



# **City of San Bernardino Historical and Pioneer Society**

**P.O. Box 875, San Bernardino, CA 92402**

## **LIBRARY NEWS SEPTEMBER 2008**

By Richard D. Thompson, Librarian

About a year and a half ago a stranger walked into the Heritage House Library and asked if we had a history of Muscoy. We did not, and in fact no one present had ever heard of one. Nor, according to our inquisitor, was there much information available in the California Room at the Feldheym Library. With that in mind, I have written a short history of Muscoy, so at least those interested in studying the community's history will have something with which to start.

## **EARLY DAYS IN MUSCOY**

By  
**RICHARD D. THOMPSON**

In the early spring of 1927 an announcement appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* proclaiming "Gate City Gets Huge Land Deal." A sub-headline informed readers, "Famed Muscoy Ranch of 8600 Acres is Sold." The article went on to identify the buyer as J. B. Roof, Inc., a Los Angeles land development company. In addition to the Muscoy Ranch acreage another 1700 acres of adjacent farmland had been purchased, making for a very large project of 10,300 acres. (Later purchases brought the total to 11,000 acres.)

The sales manager, Leonard A. Hardie, was quoted as saying, "The Muscoy property has long been known to agriculturists in Southern California as one of the best properties in the State for subdivision into small farms." It has, he added, "the four leading features which should make it very attractive to the small farmer: rich soil, plenty of water, location and low price."

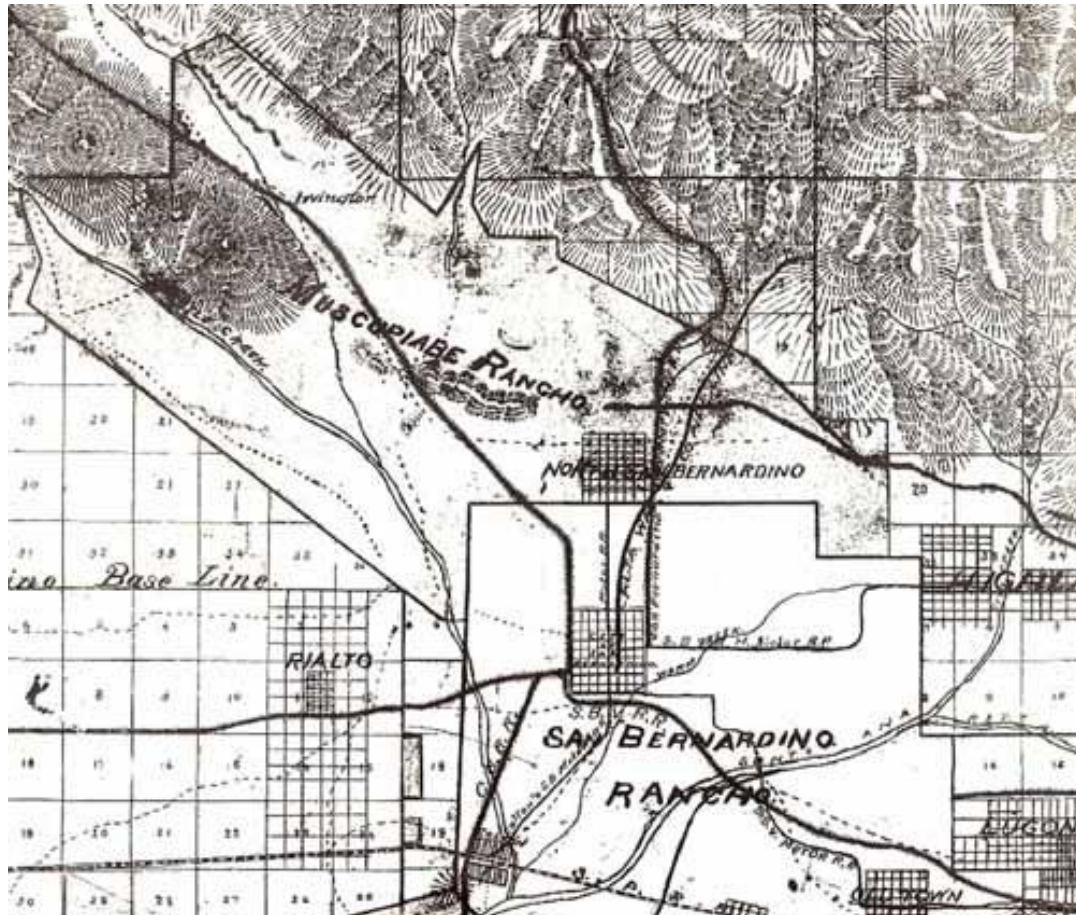
The property may have been known to agriculturalists for a long time, but few others knew then, or know today, about the Muscoy Ranch and its history. Thus, before going into the details of the land's development, a brief background of the ranch and its previous owners seems appropriate at this point.

