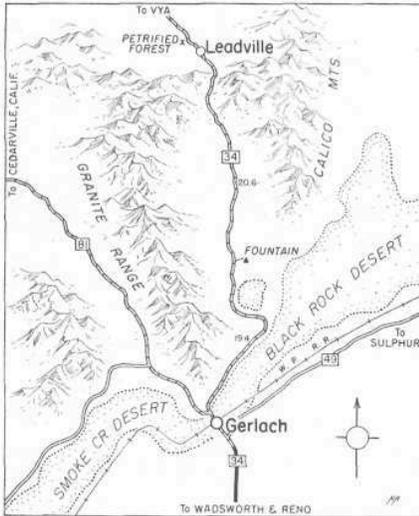


The 40 Wilderness Miles North of Gerlach, Nevada

By PEGGY TREGO
Desert Magazine's Nevada Travel Correspondent



OUT WHERE the mirage begins and the pavement ends is the 40-mile Gerlach-to-Leadville Road. If you can shuck the trappings of ultra-civilized travel, do without noise, hamburger stands and signboards, you'll find this trip a dandy.

Maps won't tell you much about this country, except that Gerlach is 111 miles northerly of Reno, and can be reached by pavement on Nevada's State Route 34 or by a longer unpaved road that winds past Pyramid Lake's west-side and through the Smoke Creek Desert. No map can tell you about the splendid hills, strange mountains, long valleys and wild canyons, streams and swamps north of Gerlach. Most maps don't even show Leadville—a highly photogenic "ghost town"—nor the petrified forest of "dawn redwoods" just beyond there. Maps also don't designate one of the strangest fountains ever evolved from a combination of natural force and human error,

particularly strange in that it is a hop-skip from the great expanse of the Black Rock Desert.

This is old country in the known account of time, first explored by Fremont in 1844 and still much the way he and his tired men saw it. Gerlach is its one town, and Gerlach is very good to those visitors who don't carp for luxuries.

The fast route to Gerlach (Route 34) takes off from U.S. 40, 33 miles northeast of Reno at Wadsworth. It leads past the south-end of Pyramid Lake, through the Paiute community of Nixon, along the long dry Winnemucca Lake shores with their acres of ancient terracing left by long-gone inland seas. Route 34 skirts the industrial town of Empire, where U.S. Gypsum's immense white-powdered mill looms among neat homes and tree-shaded streets, but Empire is there for business and not to cater to passers-by. Gerlach, another six miles up the road, is a fraction of Empire's size but its eight decades of being a frontier village permit it to look on Empire as an industrial suburb.

I prefer the Smoke Creek route, though it is really worth a trip in itself. A few ranches are along here; Garaventa's, with the Garaventa plane usually parked alongside the road, is one of the better known. In this remote country, the family plane is often as important as the family pickup, and the airplanes are uncluttered except by an occasional brown eagle. A few old mines, several side roads, shallow caves that may yield arrowheads or better—all of these make the Smoke Creek Road a happily slow trip.

But, however you get to Gerlach, be prepared to be self-sufficient henceforth. No filling stations, stores, hotels or motels from here on. The necessities are available in Gerlach, dotted along its one street. There is one small motel—Baum's—and one elderly one-story hotel which is usually full by evening with ranchers and "rails"



THE GERLACH-LEADVILLE "FOUNTAIN"

from the nearby Western Pacific mainline. One restaurant, the Stanley Cafe, purveys good plain food. A garage and filling station, several bars, a movie theater and an excellent general store run by Justice of the Peace Charles Carter complete the facilities. There is no telephone line. Emergencies must rely on the lone radio-phone, or on the Western Pacific's private wire to its own stations.

Most Gerlachers are glad to tell you what you need to know about the country hereabouts, and it's particularly wise to ask if you intend to leave the main Gerlach-Leadville stretch of road. Judge Carter has been here 31 years, and what he can't supply in the way of general information, gracious Postmistress Helen Thrasher can, and the postoffice is in the same building as the store. A couple of other obliging people with a great deal of necessary local know-how are Deputy Sheriff Cisco Aschenbrenner and Constable Shorty Taylor, who are the only law in these parts. Cisco and Shorty earn their wages; Gerlach can be rough and tough on a Saturday pay night.

Gerlach also bounces around in other ways. Every passing train jiggles it like a bowl of tapioca, and the omnipresent mirage frequently greets arriving travelers with the fine spectacle of Gerlach rising gently into the air and floating around the Black Rock's edge.

