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In this article we examine the invention of the Lower **Rio Grande Valley** of Texas as the "Magic **Valley**." To sell land and water, early-twentieth-century land developers and boosters created the Magic **Valley** as a place myth comprising claims of abundant irrigation water, pliant and abundant labor, and modernity overtaking wilderness. We use a conceptual framework developed from place-making and place-marketing literatures in which language, iconography, and performance are simultaneously deployed in the creation of place images and place myths. Textual descriptions, visual imagery, and performances relied on material transformations of the landscape. We describe the changes in the Magic **Valley** place myth, emphasizing characterizations of labor, nature, the good life, and security of investment. Two perspectives are adopted, one that considers a range of promotional literature and one that centers on a prominent individual.

Keywords: agriculture; Lower **Rio Grande Valley**; place; Texas.

In the first decade of the twentieth century land developers and boosters promoted the Lower **Rio Grande** of Texas as the "Magic **Valley**," a place for Anglo farmers to obtain water for irrigating vegetable and citrus crops and to exploit Hispanic labor. A railroad line between Houston and Brownsville, finished in 1904, connected a place widely considered only a few years earlier as an economically worthless and culturally backward desert. The Magic **Valley** idea, which we consider a place myth (Shields 1991), attracted thousands of Anglo settlers to practice irrigated agriculture in a place that quickly developed into a major horticultural and citrus-producing region sustained by impoverished and segregated Hispanic workers. The Magic **Valley** place-name would persist for decades (Jordan 1978), even after civil rights activism and water adjudication began to erode the material basis for the place myth in the 1940s and 1950s.

We analyze the invention of the Magic **Valley** as a place-making process rooted in the imperative for land and water sales in the Lower **Rio Grande Valley**. Building on recent literature on place making (Davis 2005), we focus on the origins and elements of the Magic **Valley** idea as place images that coalesced to form place myths. We explore the Magic **Valley** place myth in terms of a general notion of a booster or land developer and in terms of one person, John Shary (1872-1945), a prominent early-twentieth-century land developer and founder of the Sharyland farming subdivision in Mission and Alton,

Hidalgo County. We first develop the idea of place images and place myths as comprising texts, images, and performances, which we consider a synthesis of ideas in the literatures on place making and place marketing. Next we describe the Lower **Rio Grande Valley** (LRGV) of Texas as an early-twentieth-century farming frontier.[ 1] We then identify the origins and the elements of the Magic **Valley** idea, analyzing relationships among material transformations of the landscape and text, image, and performance. We focus on Shary to explore how land and water sales supported the place-making imperative.

Our research design relied on archival documents in the Shary Collection at the Library of the University of Texas-Pan American in Edinburg and promotional pamphlets and other ephemera held mainly at the University of Texas-Austin's Center for American **History**. After reading these materials we developed the categories described here, often relying on comparisons of text and images among promotional ephemera. We then turned to literatures in human geography for concepts to describe the phenomena we observed, settling eventually on the idea of place image and place myth (Shields 1991; Davis 2005). The categories we discuss do not capture the full range of place images, which include topics as varied as agricultural crops and architectural form. We derived the categories from the empirical data, rather than imposing them from theoretical literatures. Furthermore, the categories are not mutually exclusive; indeed, they often rely on each other, forming a land-sale stratagem that changed over time.

#### **TEXT, IMAGE, AND PERFORMANCE IN PLACE MAKING AND PLACE MARKETING**

Geographical analysis of the "invention" of places is well established. Language is seen as essential for the material alteration of landscapes (Tuan 1991). Numerous scholars have studied the origins, contradictions, and changes in written description of places (for example, Lewis 1988; Bassin 1991; McGreevy 1994; Gregory 1995; Duncan and Gregory 1999; Driver and Martins 2005). Human geographers have also analyzed visual imagery as a place-making device, interpreting landscape painting, photography, and cartography as ideological representations (Cosgrove and Daniels 1988; Gold and Ward 1994; Bassin 2000; Schwartz and Ryan 2003). Performance or spectacle is also a major force in place making. Gregory Bush, for example, was concerned with spectacle as "public ritual and commercialized entertainment that growing cities used to animate and market themselves" during the early twentieth century (1999,155). Similarly, Steven Hoelscher examines performances of memory in defining place in the U.S. South, and Jonathan Smith views performance in the form of the Texas Aggie Bonfire as playing a critical role in reconciling two narratives of Southern identity (Hoelscher 2003; Smith 2007).

Text, image, and performance may be understood as complementary strategies for the creation of place images and place myths. Rob Shields defined place images as "various

discrete meanings associated with real places and regions regardless of their character in reality" and place myths as a set of relatively stable place images (1991, 60). Building on Shields, Jeffrey Davis argues that place myths are place ideas that have "coalesced" because of their "particular coherence and longevity" (2005,611). Whereas Davis stresses "multiple and contradictory place-myths" (p. 611), Shields emphasized temporal persistence in the content of place myths. In his conceptual model of place reproduction, Davis claims that nonlocal "discourses and place-images" create a representation of place, an "imagined landscape" that inscribes the actual landscape with place myths (pp. 610-612). These place myths "enable and legitimize social practices that alter the material landscape" (p. 612), so that the landscape comes to resemble the place myth. Davis recognizes that this occurs in numerous ways; hence the relative power of social actors is critical in determining outcomes.