## **HOW MUSCOY GOT ITS NAME**

Shortly after the announcement of the sale of the ranch, the Roof Company ran a paid advertisement in which the origin of the name "Muscoy" is addressed:

Originally it was a Spanish land grant [actually a Mexican land grant] known as the Rancho Muscupiabe, from which the name Muscoy was derived. In the [1870s] it was purchased by a pioneer stockman, William Pierce, who utilized it until his death, nearly thirty years ago. His heirs, realizing the immense future value of the water rights controlled by the property, have held it intact until it was acquired during the past year by J. B. Roof, Inc., for development as a high-class community of country homesites.

This appears to answer the question of how Muscoy got its name. But what is the source of the information in the ad? The proof? Here is an historian's educated guess: an ad agent wrote an advertisement, and he probably got his information from a Roof Company functionary, who perhaps got it from the real estate broker, who may have obtained it from an heir of Mr. Pierce, and the heir was at least two generations removed from the venerable individual who changed the name from Muscupiabe sometime prior to 1891, when the Muscoy Water Company was incorporated. In other words, there is no proof.



1880s map shows the relative sizes of the Muscupiabe and San Bernardino Ranchos

However, despite the lack of historical documentation, the name very likely came to be as described in the ad. The Indian name Muscupiabe is just too difficult for many people to want to struggle with. It is reminiscent of the railroad town in Missouri that originally was named Raleigh. Missourians had all sorts of trouble with that name – the spelling, the pronunciation, to whom it referred – and so it was simplified to Rolla, by which name the town still is called to this day.

## THE FORMER OWNERS

Before the Roof Company purchased the Muscoy property, there were several owners. The original Rancho Muscupiabe grantee was an Englishman by the name of Michael White, who became a naturalized Mexican citizen and went by the name Miguel Blanco. Muscupiabe was the eighth and final Mexican land grant in what became San Bernardino County and was granted to White in 1843. White was supposed to protect the valley from Indian horse thieves, but he was unable to safeguard even his own stock and was forced to leave the area after a relatively short time. In 1854 another Englishman,

George Martin, settled on the ranch with his family and bought the property in a tax sale. There have been a number of histories on White and Martin. George Beattie, in his book *Heritage of the Valley*, has a chapter on the ranch entitled “One League Becomes Seven,” in which he describes the general background of how the grant was finally determined.

Beattie discusses some, but not all, of the many legal problems associated with the property, which basically dealt with both the ownership and the boundaries of the grant. The litigation continued all the way up to 1889, which means that there were decades of somebody paying some pretty stiff legal bills. This might help explain the lack of histories about the area, because the historian who would write about the subject would have to delve into multiple lawsuits over this extended period of time.

William Pierce acquired the property in the 1870s, so he entered the picture midway through the legal entanglements.

