

How Drought-Hit Okieville, California, Is Coping With Dry Wells.

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By: Sarah Craig

The small hamlet of Okieville got its name from those who headed to California to escape the 1930s Dust Bowl. Today, Okieville is one of the areas hardest hit by California's current drought.



The hamlet of Okieville in California's San Joaquin Valley has been hard hit by the state's drought. Sarah Craig

and dry wells. In his lifetime, he escaped one drought only to be caught in another.

Since the drought began, thousands of wells have been going dry up and down California's San Joaquin Valley and Okieville, in Tulare County, is in the hardest hit region. According to the California Office of Emergency Services, 632 households in the county are still without water and a local nonprofit at the start of the summer counted about a quarter of the households in Okieville lacking water. Those who haven't gotten a temporary tank to hold water in the yard have hoses crossing from one neighbor to another. Families who once spent the summer under the spray of their sprinklers now spend it inside next to air conditioners.



Hilda Garcia, a resident of Okieville in Tulare County, California, is one of hundreds in the county who live in households that lack running water. (Sarah Craig)

MARVIN MAY REMEMBERS the trip in the back seat of his uncle's Model A Ford in the mid-1930s. "For a seven-year-old kid, I thought it was OK!" he yells, his hearing aid turned up full volume. May was among the thousands of Dust Bowl "Okies" and "Arkies" who left drought and depression in the Midwest for the sunny skies and green fields of California. "Everyone was Okies when they was out here and they called it Okieville," May yells again.

May, now 84, has lived in Okieville for 51 years and is one of the oldest remaining Dust Bowl migrants in the small community, earning him the unofficial title of mayor. He's been around long enough to see Okieville grow from three houses to 100, and, in the past five years, from an oasis of gardens and green lawns to a tract of dusty roads

"That was a summertime thing to do, just turn on the hose and chase people, just have fun, cool off, and now you don't dare waste a drop," says Carol Guajardo, a Okieville homeowner who saw her well go dry five years ago. "We don't have our yard, we don't have our garden, it's really difficult to want to be outside and do anything." Not having enough water doesn't just mean shorter showers and brown lawns; it's affected the community as a whole, making it feel more isolated.

And Okieville is already pretty isolated. Finding it on a map is nearly impossible. Okieville is about 7 miles (11km) west of the city of Tulare and sits off state route 137. Given that the route has a speed limit of 65mph (105km/h), it's easy to zoom right on by the small collection of homes cloaked by orchards of

pistachio trees and acres of cotton. Its official name is Highland Acres, but residents don't call it anything except Okieville.

"Okieville is so small it's not even considered a community, it's more of what we call a hamlet," says Eric Coyne, the deputy county administrator for Tulare County. But failing wells have caught people's attention outside the area, even if aid groups and reporters looking for drought-plagued towns have trouble finding Okieville.

The attention has helped. And so has the diligent work of the local nonprofit, Self-Help Enterprises. It has asked the County of Tulare for support and applied for funding from the United States Department of Agriculture, the State Water Resources Control Board and the Department of Water Resources to keep Okieville alive.

The effort has helped secure \$2.6 million in emergency drought funding, according to Maria Herrera, a community development specialist at Self Help Enterprises. The funds will pay to dig a community well, construct piping to connect each house to the well and install a metering system to gauge how much each home will pay for the amount of water used. Once built, the new well will supply water to individual water tanks until the well is connected to each house.

The process of securing funds for this water system has strengthened the community. Water committee meetings have engaged residents and bridged the language barrier between a handful of white families that gave the town its name and the Hispanic families that now make up most of Okieville's demography.

"I think the drought has actually brought the neighbors closer," says Tree Dunlap, a third-generation Okievillian. When her well went dry, her Spanish-speaking neighbor – to whom she had never spoken before – offered to help. "It was kind of an English-Spanish, this-that, kind of thing, but we did understand they wanted to go ahead and fill our barrels up," she says. Stories of neighborly help aren't uncommon in Okieville, where people are still desperate for water.

And it's easy to point fingers in times of desperation. "It wasn't so bad until the trucking company dropped three big wells; that's when all these little wells started going dry," says Dunlap's sister, Lily Dunlap, "They don't even live here."



A resident of the hamlet of Okieville, California (also called Highland Acres) in rural Tulare County, is out for an evening ride on his horse. (Sarah Craig)

The biggest water user around Okieville is the biggest employer: agriculture. Most of the families in the area work the fields and dairies, and help make Tulare County the largest agricultural-producing county in the United States.

But that production also comes at a cost – especially during the drought when farmers have had to increase groundwater pumping to irrigate crops. Those with more resources can afford to dig deeper wells when the shallower ones run dry. Most people in Okieville are too poor to drill deeper wells; 67 percent of communities – Okieville included – in the Tulare Lake Basin are considered disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged.

Providing basic infrastructure and services in places like Okieville falls to the county, which decided decades ago that disadvantaged and unincorporated places were too costly to maintain. The Tulare County General Plan from 1973 states, "Public commitments to communities with little or no authentic future should be carefully examined" and "these non-viable communities would, as a consequence of withholding major public facilities such as sewer and water systems, enter a process of long-term, natural decline..."

Basically, it told places like Okieville that they should naturally disappear and their residents move away.

But Herrera thinks differently. “How do you displace 100 families and say, ‘You’ve been living here for decades and now it’s time to move?’ It’s certainly not something that I want to be telling families,” she says. She has helped to organize the hamlet, bringing residents, lawyers, engineers and state funds together for one goal: to give Okieville a community water system.

If all goes as planned, the final well is expected to be finished in August 2017. Until then, residents with dry wells rely on their neighbors who still have water to either share or sell their water. It also means no gardens, so more grocery bills and more gas bills to get to the grocery store. It means no laundry, too. Those who could afford to leave have left. “A lot of people out here are retired or on disability and can’t afford to go,” says Guajardo. “They just do what they got to do to survive until the water comes.” Guajardo and her husband, Pete, thought about selling and moving but they’re on a tight budget. They believe the stress of not having water has caused Pete to get ulcers and suffer from depression. “Just the stress alone,” he says, “I got really sick.”

Even with the financial and health problems that come with the drought, there is a taproot that connects the people to their land. Either people in Okieville can’t budge – or they won’t. “They are a family,” says Chris Harrell at the Tulare Historical Museum, “I think they would rather stay there through the tough times and stick it out, rather than go somewhere else.”

At some point, though, economics comes into play. Can the state really pay \$2.6 million to keep Okieville from demise? Herrera thinks it should. “If, as California voters, we get behind water bonds because we believe that our residents deserve this,” she says, “then why not bring the money to Okieville?”

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