We differ from Davis in one respect. Davis is interested in the interrelationships among meaning of place, social relations in place, and the production of a material landscape. He argues that the ideas of "enabling and legitimizing" material transformations come from various place images that are "quite independent" from the material landscape (Davis 2005, 611), and he develops this argument using a case study of Pacific islands that are characterized as "pristine" even though they were the sites of nuclear testing in the 1950s. Our case study, by contrast, represents a situation in which a priori material transformations, celebrated in texts, images, and performances, were essential to the creation of place myths. We add to Davis and Shields by arguing that place myths are especially likely to appear when the place is distant from centers of political and economic power, direct experience by travelers and writers with the place is brief, negative stereotypes pervade public perception of the place, and elites perceive strong potential for accumulation in terms of resource valuation. Although distance and brevity of experience make place myths possible, the negative stereotypes and the imperative for accumulation make place myths necessary.

The place-myth approach we adopt privileges elitist perspectives. We focus on place images created by people, such as land developers, railroad traffic managers, and magazine and newspaper owners, who had the capability and means to publish. These elites were not exclusively male: Julia Montgomery, a leading propagandist, wrote the most widely disseminated text promoting the LRGV (1928a; 1928b). Nevertheless, we lack knowledge of the place images held by the vast majority of the populace, especially Tejanos and Mexicans, who, as we argue, served as an abstracted category in the place images that elites created. Certainly, other residents of the LRGV may have created various place myths and place images that were not included in promotional materials; for example, a newspaper published by upper-middle-class Tejanos in the early 1900s celebrated the LRGV's economic development while cautioning against Anglo appropriation of Tejano lands (Johnson 2003, 42-48). Some Anglo elites created place images contrary to those we discuss here during the 1920s, mainly in support of a proposed federal irrigation project that would bypass the private owners of irrigation systems.

**[THE LATE-NINETEENTH- AND EARLY-TWENTIETH-CENTURY LOWER RIO GRANDE FARMING](#)**

## **FRONTIER**

Many observers considered the late-nineteenth-century Lower **Rio Grande Valley** to be an unruly wilderness, with economic and social life dominated by cattle ranching (Montejano 1987; Johnson 2003). Indeed, at the turn of the twentieth century South Texas had changed little since 1848: Spanish was the main language, Mexican pesos were the main currency, and Hispanics (Tejanos) ran the cattle ranches and local politics. "Hispanophobia," the view of the Texas-Mexico conflict as a good-versus-evil standoff between Anglo civilization and Mexican barbarism and despotism, exacerbated economic marginalization (Weber 1992, 339). For example, John Bourke, a U.S. Army captain, likened the **Rio Grande** to the "Dark Belt" of the Congo of central Africa because of the "degraded, turbulent, ignorant, and superstitious character of its population" (1894,594).

The invention of the Magic **Valley** may be situated in three main geographical and historical contexts. Railroads and land developers aggressively promoted "new" North American farming frontiers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Sakolski 1932; Gates 1934; Overton 1941; Wyckoff 1988; Ward 1998). Major railroads maintained offices dedicated to producing promotional material, and some followed the model of the Southern Pacific Lines, which created *Sunset* in 1898 as a place-marketing publication (Withey 1997, 314; Orsi 2005, 158-164; Sackman 2005). The 1880s demise of Texas rangelands created a large potential supply of farmland. By the early 1900s the last of the vast grazing lands were found in the Texas Gulf Coast, including South Texas, and the Oklahoma panhandle (Fite 1966; Wishart 1987; Jordan 1993). Land developers, including John Shary, subdivided thousands of acres of grazing land near Corpus Christi into agricultural plots, setting the stage for the agricultural colonization of the LRGV (Kilgore 1972; Silva-Bewley 2001, 43-44).

The construction in 1904 of the St. Louis, Brownsville, and Mexico Railroad (SLBMR) from Corpus Christi to Brownsville encouraged the formation of several irrigation companies in the LRGV that pumped water from the **Rio Grande** to small plots of land swindled or purchased from Tejano owners. Sugarcane was the first irrigated crop in the LRGV, beginning in the late nineteenth century (Rozeff 2007). But the great boom in irrigated cropland took place after 1904. For example, farmers cultivated 24,000 irrigated acres in the LRGV in 1908 and irrigated 190,500 acres by 1924 in Hidalgo County alone (Nagle 1910; Hawker, Beck, and Devereux 1925). In 1930 irrigated agriculture in the LRGV extended over 400,000 acres (Foscue 1932; Tiefenbacher 2001; Johnson 2003). Scholars and journalists wrote glowing accounts of the region's agriculture (Chambers 1930; Kerbey 1939; Ratcliff 1939; Schoffelmayer 1939).