### **THE MYSTERIOUS MR. PIERCE**

William Pierce kept news of himself and his affairs at Rancho Muscupiabe at a very low profile. According to the 1927 Roof Company advertisement, Pierce was a “stockman,” which brings to mind someone who owns a few horses, maybe some cattle or sheep. However, this man bought a ranch that had over 30,000 acres, and he added to it by buying adjacent public property. Nobody has totaled up his real estate holdings, but it appears they would rival in size the adjacent Rancho San Bernardino purchased by Mormons Lyman and Rich. Pierce must have had huge resources to buy a land empire of this size, and to have it remain in his possession and that of his heirs for over five decades.

Now, it could be that Pierce was just as described: a pioneer stockman, perhaps a shy “aw shucks” rancher. Or, on the other end of the spectrum, he could have been a ruthless wheeler and dealer who wanted his business dealings kept from public scrutiny. Whichever it is, or something in between, here is a man of mystery at the center of the “Famed Muscoy Ranch,” as the 1927 Los Angeles *Times* article described it.

In actuality, “famed” is not a word one would associate with the Muscoy Ranch. It was almost as unheard of as its owner. Local history publications carry very little about either. William Pierce’s son Henry is mentioned in Rialto histories because, as William’s heir, he sold off a sizable chunk of property, 22,000 acres, to the Semi-Tropic Land and Water Company. Semi-Tropic was busily accumulating land for what became the City of Rialto. Other than that, there are only occasional mentions of a real estate deal or of a transaction related to water rights.

There is no question that Pierce was interested in the development potential of his property, as he was active in acquiring water rights. In 1891 the Muscoy Water Company was incorporated, with the Board of Directors consisting of five members, according to John and Sandy Hockaday’s *From Indian Footpath to Modern Highway* (p. 201). The Pierces were well represented with three family members on the board. The two other members were Talbots. All of the directors were from San Francisco, a fact that seemingly puts to rest the idea that William Pierce was a simple stockman. The Hockadays present the Muscoy Water Company activities – which means Pierce family activities – as somewhat predatory when it came to acquiring land and water rights; the boundary markers were all moved around in the vicinity, Hockaday states, and despite the best efforts of modern owners, the exact boundaries are still largely unknown.

When the Pierces purchased the land, the family established a wall of silence regarding Muscoy matters, and little was heard from this centrally located property until it was sold a half-century later to J. B. Roof, Inc.





The Roof Company plan was to divide Muscoy into small farms, as shown by this 1927 advertisement

## INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS

Some infrastructure was built during the decades of Pierce family ownership, thus making the ranch more desirable from a development standpoint. Wells, pipes and other improvements to the water supply had been a trademark of the Pierces since the beginning.

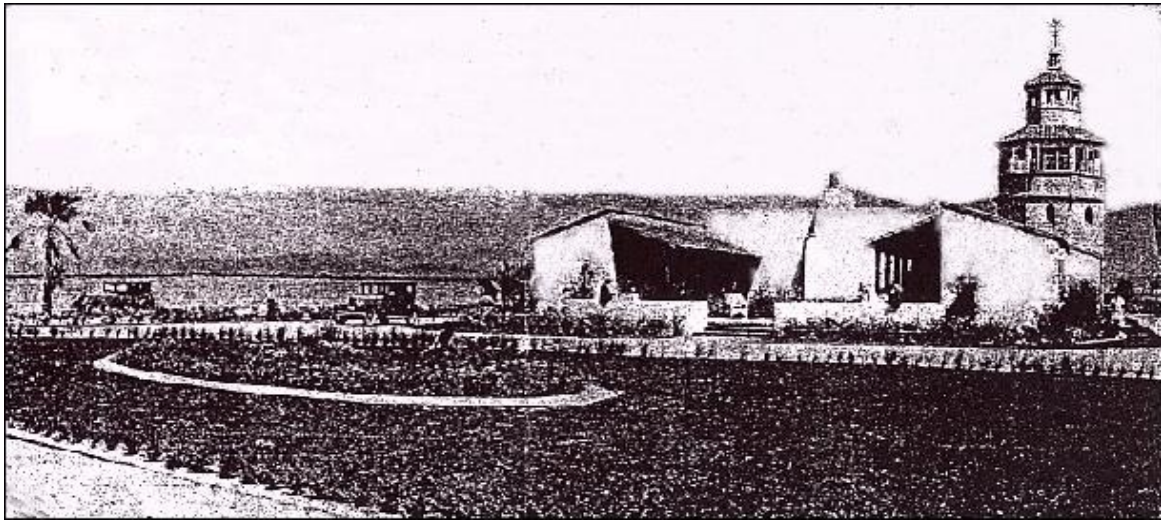
As to transportation, the county and state had paved three highways through the Muscoy Ranch by the time of the Roof purchase in 1927, namely Highland Avenue, Cajon Boulevard and Kendall Drive. These amounted to 25 miles of “boulevard” frontage, a very desirable feature for the Roof Company project. The first unit of development, consisting of 1,000 acres, added 14 more miles of streets and provided paved access to each individual lot, which could range in size from one to five acres.

