The Colorado River Delta is arguably the most important borderland on the continent. To put it succinctly, Imperial and Mexicali are entitled to a third of the annual flow of the Colorado River. What other borderland in North America controls a remotely comparable share of such a transcendentally vital unit of power?

Any historical understanding of this power, as well as of the Colorado River in general, requires a conception of the river as both a literal and figurative border. The river is a transnational river not simply because it flows across the international boundary or because it forms an actual border for some 30 miles. Rather, United States-Mexico relations, including both nations’ attempts to integrate their borderlands, ultimately effected a continental wide dispersal of fresh water resources, impacting development throughout the Colorado’s entire 1,450 mile-length.

Residents of Yuma know that steamships regularly plied the river delta, but many historians still downplay this short and ill-fated period. The Hoover Dam visitors’ center proudly proclaims the steamship era as an utter “failure” (making its damming inevitable), but, in actuality, the river’s navigation was essential for demarking and regulating the borderlands. The supplies and soldiers carried in by steamships were absolutely vital to the maintenance of Fort Yuma and therefore to the “pacification” of Native Americans, and to the orderly migration of miners, settlers, topographers and explorers, including that of Oliver Woznecraft, “the father of the Imperial Valley.” Failure or not, the river’s “navigable status” was officially designated by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo of 1848 (after the US-Mexico War), which placed the river under international jurisdiction.

Imperial Valley and Mexicali priority rights to the Colorado were institutionalized by the Colorado River’s first comprehensive reclamation project, which required both Mexican and American land grants, concessions from both nations, and a very “flexible” obeisance to two different legal systems.

The success of the California Development Company, which founded the Imperial Valley,
hinged on the company’s ability not only to acquire 100,000 acres of Mexican land, but also to persuade the Mexican government a right-of-way through Mexican sovereignty. Large billowing sand dunes made it economically prohibitive to convey water directly from the river to the Valley. The CDC had to build a canal system that had to first loop through Mexico. For the precious right of way, Mexico exacted the rights to one half of all the water diverted, establishing privileges that Mexico would invoke for the next 40 years, up until 1944, when the two nations at last arbitrated a formal treaty apportioning the Colorado.

The Mexican territory had all along been part of the CDC’s grand development scheme. The company laid out the townsite of Mexicali, promoted it as an “empire in embryo,” and helped facilitate its titular control by Southern California’s most renowned real estate developers, including Los Angeles Times publisher Harry Chandler.

By definition, a frontier zone operates without the imposition of state control. The unintentional creation of the Salton Sea was clearly the product of such operations. When the U.S. federal government began asserting control over the Colorado River, the CDC moved its diversion point south of the boundary, out of the U.S. political orbit. Months later, the rickety canal system, built on the cheap, gave way, sending the river plunging into the Imperial Valley for 2 ½ years. President Theodore Roosevelt would later present the debacle as an ominous example of arid land settlement sans government supervision.

The CDC went bankrupt. Long-term profits promoted the Pacific Railroad to step up and step away, placing the Valley’s irrigation systems under public ownership. The Imperial Irrigation District was subsequently created in 1911 with board members who were now ready to work with the U.S. government to take unilateral control of the Colorado’s headwaters. Anyone doubting the impact of U.S.-Mexican relations on the Colorado needn’t look further than the Phil Swing-Hiram Johnson Boulder Canyon Act of 1928. The authorization of the All-American Canal might not have received the same fanfare as the technological marvel that would become Hoover Dam, but both were authorized in the same legislation. More significantly, as Valley boosters boasted, the canal was “the tail that wagged the dog.” Such a canal made sense only if a high dam (the future Hoover) was put in place to prevent any more floods like the ones that created Salton Sea.

The All-American Canal staves the river at the border and directs most of it northside. It is the lifeline of the Imperial Valley. Sometimes, it serves as a national moat, a mortal threat to would-be border crossers. In advocating for its construction in the 1910s and 1920s, Valley residents and federal officials alike conjured a zero-hour state of emergency at the border. Not only did they claim Mexico was too unstable to responsibly share a vital irrigation system, they fretted about the large presence of Japanese and Chinese immigrants who leased land on the Mexican side of the delta.

They also feared that millions of immaculate orchards south of the border would ruin U.S. growers, deplete the watersheds and destabilize the hemisphere. The reality was that every acre-foot of water utilized in Mexico, even if those profits went to Asians or their American millionaire landlords, was another acre-foot of water that Mexico could claim in an impending treaty.

“These Mexican lands menace us like a giant sponge,” groused Phil Swing, when he was the Imperial Valley’s Congressional representative and former IID attorney. Clearly, a stable, prosperous Mexico was much more worrisome than an unstable, impoverished Mexico.