Land developers and railroads allied to run regular "home-seeker" excursions to the LRGV. Recruited by hundreds of land agents, working primarily in Midwestern farming communities, "prospects" arrived by the trainload for choreographed farm tours and entertainment at land-colonization clubhouses (Harger 1911, 580). The entire performance left little opportunity for contact with people who could sell better land at lower cost: "So full were their schedules and so careful the supervision over their activities that it was almost impossible for guests to make any contact with outsiders"

(Stambaugh and Stambaugh 1954, 231-232). Called "home suckers" by disgruntled locals, home seekers were greeted by "fleet convoys of Cadillacs, Packards and Lincolns [that] whirled them about the **Valley**." Tour organizers "wined, dined and insulated them from native contacts till they had been persuaded to leave their checks and cash behind while they returned North to wind up their affairs and pack their families' belongings" (Stillwell 1947, 16).

Finally, the establishment of Anglo control over land and water in the LRGV had severe implications for the native Hispanic population. For example, David Montejano described "a wall of tension and antagonism" that arose between Hispanic ranchers and Anglo farmers in the early 1900s focused on "control of county governments that possessed the power of tax assessment and collection and the provision of public services" (1987,110-112). The early-twentieth-century agricultural boom was "a disaster for small Tejano landowners" (Johnson 2003, 37). The brutal repression by the Texas Rangers of the 1915 Plan de San Diego rebellion cleared the last obstacle hindering Anglo land developers and irrigation, and by the early 1920s Mexicans and most Tejanos occupied the lowest rungs of the emerging sociospatial order that Anglos controlled (Montejano 1987; San Miguel 1987; Johnson 2003).

#### **INVENTING THE MAGIC VALLEY: FROM WILDERNESS TO GARDEN**

The Magic **Valley** place myth, originating in the early 1900s in the pages of a railroad publication, included place images that land developers reproduced and reworked in promotional materials. The early place myth included place images that attempted to replace a contrary idea of the LRGV as lawless, semiarid wilderness; in addition, boosters represented the natural environment as conducive to growing a wide range of crops year-round, with easily available irrigation water and abundant labor. At the root of the early place myth was the newly established Anglo control of organizations that relied on sales of land and water to prospective farmers, mainly from midwestern states. This emerging place myth relied not only on textual descriptions but also on photographic images of semiarid lands transformed into irrigated farms and on home-seeker tours.

Adapting the Garden Myth to the LRGV (Fiege 1999; Sackman 2005), propagandists described how cities had "sprung" from "the ash heaps of the brush fires of progress" as the "jungle [had] given way to cities and well kept profitable farms," with "millions of dollars" invested in irrigation systems, and the "wilderness of a few years ago [was] covered with 64,000 acres of growing crops" fed by the "vitalizing waters of the **Rio Grande**" (GCM 1911, 37-38). Other writers argued that "lawlessness is now a thing of the past," for "old battlefields are being converted into gardens and farms, and peaceful," and the LRGV's "primitive wilds ... are being rapidly transformed into a domain of farms and gardens" (Hornaday 1910, 404, 408-409). Boosters described a "healthful and productive" climate in which "every month is a farming month" (GCM 1907, 96). Although rapid progress was reported in the transition from "wilderness into a veritable Garden of Eden," opportunities existed for new arrivals, as farmers cultivated only 15,000 acres out of a potential 500,000 irrigable acres, and fifteen large canals supplied irrigation water to farms (GCM 1909, 53).

The garden place image included the idea that semiarid precipitation the regime could be overcome by irrigation, which boosters construed as "natural," even arguing that irrigation should be understood as "telephoning-for-water." Land developers who had invested in pumps along the **Rio Grande** argued that irrigation created a "halo of security" around farmers, even arguing that irrigation infrastructure was akin to indoor plumbing: "When his crop needs water, [the farmer] merely turns it on; when it has enough, he merely turns it off. Common sense is the only requisite" (GCM 1905a, 26-27). A major land developer, C. H. Swallow, incorporated this idea into a song book that would accompany performances of the place myth. Swallow and his agents encouraged prospective land purchasers to sing — to tune of "Beulah Land" — "This Valley cares not for the rain / No drouth can ever mar its name / By telephone the water comes / To grow our crops and build our home" (Swallow & Co. ca. 1919). In another version of this place image, the LRGV was a "last frontier," suggesting accessible land prices, but carried "none of the hardships of former frontiers to be encountered by the family of the settler" (Mercedes, Texas ca. 1911, 11).

One representative example showing the rapid transformation of wilderness to garden is a photograph that appeared in a 1910 pamphlet produced by the Lower **Rio Grande** Commercial Club (Figure 1). The ease and rapidity of converting the LRGV's shrub land to cropland was documented in a photograph with the caption "From the Wilderness to a Flourishing Field of Bermuda Onions" in "Less Than Three Months Work," showing several men and children next to a canal with irrigation water and Hispanic laborers standing near a vehicle. Indeed, creating a garden necessarily required work, and promoters were eager to create a second place image of the LRGV as site of cheap and pliant Hispanic labor. This place image required especially careful reinscription because of contrary Hispanophobia-infused place images. The challenge boosters faced was to reinvent Hispanics as agricultural workers, rather than as rebels or cattle thieves, in terms that fixed them in both place and social structure as unthreatening to Anglo farmers. For example, the first issue of the SLBMR's Gulf Coast Magazine, produced in the summer months of 1905, described Mexicans as "a class conspicuous because of its want of fixed purpose and definite occupation — a sort of floating commonality, which was content to exist after the fashion of the American Indian — living from hand to mouth and drifting in any direction whither curiosity or necessity might draw it." Indeed, Mexicans were "cheaper and more dependable" than African American workers because the supply from Mexico was "practically unlimited" (GCM 1905b, 15). Prospective settlers acquainted with the antebellum U.S. South may have been animated by the idea that Mexican farm laborers occupied "the same place the negro holds elsewhere in the South" and even possessed "more initiative and greater capabilities" than did African American workers (GCM 1906, 102). Land-water companies assured prospective land purchasers that labor was "cheap and plentiful and will always be" because of the "numerous Mexicans living on the Texas side of the river who welcome the coming of the new blood with its capital, energy and enterprise." Pointing to a labor reserve, boosters alleged that "we have Old Mexico to draw from" (SBLWC 1910, 13).

