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Vernon

## Irrigation changed Valley

The introduction of irrigation to the Okanagan changed everything

Gwyn Evans/Greater Vernon Museum and Archives - Apr 18, 2021 / 4:00 am



Photo: Greater Vernon Museum and Archives

A Coldstream orchard circa 1910.

*With Earth Day fast approaching, the Vernon Museum has taken the opportunity to research how local human activity has affected, and continues to affect, ecosystems and wildlife in the North Okanagan. Until the end of April, the museum will share a series of articles that explore some of the results of this investigation.*

Picture the Okanagan without its expansive fruit orchards. No juicy peaches and sweet cherries in the summer, and no crisp apples and tart grapes in the autumn.

It is almost painful to imagine.

But this was the reality of life in the Okanagan before the advent of irrigation.

At the turn of the 20th century, the Valley was too hot and dry to support much agriculture, and the manager of the Coldstream Ranch, W.C. Ricardo, proposed investigating Aberdeen Lake on the highlands to the southeast of Vernon as a potential water source to irrigate thirsty crops.

Water flowing out of the lake via Jones (now Duteau) creek, he argued, could be diverted south by canal to supply orchard and fields in White Valley (now Lavington) and the Coldstream Ranch.

This water even had the potential to be directed north across the ranch to irrigate the BX and beyond.

The White Valley Irrigation and Power Company began this momentous task in 1906 with the construction of the Grey Canal.

The introduction of water via the Grey Canal changed the industry of the Valley from ranching and the cultivation of cereals to the production of fruits like apples, pears and cherries. The advent of orchards across the Okanagan helped to greatly stimulate the economy, but these plants also came with higher water demands.

The climate of the Valley hasn't changed. We still live in a dry belt that, particularly during the summer, receives little water. And we certainly can't go back to the way things were before the advent of the fruit industry. Our orchards are as much a part of our identity in the Okanagan as our emerald lakes and delicious wine.

But each of us can ensure water is not being wasted and instead reserved for vital tasks. The average Okanagan citizen uses 675 litres of water each day. This is more than twice as much water as the average Canadian.

To reduce water usage, citizens of the Okanagan can try xeriscaping, a style of gardening that utilizes plants with low water needs that thrive naturally in the Valley's dry environment. Some great tips about how to xeriscape in the Okanagan can be found by [clicking here](#).

It is also important to ensure that one's water consumption is as low as possible, particularly during drought periods. Watering plants in the evening or early morning can help to reduce evaporation. A list of current water restrictions can be found [online](#).

Check out [Okanagan WaterWise](#) for more tips.

Gwyn Evans is community engagement co-ordinator with the [Greater Vernon Museum and Archives](#).