

Navy Landgrab in Nevada's Black Rock Country

Why isn't it possible for the Army, Navy and Air Force to so coordinate their training maneuvers that they can use the same gunnery and bombing ranges? Why does each branch of the service have its own private shooting grounds when, if war comes, they will have to operate as a coordinated unit? These are questions being asked in Nevada where the Navy proposes to seize another 2,800,000 acres in the Black Rock country in addition to the huge areas already reserved for aerial gunnery and bombing practice. The Black Rock landgrab will work so great an injustice on so many people that Desert Magazine asked Nell Murbarger to visit the area and report her findings. Here is her story.

By NELL MURBARGER
Photographs by the author
Map by Norton Allen



UNLESS PUBLIC opinion raises its voice in protest before Congress reconvenes in January, the Black Rock country of northwestern Nevada is doomed.

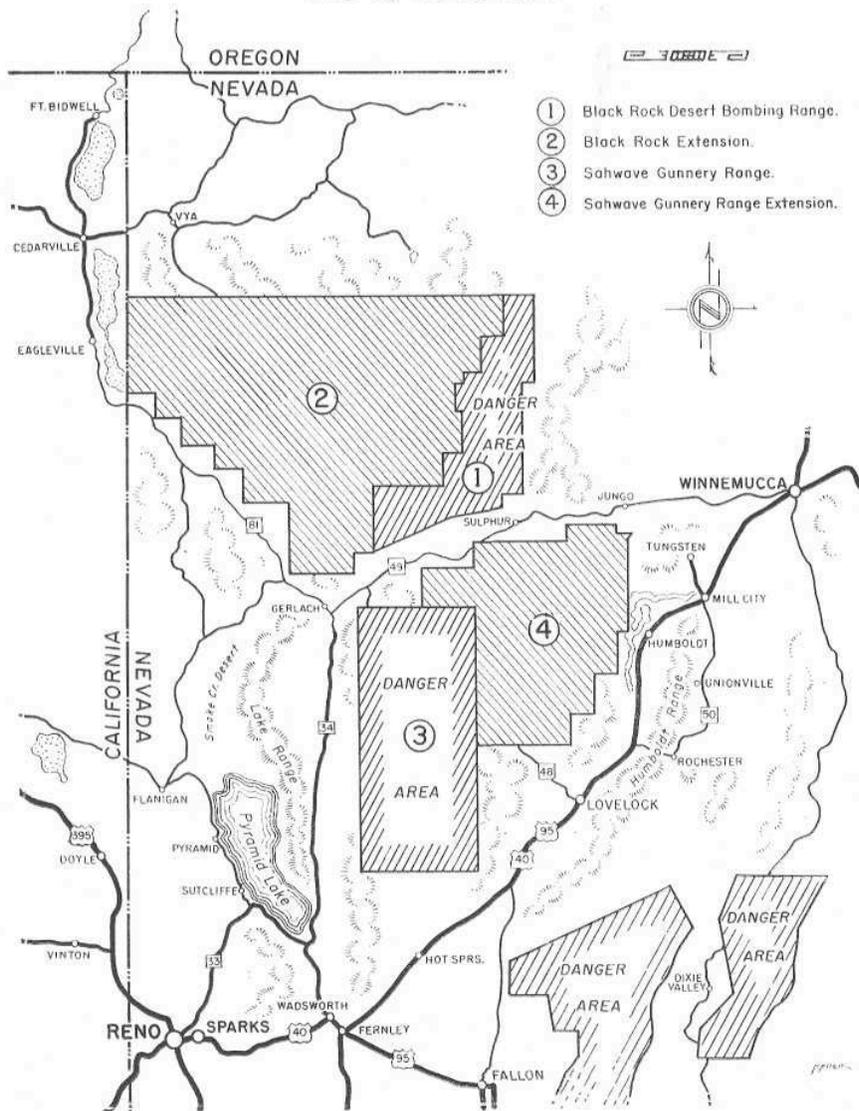
When I heard that the Navy was planning to convert the Black Rock-Sahave Mountains region into a 2,846,786-acre gunnery range, I refused to believe such a thing could be possible. Previous land seizures by the armed forces had not affected me too much, personally—but this time the shoe really pinched, for the Black Rock is a land that lies close to my heart!

My liking for this strange, remote area stems chiefly, I suppose, from the fact that it is still much like the Old West of pioneer times.