Muscoy was favorably situated with respect to the Southern Sierra Power Company main line. The company built a substation on Cajon Boulevard, three miles north of Highland Avenue, and ran a 33,000-volt power line to the project. Transmission lines provided electricity to each individual lot.

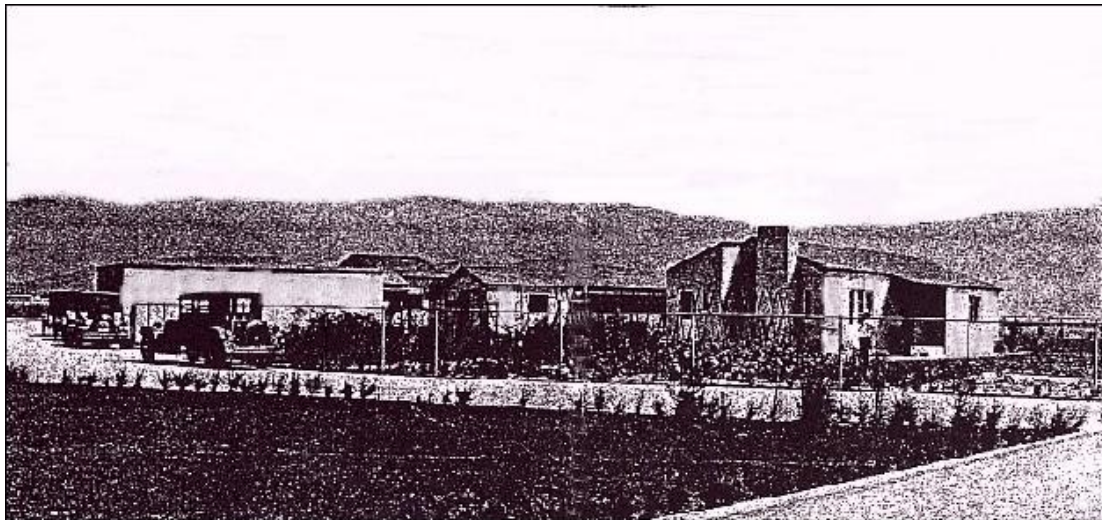
The Roof Company wrote that the watershed to the ranch was almost 100 square miles and that the surface flow from two mountain streams, combined with “an inexhaustible underground supply in the vast reservoirs that underlie Muscoy,” meant that the area had a wealth of water. Each property owner would receive one share per acre in the Muscoy Mutual Water Company. Water was delivered through six-inch steel pipes under pressure, with expenditures limited to the cost of operation and maintenance of the plant. Gas mains were provided for the ranch at the same time that the water lines were installed.

The company decided to build an administrative building on the ranch to serve as headquarters during the construction period, and afterwards as a sales office. A \$30,000 building of Spanish architecture was

erected on Highland Avenue. Adjacent acreage was planted with orange and grapefruit trees as a demonstration of the viability of citrus. Berries and field crops had already been proven.



