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**Hometown U.S.A.: Spring Valley, Nev.**

## Water war gets 'clock people' ticking

**A San Francisco group with a goal to build a clock that will mark time for 10,000 years has attached itself to this rural patch of Nevada. Now it's fighting for its water rights.**

By Ashley Powers, Los Angeles Times

March 11, 2012

Around here, they're sometimes called the "clock people." They zip over from San Francisco every summer to this remote valley, heave their vehicles up the mountain and while away hours gawking at bristlecone pines, considered among the world's oldest living things.

Over time an unlikely bond formed between the city-dwellers and a rural patch of Nevada that the rest of the state ignores. How else to explain the visitors leaping into this region's water war with Las Vegas?

In the late 1990s, when Dave Tilford was working in real estate, he got a call. He'd lived in nearby Ely all his life, and understood that people sometimes scooped up desert land to chase far-fetched dreams. Still, this request was odd. Someone was looking for property high — very high — in the limestone cliffs near Great Basin National Park.

Here's what came to mind: 180 acres of chiseled rock, squat trees and weather-beaten cabins. Elevation: about 11,000 feet. "On a clear day, you can see forever," Tilford said.

One morning, he and a group of potential buyers drove to the site, about an hour from the floor of Spring Valley. He pointed to a grove of bristlecones, whose branches resemble skeleton fingers. "Sit against it and think: 4,000 to 5,000 years, that's been here," he said.

As the potential buyers explained, they belonged to the Long Now Foundation, a San Francisco organization dedicated to promoting long-term thinking. One of its goals is to build a clock that will mark time for 10,000 years — a dramatic demonstration of down-the-road planning. (In anticipation, the Long Now website marks years a little differently, saying the group was founded in "01996.")

After the real estate tour, Tilford and his wife, Edith, paged through a book the group gave him, "The Clock

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of the Long Now," written by founder Stewart Brand.

"I didn't quite understand it at first," Tilford said. "It grew on me."

"We think for the present and not the long-term," his wife said. "But we could use some of that now in politics, thinking of what we're leaving our grandchildren."

Tilford helped the group purchase the site. In 2005, the foundation added 60 acres on the valley floor.

A prototype of the massive clock is on display at London's Science Museum, and the actual clock site is under construction in the Sierra Diablo Mountains in West Texas. Foundation members are keeping the Nevada property in case they decide to build a second timepiece.

Tilford is now the group's local liaison, leading visitors from around the world up Mt. Washington. Interest in the project is generated in part by its high-profile backers, including Amazon Chief Executive Jeff Bezos, who recently vowed to pour more than \$40 million into the venture.

That's not what sold Tilford on the Long Now message, however. It was the water war.

For years, the Las Vegas area led the country in population growth. To keep building stucco homes and strip malls, water officials said, it would need more water than the drought-stricken Colorado River, its main source, could provide.

So they pushed forward with a plan to siphon water from rural basins, including Spring Valley, via a 300-mile-long pipeline network. Conservationists, ranchers and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which owns land here, testified against the project at a recent hearing. They said it would create dust bowls, a la Owens Valley, Calif., which Los Angeles famously drained.

Las Vegas water officials maintain the project would cause little, if any, environmental damage, and that officials would halt pumping if it did. Spokesman J.C. Davis said opponents "do not account for state and federal environmental safeguards, nor do they acknowledge the Southern Nevada Water Authority's proven record of environmentally responsible practices."

The skirmish exposed the tensions between Las Vegas, famous for paving over the desert, and the so-called cow counties, which subsist on ranching and mining. These days, Tilford is convinced of another key difference.

"Las Vegas suffers from short-term thinking," he said.

Apparently, the clock people agreed. Though their ties to Spring Valley are minimal, the Long Now Foundation joined protesters at the pipeline hearing.

In a statement submitted at the hearing, the group called the pipeline "a short-term strategy that will create long-term harm" by sapping the water table, starving deep-rooted plants, clogging the sky with dust and potentially spoiling Great Basin, the state's only national park.

"We ask that you not make a decision that will be looked upon with scorn by your children; it is our duty to be good ancestors," the foundation said.

The state engineer is expected to rule on the groundwater applications this month. But Tilford and others are girding for a battle they expect to last, well, a very long time.

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