It has been cattle country for more than 100 years, and great herds of white-faced Herefords, and thousands of sheep, owned by 50 individual ranchers, still graze its open range. Its canyons and mile-high valleys still abound in antelope and deer, and sage chickens, and even a few wild horses.

Most important of all, the folks who live in the Black Rock still extend the warm hospitality for which the early West was famous. At one time or another I have eaten or slept at nearly every ranch in northwestern Nevada; and until 1949, when the Navy began moving into this region and posting it with Keep Out signs, I don't recall ever having seen a trespass notice in all the 10,000 square miles between Pyramid Lake and the Oregon line. Hunters, campers, prospectors, rock-hounds—any decent person has always been welcome in the Black Rock.

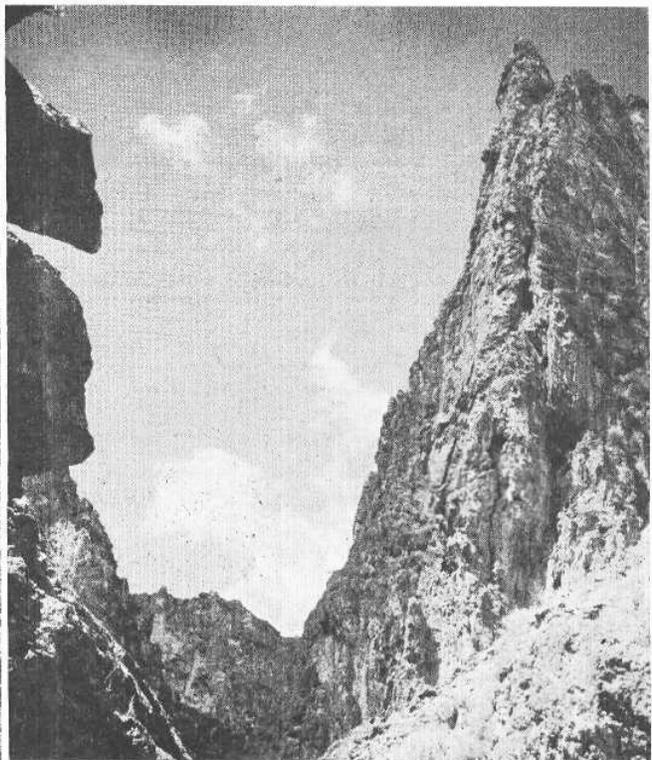
And then to learn that the Navy had filed application for withdrawal of this area for use as a gunnery range from which all civilians would be excluded except at certain prescribed times and under special permit, was not a pleasant prospect for contemplation.



Acreages: (1) Black Rock Desert Bombing range 272,000; (2) Black Rock extension 1,372,160; (3) Sahave Gunnery range 547,906; (4) Sahave extension 654,720. Total 2,846,786 acres.



Quaking aspens of Lost Creek Canyon make this a delightful oasis which is always an invitation to campers.



There are many scenic vistas in the Black Rock Country including spectacular Mahogany Canyon shown above.

Not even in a land as large as the Black Rock-Sahwawe Mountains area may a tract of nearly 3,000,000 acres be wrested from the civilian economy without affecting adversely a large number of persons. How many would be affected, and to what degree, I did not fully realize until after I had talked with E. R. Greenslet, director of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, for Nevada; and with Joe Williams, director of Nevada State Farm Bureau, and secretary of Nevada-California Landowners Association. From Reno, I traveled to Lovelock, where I spent another two informative hours talking with Paul Gardner, secretary of Pershing County chamber of commerce, and publisher of *Lovelock Review-Miner*. Then I discussed the impending land-grab at length with Nevada's senior United States senator, George W. Malone.

From these several sources I learned that there were many straight-thinking persons who regarded the Black Rock encroachment as unnecessary and unjust, and that protests to this effect had been filed by many organizations of widely differing interests.

Included among those who had gone on record against the threatened seizure were the county commissioners of Washoe, Pershing and Humboldt counties; the chambers of commerce of Pershing and Humboldt; Nevada State

Farm Bureau, Nevada-California Landowners Association, Nevada State Mining Council, The Western Mining Council, Nevada Fish and Game Commission, sportsmen's clubs in the three affected counties and California, Governor Charles F. Russell, Nevada State legislature, and both of Nevada's United States senators.