**Left half of a panoramic view of the Roof Company's administrative building**



**Right half of the Roof Company administrative complex**

## **MUSCOY LANDING FIELD**

In April of 1927, at the same time the development of the Muscoy Ranch was announced, news came that a landing field was to be built in Muscoy. Commercial aviation had begun on April 17, 1926, when Western Air Express made their first flight, providing airmail service between Los Angeles and Salt Lake City. It was determined that the mail pilots needed guides along the route, and so six sites were selected by the Department of Commerce, Muscoy being one. A beacon was erected with 3,000,000 candlepower of light, which sent a beam that could be seen for 70 miles on a clear night.

The Commerce Department, interested in the site's potential for expansion, signed a lease with the Roof Company increasing the size of the "Muscoy Airport" from 10 acres to 30, with a provision that the area

around the field was not to be developed for two years, at which time the government would have “first chance” to add to their acreage, which they thought likely. The site was rectangular, the length being 2500 feet. In August of 1927 there was speculation that hangars and other buildings would be constructed in the near future.

The City of San Bernardino must have liked the prospects; too, because shortly after the first unit opened for sale, San Bernardino extended its city limits to include the southeast portion of Muscoy.

## **A COMMUNITY OF FARMS**

The developer wanted to help his buyers become as independent as possible, and did so by building demonstration projects and by providing professional advisors. The poultry farms were stocked with pedigreed White Leghorn and Light Brahma strains. A large hatchery was underway, to provide a capacity of 1,000,000 baby chicks a year, to be operated by the company for the benefit of homesite owners. The rabbits were a highly productive New Zealand breed, raised for their white or red fur, or as meat rabbits.

To have a plentiful supply of planting stock for fruits and vegetables, a 30-acre community nursery was established for developing hundreds of thousands of fruit trees, including grapefruit, lemons, figs, persimmons, walnuts, apricots, peaches and most other varieties grown in the Southland.

## **THE GREAT DEPRESSION ARRIVES**

The trouble with large developments is that they take years to construct and sell, and the real estate market fluctuates greatly. Ordinarily this is something the developer can plan for; that is, to have enough resources to get over a rough spot. The Roof Company only had two good years of selling before the Depression descended upon the nation, and not even the most cautious developer can plan for something so catastrophic.

There was an award-winning essay in the Los Angeles *Times* which saw the bright side of things early in the Depression years. On March 16, 1930, a story by Muscoy resident Pearl S. Evans was published, one that recognized hard times but put the best face on it. In addition to her economic problems, Mrs. Evans was a widow with two small children, aged eight and nine.

