realize that what once would have been a big problem, isn't so big anymore. We've also learned not to put off until tomorrow what we can do today. If someone says 'let's go,' we're ready."

Between classes and her own painting sessions, Dolores still finds time to remain active in the Boron Garden Club and experiment at growing plants native to the lower desert.

Spare time away from work at the refinery that Dan once had is now mostly taken up by his frequent travels throughout the valley explaining and promoting the AV water project.

Over the years it has meant an average of at least two nights each week away from home for meetings, dinner speeches, or club presentations, plus trips to the state capitol as a member of the agency's legislative committee. It has been all this, plus many hours of study and work at home.

Dan has four more years at his job as an AVK director, and it's obvious that he is looking forward to it with as much enthusiasm as he has displayed in the past nine years.

As a native of the Antelope Valley, Dan Cooper sees his position as a way of helping to improve and develop his homeland.

"We all came into life enjoying the benefits of someone else's contributions. I look at this as my contribution."

Antelope Valley Press

SUNDAY, JAN. 3, 1971

Story and Photos

by Don Haley

PWS-0128-0003
Antelope Valley
Antelope Valley Place
Jan 3, 1971
p. 6

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