In the 1930s, Mexico President Lázaro Cárdenas understood the need to push the development of Mexicali to extreme levels. Mexicali still commemorates Jan. 27, 1937, El Asalto de las Tierras, when hundreds of campesinos stormed the holdings of American land speculators and ejected their Chinese and Japanese tenants. Cárdenas seized this opportunity by formally expropriating Mexicali’s foreign-owned land, making them available for small farmers and communally held ejidos. He then used radio and newspapers across Mexico to encourage mainlanders to come to Baja California and take advantage of “free” government land.

Mexican state intervention, just like U.S. intervention, was informed by the international scramble for Colorado River water. As it happened, the rapid development of Mexicali paid off. The 1944 Mexican-American Water Treaty awarded Mexico 1.5 million acre-feet of the river’s flows, more than 10 times what was allotted to the state of Nevada. Mexico should not feel grateful for this outcome. Like Imperial Valley’s share, it was based on the law of prior appropriation (“first in time, first in right”). Nevertheless, Mexico’s apportionment was significant, considering the powerful opposing interests in Arizona and California.

As water conflicts in the American West continue to mount, people will inevitably ask how two tiny desert communities win priority over the melting snow of the Rocky Mountains? The answer can best be surmised by the artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña: “the border is the juncture, not the edge.”
Understanding
Grows Alongside Crops at DREC

Mariana Gonzalez Castro is a senior at SDSU Imperial Valley who will graduate in May with a degree in Mathematics and a minor in Public Administration. A graduate of Brawley Union High School, she is attending San Diego State University Imperial Valley through the IVUP joint enrollment program with Imperial Valley College.

She said doing an internship at the University of California Desert Research and Extension Center really changed her career aspirations. "I initially wanted to teach college-level mathematics," she wrote, "After this internship, I want to pursue a career in agriculture, preferably with USDA."

When I began this internship with the University of California Desert Research and Extension Center (UC DREC) and the Farm Smart program, my only experience was working mainly with college students. I wanted to gain more experience working with K-12 students and creating lesson plans for K-12 schools.

When I was notified that the 4-H program’s annual Sustainable You summer camp wanted to collaborate with Farm Smart, I immediately offered to help and work with the 4-H program and its youth. I worked closely with faculty from the 4-H program,
impressed by the youth counselors’ leadership and initiative in teaching the campers about sustainability. The counselors were quick to react and adapt to any schedule changes during the camp day and were actively interacting with the campers every day. These counselors recognized the fact that the campers view them as role models and thus mindfully lived up to that expectation. There was a bond that strengthened not only between counselors and campers but amongst the campers themselves. There were campers that attended the camp in previous years. These campers welcomed new campers and helped each other understand the content and perform the activities. The 4-H program emphasizes its learning method of youth teaching youth. This was truly shown during the camp week and I am glad to have been a part of this event.

The camp was divided into five topics, one topic per day. The topics were water, food, land, energy and air. Each day highlighted the basic concept as well as major environmental issues, shown through group activities and active discussions. With so much preparation done before camp officially began, I enjoyed watching the youth counselors conduct the lessons and implement the activities.

There was one topic that I enjoyed observing the most: food. On food day, the campers took a wagon ride around UC DREC’s research fields, making various stops along the way. On one stop, the campers participated in irrigating a piece of land using siphon hoses and learned how important water is when growing our food.

The campers then visited the cattle feedlot and sunflower patch, where counselors and campers discussed cattle and sunflowers as a food source. After the tour, campers were then welcomed to pick cherry tomatoes from Farm Smart’s local garden. Once the campers returned to the classroom, the counselors and campers discussed how to make healthy food choices using MyPlate and then applied the MyPlate concept through a healthy snack.

After the snack break, campers formed into groups and played a Jeopardy game, testing their knowledge of what they learned that day. The campers enjoyed the friendly competition and I was delighted to see that all campers knew the answers to every single question. The best part of camp was the fact that every day of the camp’s week was like what I just described. Every camper was fully engaged in the discussions and activities. There was so much content for five days and it was clear that active learning took place throughout the camp’s events.

Even with the camp finished, I remained impressed by the youth counselors’ leadership.
By Susan Giller

Few would deny that Bret Kofford is a character, least of all the cast of characters that crowd the stories he’s eager to share whenever there’s a chance. And there are many.

His stories flow as he engages with the students who enter his classroom at San Diego State University Imperial Valley, where he is a full-time English instructor. They liberally pepper the weekly column he writes in the Imperial Valley Press, often making readers chuckle or cringe.

Recently, his penchant for sharing his stories has drawn even wider notice. A full-length movie, “Christmas in July” for which Kofford wrote the original screenplay, was featured in September at the 16th annual Knoxville Film Festival in Tennessee. The film’s presentation was sponsored by Carson-Newman University.