A half-mile westerly of town are Gerlach's own hot springs at which some experts (Prof. V. P. Gianella of Reno, for one) believe Fremont himself probably camped. The hot springs are still available to anyone, and they come in three temperatures—steam-hot, very warm and cool. The latter two are deep roundish outdoor pools filled with translucent turquoise water. The "steam bath" is in a small hut made of railroad ties, and people with aches and pains say it does wonders for them. No charge, no restrictions, no life-guards—so keep an eye on the kids if they take a dip.

The road to Leadville (actually Route 34 extended) leads almost due north past the hot springs, at the edge of alluvial fans spread out to form rugged Granite Mountain's skirts. A lot of us who are familiar with the country quit the road about three miles from Gerlach and whiz along on the Black Rock Desert's marvelous flatness, enjoying our own wheel-tracks in the biscuit-colored surface, then cut back to the road several miles later. It's a good idea to know what you are doing when you try this cutoff — better check at Gerlach to make sure a recent rain hasn't turned this fast track into a quagmire.

Where the Leadville Road bends away from the Desert, it enters a broad valley dotted with ranches, most of which are holdings of the extensive Holland Land & Livestock Co. The fantastic fountain is





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also on Holland property, but visitors are permitted so long as they close gates behind them and do not scatter trash.

By our speedometer, the fountain's unmarked entry road is 19.4 miles from Gerlach. It takes off to the right of the main road, and you can see from there the fountain's conical form a mile easterly. You can drive to within 30 yards of the fountain, but watch out for the hot-water ditch at road's end. Many prefer to park to one side of the drift-gate across the road and walk the last .4 mile along the causeway. Warm pools and swamps on either side support a surprising number of ducks, curlews and other shorebirds, perfectly at home here in the desert.

There is no name for the fountain, although I've heard it called the Settler's Well (erroneously, it seems.) It all began in the World War I days when the Gerlach Land Co. drilled here for water. They got water all right—a boiling-hot heavily-mineralized flow that has continued to spout ever since, building up its odd shape bit by bit. Judge Carter remembers a six-foot-high cone in 1929; it is closer to 15 feet today and the constant jet of hot water from its tip assures further growth. What that little jet has created is quite beautiful—a rounded fluted cone rising from a flat base, its sides folded and draped to resemble a group of hooded figures. Its colors are rich umbers and oranges, greens shading from emerald to chartreuse, dashes of red and ochre. Rising from the tall grasses of the flat with the muted pastels of the Calico Range in the distance, the fountain is a spectacular phenomenon.

Beyond the fountain turnoff, the Leadville Road lopes along easily for some miles, then begins to climb. All along here are pleasant places to picnic or camp, especially if the streams have stayed alive (they sometimes wilt down to puddles in a dry year). The terrain is rocky, rugged and rolling, with eye-pulling vistas of far hills and canyons. There are side-roads—but here again, know what you're doing when you explore them. Some lead into very rough country.

Some of the rougher parts of that country still carry the marks of emigrant trails. One of these routes winds through massive High Rock Canyon, and in one of the Canyon's shallow caves are names and dates of a century ago, scrawled in axle grease. This side-trip requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle and a guide for comfort and safety.

Leadville is 40 miles from Gerlach, and a small sign indicates the better of two roads to the little cluster of abandoned buildings clinging to the steep hillside. A boom mining community several decades ago, Leadville is peacefully vacant now. The rocky portal of its main tunnel just above the buildings is a cool resting place on a hot day, but going farther in is not recommended. There are usually a few animals (rats, for instance) at home in old tunnels, and deep shafts or weak sidewall can mean serious trouble. The little water-course in the canyon bottom is another attractive stopping place; last time there, my husband and I jumped a magnificent buck on its edge.