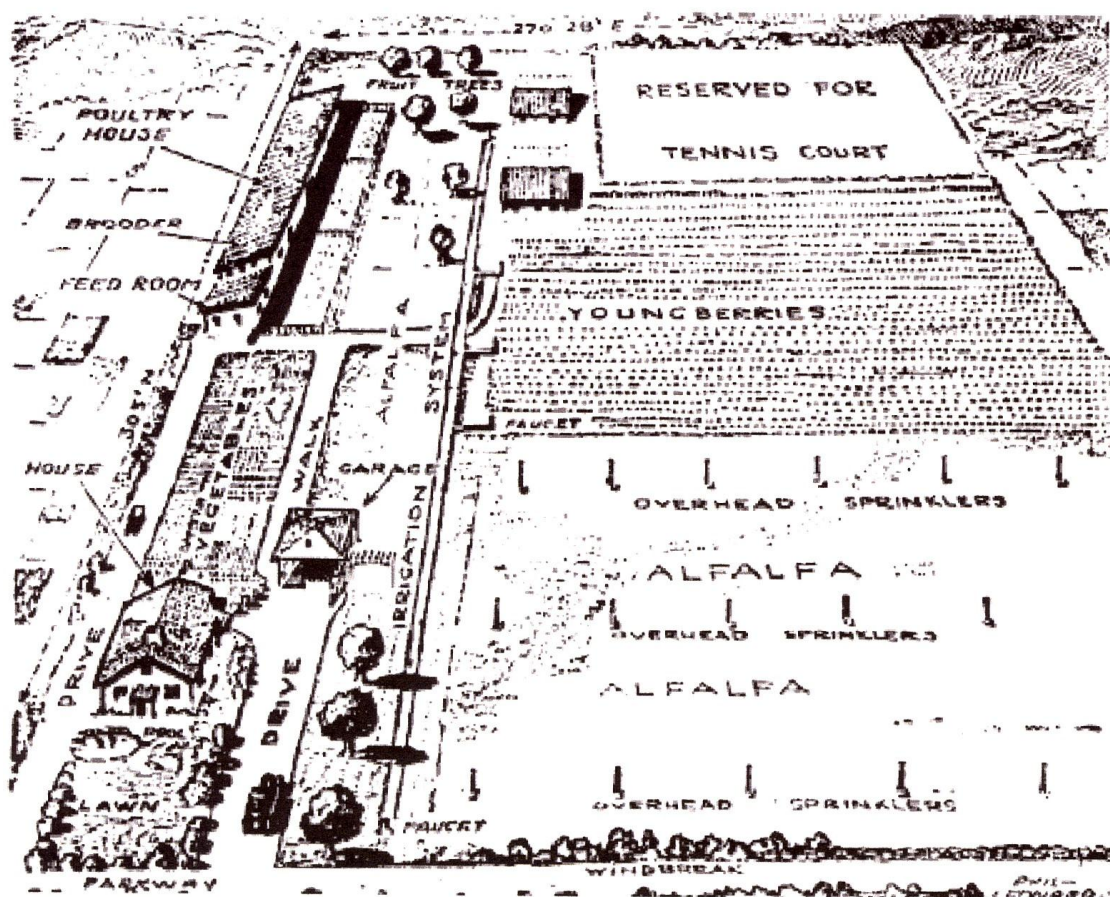
She described her difficulties when she bought a two-acre “pocket handkerchief ranch,” with a four-room house and thirteen rows of youngberries. She told how she and her sons cleared away the rocks and tin cans and decaying watermelons. Under the headline “Wanted – Longer Days,” Mrs. Evans gets to the reality of ranching life. She gives three hours every day to caring for the chickens, two hours in the garden, and that is before turning to her normal housekeeping duties.

She may have spent hours each day working on the farm, but she claimed that the fresh air, the satisfaction that comes with hard work, and a sound sleep at night made it all worth it. Life could be good, in spite of the Depression. “Watermelons and cantaloupes furnish refreshments,” she writes. “There is a wading pool. People will continue to wonder why it has not been stocked with fish and lilies, but as long as the boys enjoy it as they did last summer it is theirs.... These youngsters pity city boys.” Her sons had learned how to “turn work into play.”

The *Times* included a drawing of the Evans homesite. It shows youngberry and alfalfa fields, a poultry house, brooder room, feed room, and a garden area. A place is reserved in a far corner for a tennis court,



which was either Mrs. Evan's idea of humor, or that of the *Times* reporter. Rather dark, though. Whichever, the irony emphasizes the failed dreams of those who bought into the Muscoy development.