And a short film he co-wrote, titled “OK! Silexatana,” recently won awards for Best Debut Filmmaker and Outstanding Achievement as Best Short Film and is a finalist for Best Women’s Film at the Calcutta Cult Film Festival. The seven-minute film follows the funny misadventures of a naive tech nerd talking with her electronics assistants about a company meeting location. The film explores the question of whether modern technology and e-assistants are taking over our lives.

Witty, engaging and always eager to talk, Kofford concedes, “I think I’ve always been a storyteller. I grew up surrounded by stories. My dad was a storyteller, too.”

He is convinced his penchant for storytelling helps reach his students. “My students like me to tell stories. I think that the key to being a
good teacher is if you can engage students with practical life stories to make it (the subject) relevant.”  

He may have a point. He has won the most outstanding full-time faculty member award by a vote of the student body every year for at least a decade.

Yet it is when he’s quiet that his muse turns to writing screenplays. The alchemy takes place in those hours he spends holed up in his home office with little but his ideas, a well-used computer and a couple of snoozing dogs.

“Since I was a little kid, I loved going to the theater,” he said. “I remember being so wrapped up in the experience that nothing else mattered. I want to create that experience for others.”

Typical Kofford, he has a story about that. As a child, he and his older brothers went to see “Old Yeller.”

“I loved it. I got so caught up in the movie, I bawled,” he said. “My brothers were so embarrassed they actually stuffed me under the seats.”

He cut his screenplay writing chops in the mid-1980s when he and his brother wrote an episode of “Sledge Hammer!” It is a satirical police sitcom series that ran for two seasons and has become something of a cult classic.

Kofford has been writing screenplays regularly for about 15 years and has had a couple of other movies, including “12 Dogs of Christmas” and some TV episodes produced.

During that time, he’s also developed a lot of valuable industry connections who have helped his career. He’s honed his laser-sharp memory for the details needed to breathe life into his characters.

And he has used his other superpower talent, his insatiable curiosity. “I’m a snoopy,” he said. “I’m always listening to how people talk around me. I don’t care what they’re talking about, I’m just curious,” he said.

And he continued to write, often many projects simultaneously.

“Writing is a craft that you have to practice,” he said. And writing screenplays takes a special touch.

“In screenwriting, you tell the story through what people say and what they don’t say,” he added. “That is how you make characters real.”

For Kofford, “Christmas in July” is special and personal. Despite its Hallmark-ish title, the movie is not a formula-style love story. It is a script that delves into painful themes, and matters of faith, that families endure for love.

The movie follows the story of Daniel, a former musical sensation who has lost his inspiration and is drifting through life. With his irascible, but cherished, grandmother in a nursing home declining from the ravages of Alzheimer’s disease and a heart problem, Daniel decides to create one last happy Christmas for her. Working through challenges and comedic situations to reach his goal, Daniel comes to more profound realizations and finds his way in life again.

Kofford said many things inspired him to write the script. He recalled watching as his beloved grandmother died of what was then called senility and later being the caretaker for his mother in her final stages of life. He was touched by a song called “Christmas in July” by Sufjan Stevens.

As the ideas for the story percolated, he retreated to his office to start writing.

There, he said, “I am totally enveloped in that world. When my wife comes in, and I don’t respond, she knows I am not of this world anymore.”

He said he usually writes during semester breaks from about 10 in the morning till about 3 p.m. “Creative writing is very draining, it pulls a lot out of you.”

Once the idea forms, he said the story often tumbles out. “I write quickly, but I edit slowly. Speed seems to help when writing dialogue.”

Yet there was nothing fast about the script’s progress from the time it was completed about seven years ago to production. Kofford’s tale of woe included one producer who took an option on the screenplay and dropped, another who wanted it and backed out just as the deal was about to be signed. The screenplay was then picked up by Myles Matsuno, who produced and directed the project.

For Kofford seeing his script come to life before a live audience makes all the hard work and production uncertainties fade away.

He said attending the premiere of “Christmas in July” at the Knoxville Film Festival was “one of the best experiences in my life. The audience got it. When I wanted them to laugh, they laughed.”

One Facebook reviewer wrote after seeing the movie’s premiere of the film festival, “Emotionally engaging, well-scripted with an excellent cast and beautiful cinematography. I loved it!”

Another wrote, “Great storyline to which many of us can relate. Each character played their part so well. I hope the movie does well so my friends and family can see it soon.”

Just when the movie will be in theaters or on streaming services is not clear. The producers are shopping for a distribution deal that is right for “Christmas in July.”

In the meantime, much to his dogs’ content, Kofford is back at work writing scripts for three or four projects.

He takes in stride the fact that getting a screenplay produced is a very long and collaborative process.

“It teaches me to be patient,” he said. “I’m not the most patient person in the world, but I’ve gotten better.”

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