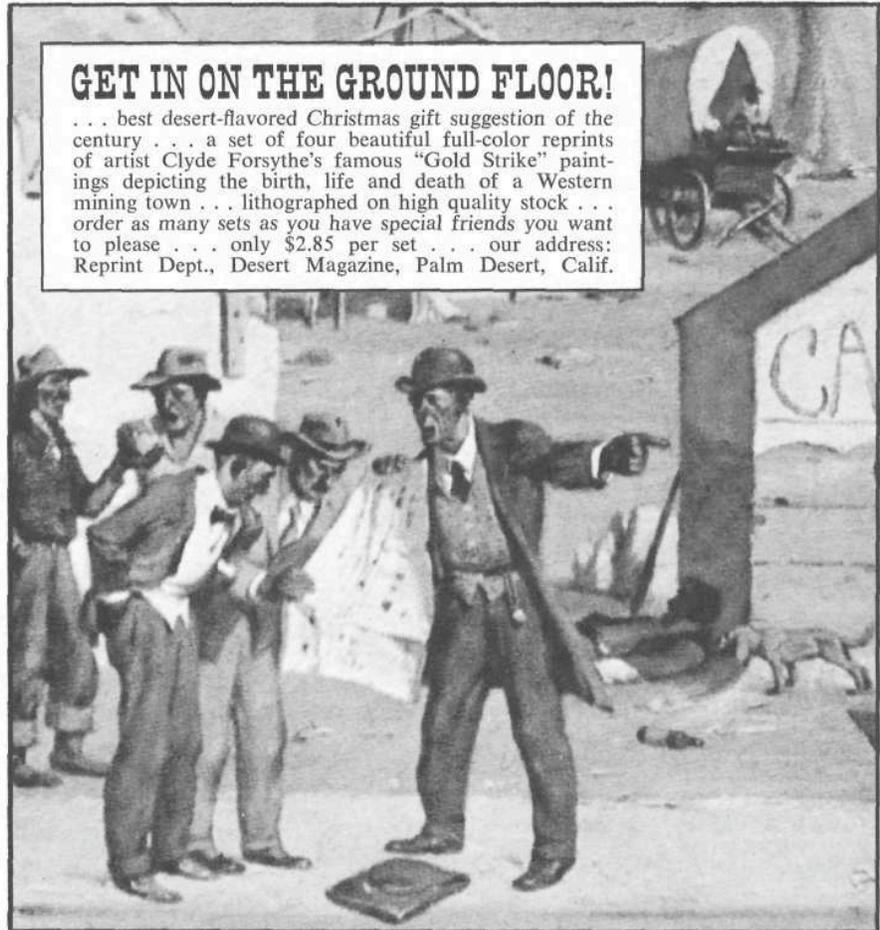
The petrified forest is almost a suburb of Leadville, a couple of miles farther along the main road. The great stumps, some of them larger than 20-feet in diameter, are relics of a forest that pre-dates the Sierra Nevada. They are for looking only, as recent legislation provides heavy penalties for souvenir-gathering. Ugly pits show why this was necessary—unscrupulous commercialism dynamited some of the better stumps to get slabs for polishing.

It's up to you where you go from Leadville. Maybe you'll mosey back to Gerlach and see about the long long road across the Black Rock east to Sulphur, Rabbithole and Lovelock. Maybe you'll push on north another 48 miles to Vya (and Vya is not a town—just a crossroads) where Route 34 meets Nevada Route 8-A. West on 8-A 25 miles brings you to Cedarville, Calif., a charming town with excellent accommodations. My favorite is Ray Golden's Hotel—possibly because when Ray decides to take an evening off he leaves the room keys on the lobby desk with a note: "Pick your

own and pay me in the morning." A topnotch restaurant is next door to the Golden. The nearby Cedar Lodge is another good stopping place.

An easier road (Nevada's Route 81) than the Leadville route leads back to Gerlach from Cedarville; this, too, goes through fine country where the arrowhead hunting and obsidian rock collecting is good.

Lake Mead is the setting for the National Limited Hydroplane Races, November 5-6; and the Gold Cup Races (unlimited hydroplanes), November 11-13. //



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Charles E. Shelton, publisher
Sworn to and subscribed before me this 29th day of September, 1960.

J. Phil Franklin
(My commission expires January 21, 1961.)

Spotted throughout the Great Basin of Nevada are beds of "rock" formations which appear to have been formed the same way that the Great Barrier Reef of Australia was formed . . . as coral at the bottom of the sea.

And well it could have been so, for the entire Great Basin of the western states once formed the ancient bed of the prehistoric Lake Lahontan more years ago than you can count on your fingers, even if you take a hundred thousand years per finger.

ejected into the air which met and adhered to one another in midair and plunked to the surface of the earth in huge blobs.

Such large chunks are found in central Nevada in the Pyramid Lake region about 38 miles northeast of Reno and along U. S. Highway 40, starting about eight miles south of Lovelock and extending about six miles along the desert valley floor. This area is known locally as the Giant Tufa Park and a highway marker indicates the location.

No one was more astonished than long-time Nevada resident Vern Miller to discover that formations he'd always known as "tufa," were not really tufa at all.



Tuff, si!

Tufa, no!

The tuffs, however, which have erroneously been called tufa by many authorities for a great number of years and still today are called so by the majority of Nevadans, came from volcanic action that took place those many years ago when the Great Basin was still a sea. These are being eagerly sought by rock hunters and rock garden enthusiasts today.

The material in these tuffs, according to the latest scientific authority, erupted from the magma zone thousands of feet below the surface as fine ash and pellets. These were carried by the high winds sometimes for many miles before settling to earth. Others fell nearby, close to the eruption.

As they floated into water, such as that contained in Lake Lahontan, they settled to the bottom and mingled with the normal sediment. In addition, ash falling on bare land was later washed into lakes by rains and streams. Ashy clays and sands thus produced were converted into tuffaceous shales and sandstones. The larger pellets formed the blobs that are now called tuffs.