As a final example, the 1918 pamphlet with the first published mention of the Magic

**Valley** place-name described a place "where the Northern farmer has planted and claimed the land for his own," in part because farmers could "telephone" for water and because the **Rio Grande's** water "automatically replenishes" soil fertility. Labor was not a problem because "we have thousands of Mexicans here who are glad to work for you." Reassuringly, "the Mexican is very easy to get along with, and is not as treacherous and barbarous as many of our Northern friends think" and even "has no social aspirations, and [is] perfectly contented to be your servants" (Stewart Land Co. 1918).

#### **REDEFINING THE MAGIC VALLEY AS THE GOOD LIFE AND A SECURE INVESTMENT**

By the late 1920s and early 1930s promotional materials were building on the existing place myth by focusing on the LRGV as the locus of the good life and the place for making a secure investment in citrus groves watered by an efficient irrigation system. Land developers aimed this place myth not at midwestern farmers but at urban professionals in search of an investment opportunity that combined profit with leisure. During the 1920s horticultural and citrus crops had defined agriculture in the LRGV; meanwhile, farmers who owned land in most privately owned irrigation companies had voted to form state-sponsored irrigation districts with rights to issue bonds (Chambers 1930; Foscue 1932; Kerbey 1939; Schoffelmayer 1939; Stambaugh and Stambaugh 1954).

The redefined place myth continued to develop the established ideas. For example, the Southern Pacific Lines issued a pamphlet that justified the term "Magic **Valley**" in familiar language. The combination of soils, climate, and irrigation "makes plants grow as if by some supernatural power, hence the name MAGIC **VALLEY**" (SPL 1927). Similarly, the Missouri Pacific Lines touted the LRGV as a place where "crops can be grown twelve months of the year" in a region situated advantageously to send "an almost endless stream of vegetables" to northern markets during winter months (MPL ca. 1929, 3). In addition, labor was both cheap and segregated from Anglos, as ethnic Mexicans were "the principal source of labor in the **Valley**," living in "primitive homes" that "correspond to the negro shanties that are found throughout the South" (p. 10). But promoters also created a new place image in the form of the good life and investment security. State-of-the art irrigation systems, paved roads, electricity, natural gas mains, and other amenities were elements of a good-life place image. Visual imagery was essential to this strategy, evidencing newly constructed buildings, expansive irrigation infrastructure, and recently paved, palm tree — lined roads, as on the cover of a 1931 railroad pamphlet (Figure 2). Similarly, the material published by the Southern Pacific Line emphasized "the highly developed ;social life" and "the high standards of home life," stressing how the Anglo children enjoyed "one of the finest school systems in the United States" (SPL 1927, 21).! Land developers made similar place images, boasting of country clubs, social organizations, recreational opportunities, strong community ties, and above-average schools for Anglo children. Pamphlets devoted entire sections to describing social activities. Pictures of especially beautiful residences implied that such homes existed throughout the LRGV; photographs of churches suggested cultural unity in a former wilderness and normalized a distant place for prospective residents (PDC ca. 1930a).

In addition, boosters used claims of efficient irrigation to replace the "telephone-for-water" idea, emphasizing claims that irrigation districts were investing "vast sums" in modernizing the irrigation infrastructure. Irrigation, of course, was critical for claims that citrus was "a source of dependable revenue each year with a minimum of labor" (MPL ca. 1929, 3-4, 9). One land-development group described land in the LRGV as a "long time investment with a permanent source of income" (PDC ca. 1930b). Thus, another "magic" quality of the LRGV became stability: The McAllen Chamber of Commerce heralded the LRGV's development as "healthy growth in no way resembling the inflated and hysterical conditions of a boom" (1929).

These two new place images — the LRGV as "community" and the denial of a speculative bubble — were on prominent display in Montgomery's *A Little Journey through the Lower Valley of the Rio Grande*, the best known of the LRGV's promotional pamphlets. Montgomery admitted that her instructions were to say "very little" about the Southern Pacific Lines (Montgomery 1928b, 1). She took it upon herself to emphasize points that she had been making in her brother's *Monty's Monthly* magazine: to persuade women to come to the Lower **Rio Grande** by creating a place image of the LRGV as a "desirable place to live," showing pictorial evidence that "women [in the LRGV] now have everything that tends to satisfy their needs and desires — the finest schools, beautiful churches, civic and (social clubs of every kind, plenty of 'help' available, accessibility to every LRGV town via the Highway, good picture houses showing many of the great films often before they reach upstate cities, with enough music, art, and literary atmosphere to leaven the whole." Conveniently, Hispanic workers "solved" the "servant" problem (Montgomery 1928a, 5, 7).