By this time I was convinced that the Navy's impending grab was as unpopular with the average Nevadan as with myself. But I still didn't know the most important thing of all.

What did the people most affected think about it—the ones who were slated to lose their ranches and mines, their homes? There was only one way to find out.

Putting a can of water and some camping gear in my car, I headed for the Black Rock.

One hundred miles northeast of Reno, the oiled portion of State Route 34 trickles to a stop in the gypsum-mining town of Gerlach, population 200. This is the taking-off point for the condemned area. From here to Denio, on the Nevada-Oregon line—176 miles by way of Routes 34 and 8-A—there is not one mile of pavement, one postoffice, or gasoline station; yet this is far from being wasteland. Spread over all this remote area are cattle and sheep ranches ranging in size from 200 to 19,495 acres. One

of these ranches is owned by my friends, Dave and Bernice Iveson, and it was at their home that I made my first stop on this journey of inquiry.

Dave and Bernice have a well-tended ranch of 1000 acres of fenced and deeded land, in addition to their range rights on the public domain. Not one acre of that ranch was handed to them on a silver platter, nor improved with money that came easily. Everything they have done to enhance the value of their property has been accomplished the hard way — with long hours of labor, and honest human sweat.

Included among these improvements has been the clearing, leveling and bringing under irrigation of 220 acres of land from which, each year, they harvest bountiful yields of alfalfa, wheat, barley and rye.

The Ivesons have stout barns and outbuildings, and a comfortable home set in a grove of big cottonwoods. Across one corner of their front yard ripples a small but perpetual stream of water, from which they irrigate flowers and shrubbery, an immense vegetable garden, and an orchard of apricots, apples, pears, peaches, plums, currants, and other fruits suited to this high elevation and northerly latitude. The stream also irrigates their calf pasture, which supports about as many wild deer as it does domestic animals. Almost any morning, winter



The Soldier Meadows ranch home of Mr. and Mrs. Wesley Fick, was built to harmonize with the original buildings erected on the ranch in the 1860s. Poplars shading the house were planted 85 years ago.

or summer, it is possible to see deer grazing less than 100 yards from the front door of their house.

Dave was at the "lower" ranch harvesting hay but Bernice made me welcome. Our talk, for awhile, concerned everyday affairs—the school progress and health of their two boys and two girls, condition of the range, and mildness of the winter past. And then I brought the conversation around to the subject of the landgrab.

"What do you hear about it?" asked Bernice, her face suddenly reflecting worry and strain. "Can they really make us leave here? This is our home—we wouldn't know where to go if we had to leave here. We've just never given any thought to living anywhere but in the Black Rock country . . ."

I knew what she meant. I knew that her grandparents had settled in the Black Rock 80 years ago; that her mother had been born there, and that Bernice, herself, had been born at the south end of the Black Rock. I also knew that Dave's father had settled in this vicinity in 1906, and that Dave, too, had been born here and had lived here all his life.

"We hadn't heard anything about losing our ranch until one day a Reno real estate man and a Navy man drove into our lower ranch in a pickup and sat in the seat for a couple of minutes, glancing around, and then drove out," said Bernice. "Next, they came up here, to our home place, and did the same thing. When they started to leave here, without saying anything, I

intercepted them and asked if they were looking for Dave.

"We're appraising your property," said the Reno man. "The Navy's going to take it." That was all the information he would give. When I asked if he didn't want to talk to Dave and learn about our water rights, and grazing rights, and things of that sort, he said, "No."

"We still don't have any idea what appraisal he put on our ranch, nor what we can expect . . ."

Later that afternoon I talked with Dave Iveson. When I remarked that they had a fine looking ranch, Dave agreed. "It looks all right, now," he said. "But if you don't keep working at it everlastingly, a ranch soon begins to run down. That's what is going to happen here. I don't feel justified in putting any more expense on the place, only to have the Navy take it away from us . . . so I find myself failing to fix the fences, postponing repairs on the house and barns. I intended to clear more land this year and put it in crop; but with this threat hanging over us, I'm completely at sea. I don't know what to do . . ."

From the Iveson ranch I drove up the draw five miles to John Welch's. John is an elderly bachelor, soft-spoken, and scholarly. He lives in a neat, two-bedroom dwelling, and runs about 125 head of stock.

"The Navy hasn't even contacted me," he said. "Of course, I'm only a small operator, but this is my home and my only source of livelihood; so

I feel that their representatives at least should have come to see me . . ."

