

NEWS

Early Rialto land scammer met a violent end

By THE INLAND VALLEY DAILY BULLETIN | dailybulletin@dfmdev.com |

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California's citrus boom presented many opportunities for scammers and schemers.

Rialto's town site was laid out in 1887 by the Semi-Tropic Land and Water Company, after the Santa Fe Railroad was extended between San Bernardino and Los Angeles, and after Rialto's first groves were planted in 1888. During the first decade of the 20th century, Rialto was growing and flourishing as its huge plantings of orange groves came into full bearing.

During those heady years, notorious con artist Ollie J. Watkins (nicknamed "Oily" because of his smooth talking) and his cronies bamboozled many victims into buying non-existent orange groves in Rialto.

The six-foot, 250-pound, one-armed Watkins had a long history of defrauding people. Yes, one-armed. It was said that he once lay down beside a railroad track and let a railroad car run over his arm so he could collect \$5000 from an insurance company. The company not only refused to pay him, but had him arrested for trying to cheat them.

In 1907 Watkins was passing himself off as the general manager of a citrus organization called "The California Fruit Growers Association." This sounded very much like the very reputable California Fruit Growers Exchange. Watkins' company had impressive offices in a business building in Los Angeles and it claimed to have 7,000 acres of orange-bearing land in Rialto. In fact, it had none.

Advertisements were sent all over the country describing these groves in glowing terms and offering five-acre tracts for sale. Those who sent money to buy a grove received a contract that astoundingly did not designate the exact location of the land that had been sold and also stated that the buyer would not receive a deed until seven years after the purchase was made.

Clearly the hundreds of people who sent money to buy groves did not read the fine print. None of them ever received title to the groves they thought they had bought (Watkins didn't own any groves to sell) and none of them ever got their money back.

They stopped making payments when word got around that it was all a swindle, but Watkins had pocketed a sum of money estimated to be more than \$250,000.

He also hired groups of men to work on a piece of Rialto property that he did own, and never paid them. One outraged group burned down Watkins' Rialto barn in retaliation.

Watkins had heard talk in Rialto about plans for its incorporation and bragged to his friends that he could be elected as the first mayor of Rialto, but then he and his confederates were arrested and charged with mail fraud.

He never stood trial.

Watkins was in San Bernardino one day arranging to have the possessions from his home in Rialto shipped to Los Angeles, when he was accidentally dragged 300 feet by the wagon he had hired and run over by its wheel. He died hours later in a San Bernardino hospital.

John Anthony Adams is author of "Scammers, Schemers, and Dreamers: The Turbulent History of Early Rialto." The book is available from amazon.com or at the Rialto Historical Society, 205 N. Riverside Ave., open 2-4 p.m. Wednesday and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday.