In Montgomery's view, men valued "investment and financial possibility above other things," so she brought out the usual claims for the "magic of irrigation," warning prospective arrivals who were used to working several hundred acres that they would "have both hands full" with 20 or 60 acres in the LRGV, because crops and weeds would "grow with Magic speed" (1928a, 27). In a significant contrast with the earlier "telephone-for-irrigation" idea, Montgomery admitted that 70 percent of the LRGV's irrigation water was "lost through seepage and evaporation" (p. 26), only to contrast previous inefficiency with the move toward concrete lining of irrigation canals and ditches to increase efficiency. Accordingly, water charges were a "minor consideration" in comparison to the returns from irrigated agriculture (p. 27).

Montgomery's pamphlet is also memorable for the color map in it (Figure 3). She described it as "a masterpiece, the most fascinating thing ever printed about the **Valley** ... just the touch needed to emphasize all things represented" in her text and photographs (1928b, 6). Designed and illustrated by Wilfred Stedman, an illustrator and architect whose work later included the covers of several official New Mexico guidebooks in the 1940s, the map reinforced the new place images. The good life in the LRGV, with modern public buildings, irrigation, and leisure were juxtaposed with cock fighting and napping in northern Mexico (Figures 4 and 5).

Even as boosters promoted the good life and secure investment to urban professionals, the place image of transformed landscape sustained by Hispanic labor persisted.



Wimberly McLeod's **Valley** Developments firm promoted lands with images of transformed landscapes, such as a field of cabbage with the caption "Mexican Labor — Cheap and plentiful" (**Valley** Developments ca. 1928) (Figure 6). Another major land developer attempted to attract investors by arguing that farms were not "an idle plant for six or seven months of the year but continually productive and profitable" and that access to northern markets and "cheap Mexican labor" made "big profits possible" (PDC ca. 1950a). Yet characteristics of the frontier still existed, as evidenced by the description of "the golden glow of the brush fires against the night sky, where land is being cleared for cultivation," indicating "the passing of the old civilization and the coming of the new" (PDC ca. 1930a).

#### **THE MAGIC VALLEY DEFINED AND REDEFINED: SHARYLAND**

Thus far we have considered the origin and development of the Magic **Valley** place myth as a product of railroad and land-developer imperatives for hauling passengers and freight and for selling land and irrigation water. We now focus on how one land developer, John Shary, defined and redefined the Magic **Valley** while relying on images of a transformed landscape and using home-seeker tours. Shary's assets, estimated at \$5 million in the early 1920s, derived from his sales of land, marketing of fruit, supplying of irrigation water supply, and control of banks and newspapers in the LRGV. Shary mingled with the regional and statewide elite, and his adopted daughter married Allan Shivers, a lieutenant governor and governor of Texas during the 1940s and 1950s (Silva-Bewley 2001, 45-46).

The basis for Shary's place-myth creation was his purchase in 1910 of 10,000 acres near San Juan and Pharr, of a bankrupt irrigation company in 1915, and of 32,000 acres near Mission between 1917 and 1922. Shary, born in Nebraska, educated as a pharmacist, and experienced as a traveling salesman, partnered with George Paul in 1904 to subdivide 250,000 acres near Corpus Christi (Silva-Bewley 2001, 45-46, 75). Shary claimed that, between 1905 and 1911, he and his 1,300 agents ran special trains from Omaha and Kansas City that brought 550 cars of home seekers to the Corpus Christi region (Shary Organization 1948). In 1926 he estimated that since 1912 they had "scarcely missed an excursion of from one carload to a special train every two weeks" (Shary 1926).

Shortly after his purchase of land near Pharr and San Juan, Shary published *The Treasure Land of the Lower **Rio Grande**: Where Nature's Smiles Are Brightest*, which reproduced the Magic **Valley** place myth for his subdivision. He appealed to prospective buyers by arguing that "raw land" in the United States was "becoming very scarce" and by asking readers "why remain idle from seven to nine months of the year," when in the LRGV "bounteous crops can be grown and harvested every month of the year." The pamphlet admitted that the LRGV was "overlooked and misunderstood" but represented Shary's subdivision as an agricultural paradise where farmers could raise a variety of crops and animals profitably, as indicated by the overflowing cornucopias, one with a variety of crops, the other suggesting inevitable profitability by the coins spilling out (Figure 7). To perform the work necessary to sustain such an agricultural paradise, Shary depicted the Hispanic workforce as "peaceful, honest, polite and religious,"

unwilling to "mix up in other society." The region's soils would remain "indefinitely" fertile because they were "constantly renewed with each application of the river water in irrigation" (Treasure Land ca. 1914, 7-9, 13).

Like other promotional materials, Treasure Land relied on place images of transformed landscapes with prominent irrigation infrastructure. Having asked "Why run the risk of failure from drouth and floods?" Shary assured readers that, on his lands, one could "order [water] by telephone and be prepared to receive it to the best advantage when it arrives at his headgate." A photograph of "gigantic" canals, described as "very wide and deep, with extra high banks" and a 1913 letter apparently confirming Shary's control over water rights supported such claims (Treasure Land ca. 1914, 1, 12, 16-17).