John is well informed on the subject of Nevada history, and it wasn't long before our conversation drifted around to pioneer times in the Black Rock.

"Men have been fighting to win this land for 100 years," said John Welch. "First, they had to fight bands of renegade Indians who periodically went on rampages, killed settlers and burned their homes. For years, there was the ever-present spectre of drouth—and always there was the problem of inaccessibility. Even as late as the 1920s, many roads in the Black Rock were so bad it was impossible to get even a truck over them, and it was still necessary for us to haul our supplies with freight wagons and 16-mule teams.

"But, eventually, we got a good, graveled, all-weather road through the area. We built dams and drilled wells so we didn't have to worry about dry years. We cleared land so we could raise our own winter feed; and finally we got our land fenced, and got some decent quarters built . . . And now, they say we're going to lose it all.

"What'll become of us old fellows? We're too old to start from scratch somewhere else—where will we go?"

It was a proper question, but not one that I could answer.

On the morning of the second day, I continued on north toward the old mining camp of Leadville.

It seemed to me that in all the years I had known this land, I had never seen it so beautiful. The air was clear and cool, every hill and canyon was as sharply defined as if it were etched with a knife. The sage that blanketed these mile-high valleys was all aglow with bright new growth. Turkey mullein was sending its yellow stalks aloft from the soft dust at the roadside, and all the slopes were smudged with the blue and red and gold of wild flowers. A flock of 16 sage chickens sprang into flight from beside the road; a cottontail hopped across in front of my car.

Then as I topped the hill and started across the flat near the head of Leadville Canyon—a band of 14 antelopes feeding peacefully not more than 100 yards from my road! There were three fawns in the bunch—the others were mainly does whose young were probably still hid-out in the covering sage. The trim little animals didn't move for several moments after I stopped the car to watch them; and when they finally took their departure, it was at an unhurried trot, with frequent halts to turn and stare back at me.

My way led past the pertified sequoia forest set aside last year by Nevada

for preservation as a state park. Included in this strangely isolated grove is one of the largest fossil stumps in the world—a stone giant with a circumference of 47 feet. (*Desert Magazine*; July, 1951.) I wondered how the forest would fare as part of a gunnery range.

I passed the turn-off road to Lost Creek Canyon, where a delightful grove of quaking aspen shades a small clear stream of water. This and Grass Valley, nearby, constitute some of the most important range of Bare Ranch Cattle company, a California concern, which holds a permit to graze approximately 2000 head of stock in the land now menaced by Navy seizure.

After traveling for nearly 70 miles through the rangeland threatened by seizure, I reached the junction of Routes 34 and 8-A and turned east on the latter road, soon afterward swinging southeast toward Summit Lake and Soldier Meadows.

Soldier Meadows is a fine old ranch that anyone would be proud to own. In a grove of towering Lombardy poplars, planted 85 years ago, sets a great collection of stone barns and outbuildings, and pole corrals. These buildings, erected in the 1860s as an outpost of Fort McGarry, seven miles to the north, later became one of the home ranches of the far-flung Miller & Lux empire.

One of the old Fort McGarry buildings is incorporated in the attractive new home built recently by Wesley and Theodosia Fick, who purchased the Soldier Meadows property ten years ago and moved here from Holtville, in California's Imperial Valley, where they had owned a tangerine grove. Planned to harmonize with the much older buildings surrounding it, the new house has thick stone walls, covered with woodbine, an immense living room fitted with Indian rugs, and a picture window which looks out on a tree-shaded patio, with roses and a pool, and the largest planted lawn in probably 20,000 square miles. The house is completely modern, with electric lights (from a home power plant), a tiled bathroom, and a deep-freeze well filled with home-butchered beefsteaks and out-of-season fruits.

"I didn't want to come here, at first," confided Theodosia Fick. "I had always lived in densely-settled areas, and I was terrified by the prospect of living 23 miles from my nearest white neighbor, 60 miles from the nearest postoffice—170 miles from any town where we could obtain more than the bare essentials of life. It wasn't easy growing accustomed to this sort of isolation, but, in time, I came to accept it. And, finally, I grew to love it!



Dave and Bernice Iveson, second and third generation ranchers in the Black Rock country, and three of their four children, Leslie, Zelma, and Dean. An older girl was away at Bible school, in Reno.

