Inside the Owens Valley: An Interview with Tani Tatum

Tani Tatum talks about her experience as a rancher and how the challenges of maintaining land in the Owens Valley have changed since her family first established the Dixon Ranch in Bishop, California, in 1865. Tani also tells the story of the Pittsburgh Plate Glass (PPG) factory (1928–68), built on the edge of the Owens Valley dry lakebed. Left abandoned after flooding, PPG was bought by heart surgeon Dr. McCabe and eventually inherited by Tani. Since 2008, her collaborative friendship with Lauren Bon and Metabolic Studio has reactivated PPG.

Charlotte Cotton
It’s a pleasure for us to be here with you, Tani. Can you start by telling us about where we are?

Tani Tatum
You're at the Dixon Ranch in Bishop, California, which was probably established in 1865. One side of my family — the Schobers — came from Austria in the early 1800s, landing in Wisconsin as the gold rush hit. It was the same old story: they brought their wagons through Death Valley to this place in the 1860s. They started a 150-acre dairy farm over by where the golf course is now; there is even a Schober Lane named after my family. My great-grandfather Rudolf Schober was a twenty-mule-team teamster and worked out of Death Valley at the turn of the century. He also hauled freight from the Owens Valley to Los Angeles with the twenty-mule team. We were one of the first settler families in the Bishop Creek area and named several of the lakes up there. They built a lodge in about 1910, called Bishop Creek Lodge, that still stands. In 1913, when the LA Aqueduct was being constructed, my family, along with many others, sold their homesteads to Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

The other side of my family were the Tatums — that was my grandfather Slim and his family, who came out to Imperial Valley about 1912, when he was just a boy. When he was about sixteen, he got sick of being in the desert and decided to move to Oregon. He ran out of money on his way and became a cowboy in the Owens Valley, then got a job as a mule packer up in Mammoth, where he met my grandmother in 1921. They acquired a frontier pack station in June Lake, California, and got in the packing business and ran a little dairy. They packed all through the 1930s and sold the pack station right after the war, in 1945. My grandfather wanted to go back into the cattle and ranching business. Gradually, when the Los Angeles city leases for small ranches that couldn’t sustain themselves came up for sale, he began to put together what is now the twenty-thousand-acre cattle ranch that we have today.

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Could you describe what a lease means? What does it mean to be a rancher who leases from the city areas?
That’s an open question. There are negatives and there are positives. The big
negatives are the limited amount of water and how it is metered out. There are
the droughts and then there are the floods. You don’t have private property
rights when you lease; we get a lot of gates left open, cattle hit on the
highway, that kind of thing, because it's like an open range. The benefits are
that this kind of administration keeps the valley much the same as it was.
There is not a lot of housing here. Those of us in the ranching industry don't
care if this place grows very much, you know. It has kept the valley
relatively pristine and protected.

Could you describe the ecosystem of the twenty thousand acres that you ranch?

Most of the land is not irrigated. About five thousand acres are irrigated and
the rest is desert. So you get what you get. You get the rain that you get.
This spring, the flowers are blooming, the weeds are high, the cattle are out
in the brush, and it's all wonderful. But then there are those dry springs
when you can only be on the irrigated pasture. Come May 1, we have to be off
one of our biggest areas because of a rare bird that migrates here. The river
is fenced off and we have to be on the other side of the fence.

The ranchers are the day-to-day custodians of this place. Can you say
something about that responsibility?

Well, I think you can forget that it's not your property. I’ve been here all
my life and of course you tend to the things that need fixing. I think most
people take care of it like it's their own land. The Los Angeles agencies help
you to some degree with irrigation or fencing projects, but it's up to you to
maintain it, to take care of things and run your cattle.

You inherited the Pittsburgh Plate Glass [PPG] factories and silos on the edge
of the Owens Valley dry lakebed. Could you tell me more about this place?

I inherited the PPG properties from Dr. McCabe indirectly, through his
longtime personal assistant. I met them when I was about nineteen and they
played very important roles in my life. Dr. McCabe had bought one hundred
acres of private land, with a natural spring, two wells, and the factories in
the mid-1980s. He was an amazing man driven by his faith, compassion, and his
work ethic. He was a pediatric surgeon and invented a pediatric heart pump in
the workshop he established at PPG. I inherited the property and a medical
business for the children's heart pump, both of which I have tried to develop
and which I guess brings us to Lauren Bon and the Metabolic Studio.
It does! Tell me when you met Lauren.

In 2008. I got a call from Rochelle at Metabolic Studio asking if I would allow them to make a film on the PPG site. I had let a couple of movie and fashion shoots happen there, which helped me pay taxes. So I thought, "Well, here's another movie deal." The first time that I met Lauren and the gang was on the site to talk about filming for Silver and Water [AGH20]. Lauren was trying to explain to me Cerro Gordo Mine, the silver, and the water from the Owens Valley that moves down to LA and helped build the city. It sounded interesting, but I'm thinking, "Okay, what am I gonna get paid for this?" And Lauren said, "We can't pay you anything but we can help clean things up. We are a nonprofit. We're good folk." And I instantly read them to be reliable people.

Since 2008, you’ve given over the PPG site to Lauren and Metabolic Studio. The silos are central to the studio’s daily rhythm. I’m thinking particularly of the Aeolian harp silo, whose sounds are broadcast with less than a minute’s delay down in studio on N Spring St in Los Angeles — a constant connection between the lakebed and the source of the LA River. It must take a very special relationship between you to make this happen.

I think it's a sisterhood. I call her my soul sister. There are people that come along in your life — like Dr. McCabe and Lauren — who are just very special. They are big people. Lauren has helped me and I've helped her, you know. And it's a friendship — a special one that I treasure.

What do you think Lauren brings to the Owens Valley?

You know, Lauren is ever changing. Hell, I can't answer this one for Lauren because you never know what Lauren will say. But I think it matters to her a lot that she doesn't feel like an outsider — that she feels more like a local and she treads lightly in that way. Lauren didn’t come here to take over. She came to enhance and make contributions to this community. I think it takes years to establish the level of trust she has gained. Everybody is a little wary around here and I think she now knows that she's one of us. When she puts PVC flute pipes around PPG and wants to make sound on the silos, we don't all get it but we all embrace it. Her 100 Mules Walking the LA Aqueduct brought attention to the valley that was a blessing to everybody up here.

How would you describe your relationship with the lakebed?
I remember when I was a kid holding my nose as I went by the lakebed because it can smell like sulfur. I called it "Stinky Lake." Did I look over the lakebed to the factory as a kid and think, "Oh, I'm gonna own that one day"? No way. You just never know what God has in store for you. Don't guess because you'll waste your time. I'm on the edge of the lakebed. Its future is in so many people’s hands, but I think that I am a partner in its future. If you tried to have me make a prediction about the lake or what's going to happen, or ask me to define my relationship with it, I’d have to say that it is still unfolding.