Shary relied on landscape modifications not only in photographic images and texts but also in performances. Indeed, the close link between landscape transformation and land sales was not lost on observers, one of whom reported that developers pushed land sales "as soon as the irrigation companies [had] installed the pumping plants and provided sufficient canals so that even small quantities of water could be supplied" (Willard 1918, 21). Pumps lifting water out of the **Rio Grande** were a highlight of land-sale tours, but in 1916 pumps that Shary had ordered were delayed. Furious, Shary explained his case to the pump maker's sales representative: "Here I am bringing down trainloads of people every two weeks and unable to show the big and most important development at the river, which is the guarantee for the people's investment" (Shary 1916b). In another case, Shary criticized his clients for not making the landscape modifications necessary for the Magic **Valley** place myth. A Minnesotan farmer who had purchased 5 acres asked Shary in 1920 to sell his land. Shary refused even to quote a price, criticizing the owners: "There is one thing that is rather unfortunate. So many of your neighbors are like yourself. They have not come down and put up the necessary improvements on their land which adds so materially to it's [sic] value and you know it is hard to build up a community unless the owners improve their places or make them a desirable investment for prospective buyers" (Shary 1920).

If landowners would not "improve their places," then Shary himself managed farms and organized the material transformations he required for both the visual imagery of pamphlets and the performance of home-seeker tours. In a representative case, Shary assured the owner of a 5-acre tract in 1917 that he would "plow it all up and put it in first class shape and will rent it next year" (Shary 1917). For a farmer based in North Dakota, Shary reported that he had put a tenant on his 17-acre tract in 1919 and offered to plant citrus trees which either he or the tenant could tend, for a fee (Shary 1919a). In another case Shary reported to a farmer in Iowa that "We could not get anyone to rent your land to in the immediate neighborhood so we had my man put it in cotton" (Shary 1919b). In 1925 Shary managed the farm owned by a bank vice president from South Dakota. To convince the banker to plant all the land in grapefruit, Shary sent him a crate of grapefruit by rail express with a note claiming that his gross return per acre, with Shary as orchard manager, would be around \$1,000 (Shary 1925). In other cases, however, Shary did not manage farms; rather, he facilitated only part of the wilderness-to-garden process. In 1916, for example, he hired a Hispanic contractor

to prepare for planting 18 acres that had been purchased; but he reminded the buyer that he had no intention of farming every 20-acre tract in Sharyland, otherwise "I would not sell it all. I have no thousand head of mules and thousand men to look after everybody's land." Nevertheless, Shary managed the banker's farm for at least three more years (Shary 1916a).

Shary received fees from absentee landowners, but his primary motivation in managing farms was that untended and undeveloped farms were bad for land sales. By the early 1930s approximately 60 percent of Sharyland had been cleared, and 25 percent was still in "brush" (SPL 1932). In a push to sell the remaining Sharyland plots, Shary redefined the Magic **Valley** place myth in ways that built on the revised overall place myth, which included place images of the good life. Shary promoted a place image of Sharyland as a site for investment made by distant elites, with himself as orchard manager, and thus Sharyland became more business venture than community. In addition, the grapefruit became the centerpiece agricultural commodity of Sharyland, supplanting the wide variety of crops suggested in Treasure Land.

The most striking visual representation of Shary's lands appeared in a **Rio Grande Valley** brochure (Figure 8), part of Shary's broader marketing campaign intended to reinvigorate land sales during the early 1930s (SLC 1932). Shary used these images until at least the early 1940s, when they appeared as the Golden Story of Sharyland (SLC 1941). The **Rio Grande Valley** brochure represented a version of Sharyland modeled after Southern California's citrus suburbs (Garcia 2001, 17-46), with houses surrounded by orderly grapefruit orchards watered by faceless Hispanic workers, as emphasized in Shary's Five Essential Elements to Successful Agriculture (SLC ca. 1932a) (Figure 9). Similarly, the brochure represented the leisurely life of a grapefruit farmer with an image of a well-dressed woman, a worker picking fruit behind her, and a school bus on the street as an icon of the strong community that resident farmers enjoyed. The TexaSweat grapefruit, established as a brand in 1925 by Shary's Texas Fruit Growers Exchange, was sliced as a cup and saucer, symbolizing its invention as a normal breakfast food. Indeed, the **Rio Grande Valley** brochure represented the grapefruit commodity chain, linking planting, picking, packaging, and selling, in a context of a suburban, gardenlike idyll (TCFGE 1925; SLC 1932, ca. 1932a).