Now, when I have to go to the city for some reason, I can't get back here fast enough! All the while I'm away, I'm thinking about Soldier Meadows—its peace and quiet, and the clear, crisp air, and the hills . . ."

The Ficks are the largest resident operators in the Black Rock country. They have 1000 acres cleared, under irrigation and in crop, and this year will cut and bale around 1500 tons of hay. ("You should have seen our first cutting of alfalfa, this year," said Mrs. Fick. "It stood breast-high to a tall man . . .") At one time the Ficks were offered \$450,000 for their ranch, but did not sell.

"So far," said Mrs. Fick, "we have put back into the ranch every penny we have taken out—and more, too. And now, just as it was beginning to look as if we might realize some return

from our investment, the Navy says they are going to take it for a gunnery range.

I remained overnight at Soldier Meadows, and early next morning started down the valley toward the ranch owned by Vern and Ruth Parman. I was traveling, now, through a land rich in historic memories.

As at other ranches in the Black Rock country, I found men of the Parman ranch busy with their summer haying. Driving into the yard, I had barely halted my car in the shade of a honey-locust tree when a gray-haired woman called a hearty greeting from the open barn door.

Ruth was born in the Black Rock country. Vern Parman came to this area about 30 years ago and Ruth and Vern were married in middle life. Together they acquired a run-down ranch

and were building it up and were getting it in good condition when the Depression struck. With ewes dropping from \$12.50 to \$1.25 each, the Parmans went broke, lost the ranch, took a deficiency judgment, and walked off the place with little more than the clothes on their backs.

But the Black Rock breeds a strong race of men—and women—and Vern and Ruth Parman started all over again, living in a tent, doing all their own ranch work, and slowly building up another flock of sheep.

"We're doing all right now," said the gray-haired Ruth. "Our long years of work are beginning to pay off. But if the Navy takes our place — what then? Where will we go? We're too old to start again from scratch—clearing sagebrush and drilling wells, and building barns, and fencing. We can't do it at our age . . . and even if we were young enough to start over and build up another ranch, what assurance would we have that in 10 or 20 years the Navy, or some other branch of the military, wouldn't come and take that ranch, too? Where is it all going to end?"

I couldn't tell her.

Nine miles south of the Parman home is the ranch operated by aging Grover Jackson and his son, Andrew.

Grover Jackson is a short, wiry man, with gray hair, a dusty white stubble of beard half-masking a wind-weathered face, and eyes that are still bright and vitally alive. He and his forebears have lived in the West for the past 107 years.

"There's four generations of Jacksons buried in the old graveyard at Portola," said Grover. "And now I hear they're figuring to build a big dam on the Feather River that will flood the cemetery . . . Seems as if the government's bound to get us Jacksons—if not one way, then another!"

The Jacksons have a good paying ranch, with an abundance of artesian water—the three wells they have drilled flowing 2200 gallons a minute.

"It's a good ranch," said Mr. Jackson. "Yet, strangely enough, I'll feel almost as bad about leaving these mountains as I will losing my ranch! One of my greatest pleasures in life has been prowling over these old hills," he went on. "I've prospected for mineral, and hunted deer, and agates, and fossils, and Indian relics. I've traced out all the old covered wagon trails, and located emigrant campsites . . . and emigrant graves."

The old man's eyes had been fastened hungrily on the rocky Calicos bordering his ranch on the west; and now he turned to the color-blotched Harlequin hills lying across a narrow

arm of the Black Rock desert, to the east.

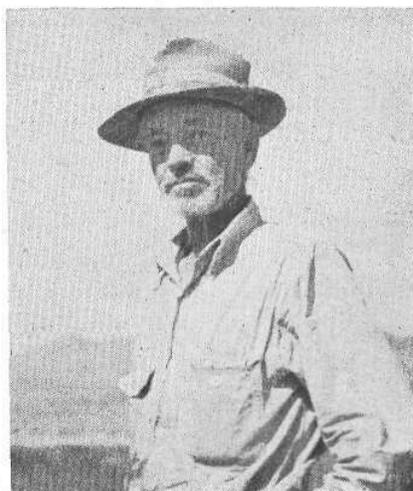
"I don't quite know what I'll do with myself if they take these mountains away from me . . ."

With a view toward checkmating opposition to their projected "grab," spokesmen for the Navy have pointed out repeatedly that their intended gunnery practice will not interfere with cattle grazing in the Black Rock-Sahwave area.