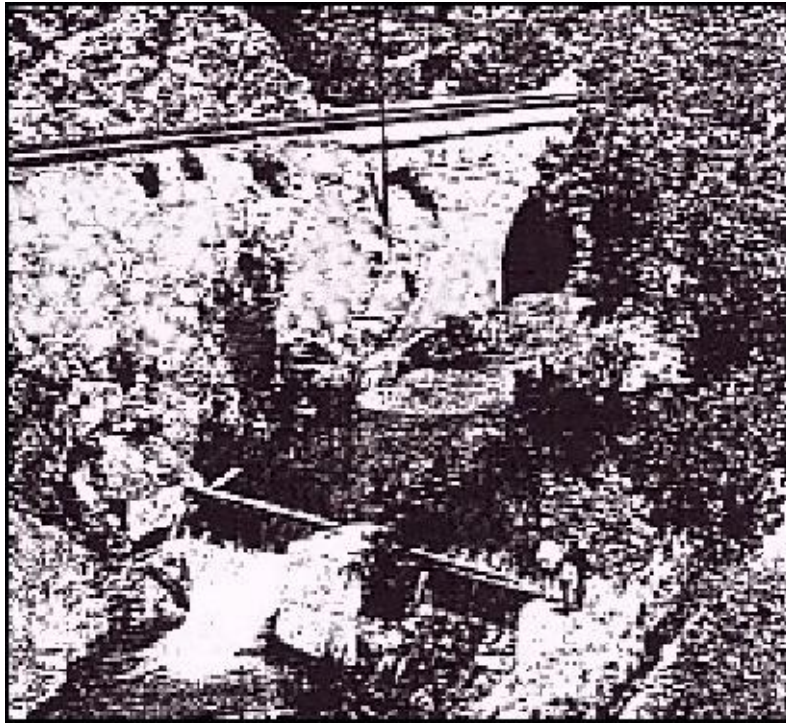
Drawing of the Pearl Evans homestead that appeared in the Los Angeles *Times*

Following the Evans story, the spate of Muscoy advertisements in the Los Angeles *Times* ended. When a developer stops promoting his project, you know there have to be problems in paradise.

## MUSCOY WATER COMPANY

Another addition to the list of scant Muscoy histories is M. B. Scott's *Development of Water Facilities in the Santa Ana River Basin, California, 1810-1968*. Scott devotes a section to the Muscoy Water Company (pp. 117-122), which traces the operation's initial six claims to the period between 1885-1905. Interestingly, he does not even mention William Pierce in the history. Scott states that it was members of the Towne family who filed the earliest claims on property in the valley of Cajon Creek and Cajon Canyon. This area was north of the Pierce holdings. Whatever connection there was, if any, between Towne and Pierce, it is not yet known.

The first diversion of Cajon Creek, according to Scott, was in 1883. A short distance down from Vincent's Ranch, a well-known early pioneer farm in Cajon Pass, an intake facility was built for the Glen Helen ditch. Scott details the pipes, ditches, dams and other water systems developed for bringing water from Cajon Pass, southerly through the Glen Helen Ranch and about half way to the future Muscoy development.



**Diversion dam (lower center), at mouth of Cajon Canyon, channels water to the Muscoy Water Company pipeline. Railroad line crosses at top of picture. Photo is from a 1927 brochure.**

In November 1926 the Muscoy Water Company sold its holdings to C. H. Jonas and J. B. Roof. The two new owners gave a trust deed to the stockholders of what came to be known as the Muscoy Syndicate. When Jonas and Roof failed to pay off the trust deed, the property was auctioned off. This was in August 1936, and in a trustee's sale, George S. Towne purchased the land and water rights.

The Muscoy Water Company was reincorporated at that time, although the new concern retained the original name. During the Jonas/Roof ownership, the water supply system had deteriorated and in the mid-1930s was not utilized to its capacity. Scott continues with the history through the difficult flood years, particularly 1938 and 1943. In the late 1940s the City of San Bernardino purchased land in the area, developed some wells, and entered into a lease agreement with the Muscoy Water Company. In the meantime, the company's conveyance system had been improved and put back into good operating condition.

### **VISIONARIES' DREAMS STILL IN PLAY**

When the worst depression of modern times hit the country, in fact the world, it had the natural effect of slowing development down to a near standstill, and that applied to the entire San Bernardino area. The population actually receded for the first time ever. Roof lost the property and his development had to await brighter days. Nevertheless, the project survived with its original intent – a low-density agricultural community – and today there are people very happy with the result. The dreams of William Pierce and J. B. Roof are still being realized.

**Saving the past for the future since 1888**