Volcanic ash tends to travel far while pellets or the coarser ejected materials fall near to the source. Because of this, tuff varies a great deal in texture as well as chemical and mineralogical composition. It also varies in appearance from white to a dull brown and in several shapes.

Generally, the material ejected is usually thought of as fine ash or small pellets. Actually, some were much more than pellets. They were chunks

While locally they are referred to as tufas, they actually are tuffs, formed from volcanic action. "Tufa" is a name properly applied to the cellular deposits from mineral springs or waters, either siliceous or calcareous. The latter is called "calc tufa," and is a cellular variety of calcite in which the mineral matter has been deposited from the waters of springs. In the past, mineralogists have included these formations along with tuff. However, this theory is no longer sanctioned.

Prime example of tufa formations are the stalagmites and stalactites found in caves throughout the country, formed by the dripping mineral waters within those caves. There is little to indicate that the Nevada "tufas" were formed by this action, although materially tuffs and tufas are similar.

Small tuffs are found under desert sands, one type resembling toadstools. Resting on the desert floor, they vary in depth from the surface to several feet below. The ones most easily available to hunters of specimens are those easily spotted on the surface, such as a field of toadstool tuffs located near Henderson on Nevada 41.

These make an exotic addition to decorative rock gardens. It is quite an oddity, however, that they are rarely, if ever, located near the beds of giant tuffs which may reach the proportions of a four-story apartment house. The mushroom variety ranges from the size and weight of a marble to five feet in diameter, often weighing 400 pounds.

by

Vern Miller

One of the most sought after areas in the realm of tuff hunting is the Lahontan Valley of central Nevada whose center is the city of Fallon. Located sixty miles east of Reno, the northern portion of the valley contains many of the mushroom type of tuffs. Part of this area is known as the Forty Mile Desert, the Nemesis of pioneers a century ago who crossed it in covered wagons. It is more accessible now, however, being crossed from north to south by black-topped U. S. Highway 95.

This area is reached from Reno by traveling on U. S. Highway 40 to Fernley. The remainder of the distance into Fallon is traveled by U. S. Highway 95 alternate. The entire portion of the valley to the north of Fallon contains the Carson Sink and portions of the Forty Mile Desert. In this desert wasteland, numerous mushroom type tuffs are located.

Other tuffs small enough to be retrieved from the desert floor, while they may vary slightly to those found in central Nevada, are located in almost every one of the desert valleys stretching from Black Rock Desert south to Las Vegas and nearby Henderson.

For those interested in rock formations that lend themselves to exotic camera work, the giant tuffs of Pyramid Lake are readily accessible from Reno. Adjacent to both shores, giant tuffs tower over a hundred feet into the air.

A short drive around the southern end of Pyramid Lake places the tuff hunter in the Indian reservation town of Nixon, one of the headquarters for Nevada's Paiute Indians. Here the driver may turn north on State Route 34 and within ten miles is traveling along the western shore of Winne-

muca Lake, a dry lake bed that is completely surrounded by more giant tuffs.

This dry lake bed reveals yet another form of tuff — sheets of tuffaceous material similar to the thin shale of the desert's sandy areas, only greater in thickness. Often mistaken for tufa formed by mineral water action, this tuff material so closely resembles coral that unless an individual knows differently he would surely identify it as such. Found protruding in small sheets it, too, adds much to rock gardens and table centerpieces.

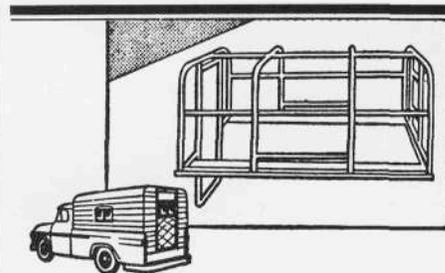
There is no need for rock hunters to chip away at giant tuffs and destroy their beauty in order to obtain a specimen, as smaller counterparts abound in the areas mentioned above.

To uncover and retrieve mushroom tuff specimens, only a sharp pointed shovel is necessary. This implement may be used to dig sand away from the tuff's edges and is strong enough to pry a weighty specimen from its sandy bed. Sometimes a pry bar is useful in locating underground tuffs, as it may be easily poked into deep sand.

Special transportation is unnecessary, as desert roads in most of these regions may be traveled by passenger car if the driver takes care in avoiding soft sand. Those who conduct their search in a 4-wheeler, however, operate at an advantage — especially when one of the larger tuffs is uncovered and the vehicle may be driven to the site.

For a day's outing, tuff hunting is hard to beat. Carry along a good picnic lunch with plenty of water and the whole family will have a "tuff" time! ///

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