In my tour of the threatened area, however, I asked each rancher, in turn, if he thought it would be feasible to continue ranging cattle under conditions laid down by the Navy.

From each rancher, in turn, I received the same answer: "No!"

In its original proposal to stockmen,



Grover Jackson, pioneer rancher of the Black Rock Country.

the Navy offered to desist firing for a week in the spring and another week in the fall so that ranchers might put their cattle on the range and take them off. Later, in response to a flood of protests, the grace period was increased to a month each in the spring and fall, with Saturdays and Sundays available for inspection of forage and water resources, resupplying salt, branding calves, and caring for such other matters as might arise. But, despite these more liberalized terms, I found resident stockmen of the area agreed that cattle ranching, under such conditions, would be impractical if not completely impossible.

"They seem to think all a man has to do is to turn a bull and some cows on the range and wait for the calves to grow into beefsteaks," said Dave Iveson. "Maybe it can be done that way in the Pentagon . . . but it's not so simple under desert conditions, in northwestern Nevada!

"For one thing, the Navy says we

won't be permitted to enter the area to harvest crops, so where are we supposed to get our hay? With alfalfa selling for \$35 a ton, plus freight, we can't afford to buy it—and at this elevation and latitude, livestock can't survive the winters without being fed.

"No," he declared. "I won't even attempt to range cattle under Navy restrictions . . ."

With my four-day tour of the Black Rock ranches completed, I returned to Gerlach, refilled my gasoline tank and water can, and headed for the Sahwave—site of a majority of the 1751 mining claims including 142 patented claims, included within the land-grab.

This was a different proposition than the Black Rock, since the 1,202,626 acres embraced within the Sahwave area had already been granted to the Navy by the Senate Armed Services Committee on June 28, 1956. But although that date was nearly two weeks in the past at time of my visit, I found everyone still in a state of complete confusion.

"We understand we're not included in the 'grab,'" said L. C. Donnelly, caretaker for the Double-O Timber and Mining company property at the old placer gold camp of Rabbithole. "But, of course," he added, "we don't know for sure . . ."

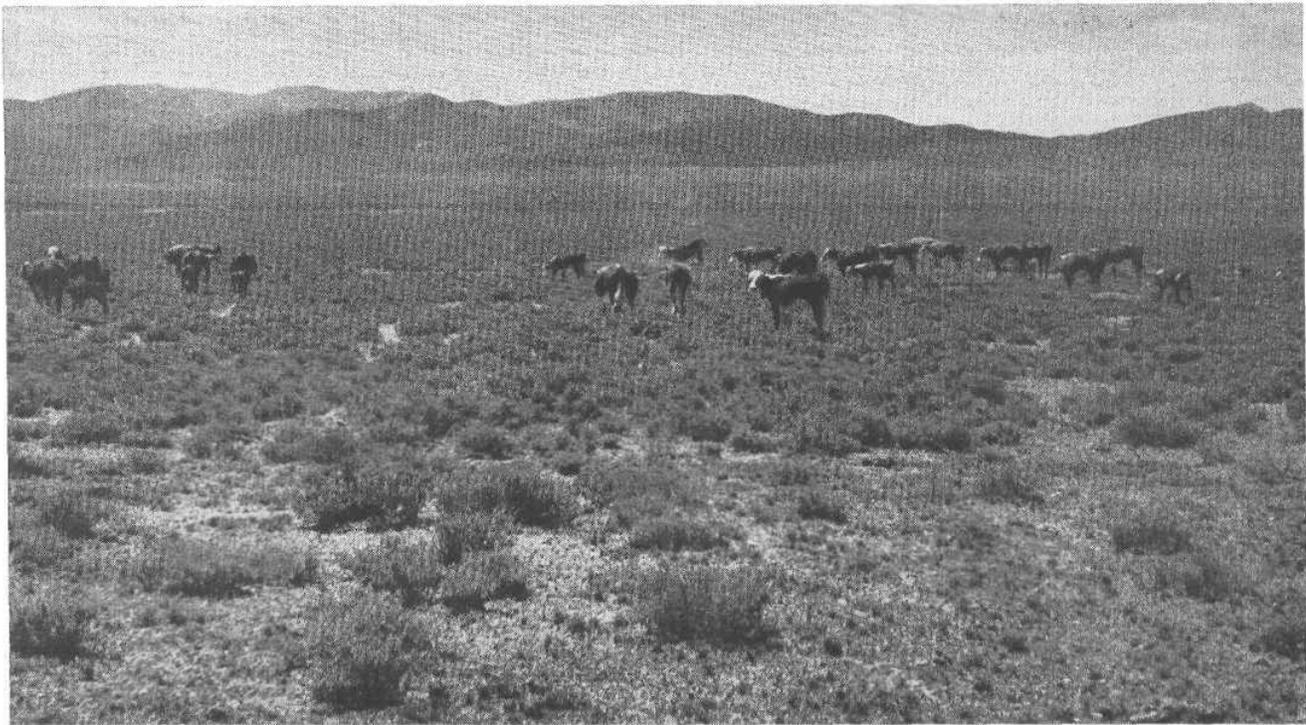
The same uncertainty was expressed by Bob Chandler, lifelong miner and resident in the Rosebud Canyon area since 1947.