Whereas the visual elements of Shary's place myth included the idea of a suburban farming community, the textual elements stressed secure returns on investment to absentee landowners. Indeed, during the 1920s the three-year contract for orchard management was widely practiced in the LRGV (Watson ca. 1931, 165, 301). A scripted "Sales Canvass," supplemented by maps and other imagery, formed the basis for the Sharyland place image. Used by Shary's agents who recruited prospects for excursions to Sharyland on commission basis, the Sales Canvass promoted Sharyland as the site of grapefruit land that was relatively scarce in regional and global terms. Shary's agents would have encouraged prospects to purchase at least 1 acre (or 63 grapefruit trees) for \$1,010 (10 percent down and payments spread over three years), which would generate more net income than an 80-acre Michigan farm, "with no personal labor involved" because Shary would manage the orchard.; The agent would have shown a picture of a

tree bearing 2,400 grapefruits, which would have yielded \$50; 1 acre would have yielded \$3,000 a year. These returns would represent "income to provide [for] you in the later years of life," or with a college savings fund, and with "a home in the most inviting and healthful of all lands" in the LRGV's "higher type of communities." Claims that grapefruit orchards provided "a greater, surer, and more satisfactory income than in a like investment one can make in any bond, insurance industry or business" further pushed the place image of secure investment (SLC ca. 1932b).

Shary's "Sales Canvass" referred to two related documents that agents pressed on their prospects. One was the "Four Point Plan" by which Shary's organization would manage orchards, from planting seedlings to picking fruit, for three years upon purchase, delivering irrigation water to trees selected from Sharyland nurseries, ensuring proper management and care, and marketing the crop through the Texas Fruit Growers Exchange. The second was Shary's "Guaranteed Investment Plan," which allowed investors to sell back their property for the original purchase price. Using a Repurchase Bond, Shary assured investors that there would be "no need for an investigator personally inspecting his property" (SLC 1941). Indeed, the pamphlet referred to the many Sharyland owners who remained in the Midwest, traveling to the LRGV only to inspect their property and for vacation (SLC 1941).

Another key factor in producing the Sharyland place myth was the performance of home-seeker tours. In Treasure Land Shary implored those coming to the LRGV to be sure to visit his subdivision because missing it "would be like the boy going to the circus and missing the main show by taking in one of the smaller side attractions." Shary would thus be the ringleader presiding over his LRGV tours, required to "give a much clearer and more definite idea of the value and extent of these superior resources than may be gained from reading pictures or hearsay" (Treasure Land, ca. 1914). The performance began as home seekers boarded the Pullman train cars with "Sharyland" painted on the side (Olmsted ca. 1928). Copies of the Sharyland Song Book distributed en route for entertainment on the train added to the spectacle (SLC ca. 1921).<sup>[ 2 ]</sup> In the LRGV, Shary's sales team treated prospects to Shary's clubhouse, drove them to Port Isabel to enjoy the coast, took them hunting and fishing, and entertained them across the border in Reynosa, Mexico, with dinner, drinks, and the occasional bullfight (SLC 1930, 1933, 1934b). Agents took great care to present the region according to the Magic **Valley** place myth by showcasing specific prospering orchards and the modernity of the irrigation and by using promotional talks by chosen community members (SLC 1934b). Daily menus included LRGV crops, most often grapefruit (SLC 1934a).

Although Shary was not unique in running excursions, the detailed cost-benefit records he kept on some excursions are exceptional. In examining sixty financial reports of excursions to Sharyland between January 1930 and August 1933, we found that 1,200 prospects toured the LRGV under Shary's care. These excursions resulted in the sale of 217 parcels of land — all in Sharyland — totaling 2,100 acres. Shary also calculated that each excursion, averaging twenty-one prospects, cost him \$1,200, whereas land sales from each excursion brought him \$1,800 (SLC 1930-1933).

One of Shary's most prolific and trusted agents, L. N. Olmsted, reflected on a typical

excursion trip in February 1933. When prospects arrived in Brownsville, Olmsted drove them to Matamoros for lunch, where they drank beer, and then to the Sharyland packing plant and a Shary orchard nursery, where he explained his method for growing trees. Next the visitors were shown a 2,000-acre tract, then headed to Shary's clubhouse for dinner. The next day the group visited the irrigation pumps and the lands he had picked out for one of the prospective buyers. Olmsted reported that the prospect "did not want to be pushed" and even a further "conference" with him could not finalize the sale, for Donaldson wanted to consider it at home (Olmsted 1933).

The benefits of excursions were not always obvious. Shary and his staff pressured agents to keep costs low. In one telegram Olmsted urged another staffer to "make it profitable instead of just a big show" (Olmsted 1930). In a letter, Olmsted complained to Shary that excursions were expensive and tiresome and that they were "becoming an antiquated method of selling land" (Olmsted 1931). Shary himself acknowledged the frustrations of colonization, for the excursions often consisted of one hopeful prospect with his entire family, plus many other visitors who had little intention of buying land: "There is always a great deal of dead timber, even with the most careful selection of prospects." He expected no more than a 10 percent success rate for each excursion, and expected that only one-third of land purchasers would "become actual settlers" (Shary 1926). Shary's ambivalence had appeared in 1919 when he complained to a railroad traffic manager that "on average we are doing well if we sell one out of eight to ten as now days the head of the family brings his wife and children along" (Shary 1919c). The Magic **Valley** place images of schools and other family amenities confronted Shary's land-sale imperative because Shary wanted families to move to the LRGV, but he was not pleased at paying for prospective home seekers to enjoy a family vacation while looking for farmland.

