

# Mentone: Well Near the Wayside

by Cora Tench

Water supply has always been important in San Bernardino Valley, and consequently when drought struck Mentone in the mid 1890's, many thought of leaving. Pioneer John William Tench, however, stood firm in faith.

After the great Southern California land boom was at its peak, the Pacific Land Improvement Company, subsidiary of the Santa Fe Railroad, laid out the town of Mentone in 1887-88. They agreed to furnish water from the McIntosh tunnels to each property purchaser. Later, when the drought came, this supply of water was practically a thing of the past. The only remaining water, tunneled through a wooden flume from Mill Creek to the Mentone reservoir, was piped on to the houses.

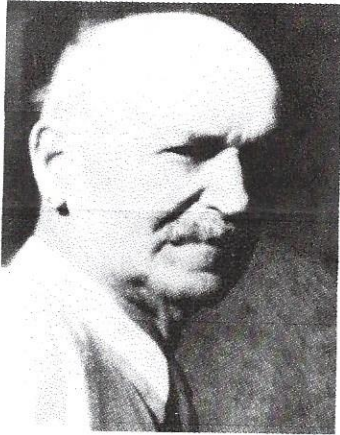
The ever-present rocks, sand and sage brush were still thriving in this sunny region. But the many thousands of orange trees required a thorough irrigation every two weeks to produce a good crop of fruit. Other orange growers thought it was impossible to provide water for their trees at this time.

Intrepid Tench, who knew the country better than anyone else, refused to believe as others did that Mentone was headed for being a ghost town. Somewhere there was water. He was figuring a way to save his orange trees. They were sure to be dead before he could get a well operating. With his fighting spirit well aroused, he was determined to carry out what he had in mind.

Young Bernard Tench saved the day for his family during this critical water shortage. He was sent from home at two week intervals to "borrow" irrigation water for their orange grove. The boy walked barefoot for two and one-half miles purposely planning to reach the spillway after dark. Beyond where the creek crosses the road — near the lower power house, he would stealthily raise up an old gate. Splashing water, surging over the side of the spillway, eased his tired feet. Raising the gate allowed sufficient water from the Zanja to flow back into its old Mill Creek channel. It followed this course for about a mile, and from there was carried by a wooden flume the rest of the way to the irrigation reservoir, which would slowly be filled during the night. Such scarce not-to-be-bought water was carefully closed off to run its regular course at day break.

W.J. Tench, a native of Buffalo, New York, had come to California in 1888 as purchasing agent for the railroad company, arriving in San Bernardino just two days before Bernard was born. He then came to Mentone as station agent, and remained there for many years. He started buying up land, which at that time was a dead give away. Nine blocks east of the depot where he worked he bought a 10-acre plot — always known as the Home Place, and which later became the well site. At that time there were regularly nine trains every day running over the kite-shaped railroad track through Mentone. Often engines under repairs used the San Bernardino loop track for trial runs. The orange groves all along Mentone Boulevard were show places to out-of-state tourists, until the drought got well under way.

In September of 1898, Tench decided to dig a well through underlying boulders to an



W.J. Tench

W.J. Tench, Station Agent,  
Mentone depot, circa 1900.





ancient river bed. It was an unbelievable task to anyone who had ever thrust a spade into Mentone's rock-strewn surface.

In spite of this, W.J. and a Chinese laborer named Ah Yee started to dig a hole four feet wide and six feet long at the upper corner of his 10 acre orange grove. The large, rock house, set quite far back, faced the main boulevard so the entire stretch of land edged its way along to the corner that was selected as the most suitable site for the future well and reservoir. Later, as the highway was widened out, it brought the well considerably closer to the wayside of Mentone Boulevard than it was originally, and became a "well near a wayside."

Harrowing experiences followed in the wake of the determined pioneer and his frightened Chinese helper who feared dynamite.

The deepening procedures of the well near the wayside were the center of attraction for friends as well as competitors. By the end of the year 1898, the Pacific Land Improvement Company promised Tench a deed to their entire distributing system, if he succeeded in producing sufficient water.

Before long it became evident that Tench's well development would take far more time and money than the Land Company had anticipated. They withdrew their original offer to deed the distributing system, and instead gave a five-year lease. This carried the privilege of a renewal, with satisfaction given to the parties of the first part. They also deeded Mr. Tench the best vacant block of land in the community.

Months of work continued through summer and winter. There were tense, exciting moments in the early spring of 1900 when water seemed imminent below the surface. Success came after two years of work, April 11, 1900. Mentone had its first worthwhile water supply.

At this stage, the finishing work had been turned over to a mining expert named Bill Coates, who working with Tench was standing hip-deep in water. Tench, as usual, operated the bucket from above. This involved using a square shaft which had to be held in place. Unexpectedly, the wedges came out of this shaft and let the spool run free, dropping the bucket. Tench was afraid the bucket had hit Bill on the head and called down. No answer.

Again he called the same but louder. No answer.

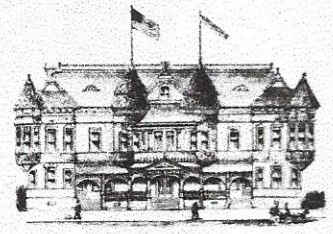
The third time Tench lay on the ground, with his head down the hole. This time he heard a faint answer.

After Bill came to the surface, he explained why he was unable to answer. He was watching the bucket as it was coming down. Suddenly, he saw it was starting back and knowing something was wrong, jumped in a corner. Then the bucket dropped full speed, hitting the water with such force, it splashed the water about 20 feet or higher and nearly drowned him.

Now sure of his water supply and equally sure of accumulated debts, W.J. Tench started the water system by persuading the railroad to put up a tank for engine use. He also promised the Crafton Orange Grower's Association five years of free water to persuade them to spot their packing house in Mentone. When Tench produced his own water, the Land Company leased their pipelines to him as they had agreed to do.

After the installation of engines and pumps, Tench put in his own pipe lines, furnishing water on a flat rate by the month. He didn't have many customers then, but he did have the railroad and the packing house. They were worth more than all the rest put together. The Tench well gave Mentone a more reliable water supply than the McIntosh tunnels and the two systems had a good start for the rivalry, which was to last for many years. In 1903 a big reservoir was built, a new and larger pump installed and about 20 meters put on most-needed connections.

Finally the long drought ceased and Tench was left primarily with debts. But the pioneer spirit remained with Bernard Tench, the son of W.J. Tench, and consequently despite constructional, governmental, vacillating public interest, the hydrant in front of the reservoir on Mentone Boulevard, as "the well near the wayside", continues to serve the resident and traveler alike.



The above shows a view of the

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