"I haven't been able to learn whether my property is inside or outside the boundaries," said Bob. "I own 10 placer gold claims here, and have check stubs to show that I've spent more than \$10,000 developing them. I also have four claims of rutile ore carrying 3.95 per cent titanium—4,000,000 tons of it, engineers estimate. But I'm not in production, and I'm told that the Navy won't pay for any mines not actually operating . . . So I don't know where I stand!"

"We took \$3500 worth of concentrates from our tungsten property in only 26 days, recently—yet the Navy refuses to recognize it as a working mine," said E. K. Farnham, who, with Mrs. Farnham, has spent the past several years building a comfortable camp and developing a scheelite mine at Porter Springs, near the west base of the Seven Troughs range. They've even built a small mill, which the two of them operate without other help.

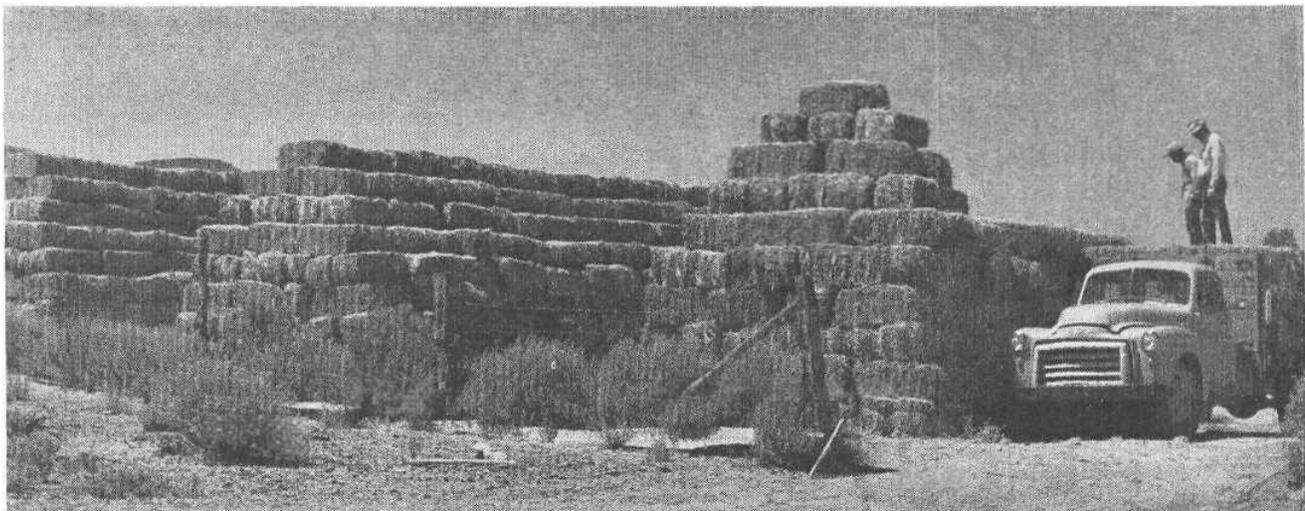
"We thought we were working toward a good thing, here," said Mrs. Farnham. "Now, we don't know what to expect . . ."