#### **TRANSFORMING NATURE, INVENTING PLACES**

The Magic **Valley** place myth comprised a set of place images that relied on an already transformed landscape in which workers had built irrigation systems, segregated Hispanic workers picked crops, and Anglo farmers could achieve both the good life and secure investment in troubled financial times. Rooted in the political economy of the LRGV, the Magic **Valley** place myth was the result of the imperative among elites to sell parcels of farmland and rights to irrigation water. After World War II two major factors eroded Anglo power over labor and water. Activists attacked the system of segregation, focusing primarily on public education (Montejano 1987, 262-287; San Miguel 1987; Carroll 2003), and the state of Texas sued irrigation districts for overappropriation of water (Schoolmaster 1991). Thus, the 1930s and 1940s represent the decades in which Anglo elites created a landscape in the image of the place myth, even if their transformed landscape would soon come under assault.

Place images contrary to the dominant elite discourse first emerged during the 1920s. At least some Anglo farmers opposed the Magic **Valley** place myth as inaccurate and misleading; the leader of this group criticized the for-profit rationale of irrigation companies and sought to obtain federal support for a gravity irrigation project. This view, in turn, received criticism from the publisher of Monty's Monthly. The LRGV's

contradictions did not escape contemporary observers, who described a "rambling superstructure of fantastic profits and spreading orchards" above a "base of toiling, brown-skinned Mexican laborers [living] on the verge of actual starvation" (Stillwell 1947, 17). Representatives of the federal Children's Bureau reported in the early 1940s that Hispanic families living in rural areas suffered disproportionately from various gastrointestinal illnesses provoked by drinking water from the irrigation canals and using open-pit latrines (Warburton, Wook, and Crane 1943).

The Magic **Valley** place myth is instructive to the broader literature on place myths and place making in two main ways. First, the case shows how texts and images create a particular idea of place, which forms the basis of performances that celebrate place myths. Texts, images, and performances create place myths, but they rely on material modifications of landscape. Land developers such as Shary were acutely aware of the importance of clearing land, digging irrigation ditches, and installing irrigation pumps. Indeed, the relationship between material transformations and place myth is a complicated one. The place myth, when created under the profitability imperative of selling land and water, requires images of some material changes to the landscape; these material changes become focal points for the performances and touchstones for textual descriptions.

Second, the case of the Magic **Valley** provides insight into the conditions in which place myths are created. Place myths are especially likely to appear when the place is relatively distant from economic and political centers, when direct experience with the place is brief, and when negative place myths have predominated. Elites who perceive strong potential for accumulation of wealth based on imminent increase in the value of a natural resource play a key role in creating place myths. Relative distance and brevity of experience make place myths possible, so boosters can convey fleeting glimpses of a place in pamphlets that distant readers will read. Negative place images provide a foil for promoting a place and its various aspects, while the imperative for profit makes place myths necessary for elites seeking to sell commodified aspects of nature and people.

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#### **NOTES**

**1.** The Lower **Rio Grande Valley**, which comprises Hidalgo, Starr, Willacy, and Cameron Counties in the southeastern tip of Texas, is the delta of the **Rio Grande/Bravo**.

**2.** The Sharyland Songbook is not dated, and its contents contain no hints as to its age. Our date of "ca. 1921" reflects the 1921 creation of the Southwestern Land Company from an existing land company, the Gates-Barrier Immigration Company, to market Shary's lands.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FIG. 1 — Images of a transformed landscape such as this scene conveyed the wilderness-to-garden place image of the Lower **Rio Grande Valley** and suggested that human domination of nature could be effected rapidly. Source: Lower **Rio Grande** Commercial Club 1910.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FIG. 2 — By the late 1920s and early 1930s promotional pamphlets carried images of the good life in the Lower **Rio Grande Valley**, indicating various leisure pursuits and tourism in Mexico, along with citrus farming. Source: MPL ca. 1931, cover.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FIG. 3 — Wilfred Stedman's color map of the Lower **Rio Grande Valley**, published in Julia Montgomery's *A Little Journey through the Lower Valley of the Rio Grande*. Source: Montgomery 1928a, following p. 31.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FIG. 4 — Detail of a scene in Wilfred Stedman's map of the Lower **Rio Grande Valley** suggesting modern irrigation practices on the U.S. side of the **Rio Grande**. Source: Montgomery 1928a, following p. 31.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FIG. 5 — Another scene in Wilfred Stedman's map of the Lower **Rio Grande Valley** shows cock fighting in Mexico, suggesting the cultural superiority of the agricultural systems on the U.S. side of the **Rio Grande**. Source: Montgomery 1928a, following p. 31.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FIG. 6 — Images of transformed landscape in the Lower **Rio Grande Valley** persisted into the late 1920s. This postcard shows a cabbage field with the caption "Mexican Labor — Cheap and plentiful." Source: **Valley** Developments ca. 1928.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FIG. 7 — John Shary's *The Treasure Land of the Lower Rio Grande: Where Nature's Smile Are Brightest* reproduced existing Magic **Valley** place myths. Source: *Treasure Land* ca. 1914, cover.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FIG. 8 — The cover of the early 1930s Sharyland marketing brochure promoted a suburban orchard modeled after Southern California's citrus suburbs. Source: SLC 1932

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): FIG. 9 — Detail of John Shary's *Five Essential Elements to Successful Agriculture* brochure luring prospective investors to citrus orchards based on the suggestion of a leisurely suburban lifestyle reliant on Hispanic laborers. Source: SLC ca. 1932a.

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