In a 1952 editorial, *Borrego Sun* editors framed the town’s commitment to agriculture as vital to Southern California’s future. “In the San Fernando Valley, where a few years ago farms supplied hay, alfalfa, and other feed for dairy stock, the scene is one of constant building and growth. Where the crops of the built-over farmland come from? The answer is before us. It comes from the newly developed desert land in Borrego, Imperial, and Coachella valleys.” *Life* magazine also joined the choir boosting these desert regions as the agricultural solution the nation had been waiting for.

Borrego Springs emerged in the late 1940s alongside Palm Springs as a desert playground for a newly mobile and affluent postwar American middle class. While Borrego Springs shared some of the flash and glamour of its more famous desert cousin, the development of the smaller desert town manifested the careful planning and slow growth characteristic of an intentional community. Still, the name Borrego Springs was itself a calculated move, banking on its association with the vibrant Palm Springs development and the visions of aquatic plenty “springs” might conjure. As developer and realtor Robert Ransom put it, “the jazz note will be missing at Borrego Springs. We plan to develop a city which will preserve the beauty and peace of the desert.”

Borrego’s founders extolled the virtues of being surrounded on all sides by the largest state park in the nation, protecting it what was already perceived in the 1950s as the “threatening advance of suburbia.”

At its initial founding the town’s self-styled, modern frontiersman envisioned their ecological conquest of the Borrego Valley as a final and absolute mastery of what appeared to the unimaginative American as a veritable wasteland.

This “new desert” at Borrego Springs reflects the powerful imaginative forces at work across booming postwar California. Unlimited access to an unseen water reservoir of an untold scale served as the premise upon which Borrego’s modern experiment hedged its bets. The agriculturalists at Borrego sought to defy the age-old adage “knee high by the fourth of July,” boasting bumper crops of winter corn along side the nation’s earliest grapes. Likewise, the venture capitalists interested in cultivating a landscape of leisure would harness the indiscernible quantities of water to produce golf courses, lawns, and even lakes.

Beyond the venture capitalists and agricultural moguls who invested their resources into the valley it was truly the labors of people working in the fields and in resorts and restaurants of Borrego Springs that assured the community’s survival. Working class families were drawn to the valley by the promise of steady work. As a long time resident put it, “ignorance brought us here and poverty kept us here.” The labor of the year round residents served the interests of the part time leisure seeker, resulting in both racial and class stratification. Borrego’s working class teenagers entered the labor force during high school, working in DiGiorgio’s grape fields or in the kitchens and dining rooms of the town’s resorts. Borrego Springs positioned itself as a “community planned for those who look beyond tomorrow.”

While the future oriented desert town in some ways worked to compete with Palm Springs, Borrego Springs worked equally hard to differentiate itself from the flashy town to the north. An editorial published in, The Borrego Sun; suggested that “Borrego has been building for the future for years, but 1966 will undoubtedly go down as the year we turned the corner to our future as a community that is destined in truth to be not only the desert playground of San Diego County.” This marks a significant shift in the town’s self image. After two decades of growth, Borrego Springs began to see itself as much more than a seasonal resort community.

Today, the Borrego Springs community is beginning to consider how to shift the local economy and land use away from agriculture. Some former farmland lies fallow and has sparked the imagination of contemporary Borregans. A group of naturalists see these dormant lands as a remarkable opportunity to reintroduce native wildflowers in an effort to responsibly re-green the valley floor and capitalize the area’s natural beauty as a potential tourist attraction and enact ecological restoration. How might we compare the scope and purpose of this current attitude about the desert transformation to the imaginative forces that “opened” the desert to development?

The voices of those whose labors afforded the “sheltered” life and agricultural plenty that fueled the local economy as well as facilitating the production of these fantastic visions of the “just add water” good life are crucial. As their experiences and knowledge complicate romantic histories and foretell the environmental and social challenges that faced and continue to face the American southwest.