I wandered on over the Sahwave, talking to mine owners and leasers in



When the Navy proposed to cease fire for two months in the year so that cattlemen could take their stock on and off the range, one of the ranchers remarked: "They seem to think that all a man has to do is turn a bull and some cows on the range and wait for them to grow into beef-steaks." Actually, the natural range of the Black Rock

produces sleek well-fed Herefords in summer, but when winter comes it is necessary to have great stacks of hay on hand for feed when the ground is covered with snow. The Navy has not made clear how this kind of ranching can be carried on in two months out of the year.

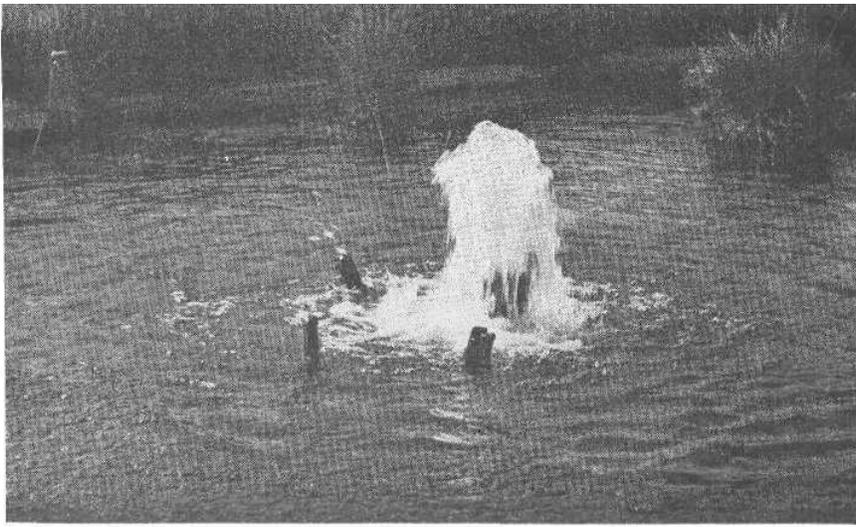


the old gold camps of Seven Troughs and Vernon and Farrell, and Scossa and Placeritas. I visited Cow Creek, where an estimated 1,000,000 tons of the finest light perlite known still awaits the development that was halted when Navy brass began eyeing this region; and I drove north to Majuba Mountain, and the Majuba mine, owned by Floyd Tegnell, of Idaho Falls, Idaho. He is said to have paid \$175,000 for the Majuba mine and according to reports by competent engineers the mine still contains 8,000,000 tons of

copper-silver-tin ore assaying \$30 a ton at 1950 prices—since which time the price of copper has tripled. In addition, a geologist of the AEC has assertedly named this deposit as one of the four most promising uranium properties in Nevada.

Thus, in addition to the human factors I had been considering—the disruption of lives, and thwarting of hopes and plans—I was becoming increasingly aware that there was another important factor involved: That of plain dollars and cents.

Even though the Navy were to pay generously for private property confiscated, there is no reimbursement to local governments; no means of compensating a community for banishing its people and removing from the tax rolls their real and personal property—nor can there be any adequate compensation to a state for the locking-up of its proven or potential resources. No better expression of this thought is possible than that embraced in one sentence included in the report on the military landgrab hearings conducted



Water is always a problem on the Black Rock, but Rancher Grover Jackson is fortunate in having three artesian wells which flow 2200 gallons a minute.

before the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Forming the closing paragraph of that report is this succinct observation:

"The program for the defense of our nation's human and natural resources should not—and must not—be so conducted as to destroy the very resources it is aimed at preserving."

The people of northwestern Nevada are not Communists nor pacifists; nor are they prejudiced against the United States Navy, as an officer of the Fallon Naval Auxiliary Air Station suggested in a public address. They are good, plain, hardworking Americans, who believe in God and freedom, and the American way of life; and if the defense of our country demands that they sacrifice their homes and the properties they have worked years to develop, they are perfectly willing to make such sacrifice.

But—before they do so—they want to know for certain that the sacrifice they are making is necessary.

They want to know that capacity use is being made of the 24,000,000 acres of Western land now held in the grasp of the military; and they want to know that there is absolute need for the 9,000,000-odd acres of additional land sought by the armed forces during the past year.

Especially, they want to know why the Navy cannot make joint use of the nearly 4,000,000-acre Las Vegas-Tonopah Bombing and Gunnery range, in south-central Nevada—a tract that measures, in its extreme distances, 75 by 85 miles, and is the largest military base in the United States. Although a major portion of this immense reserve has not been fully used by the military for more than 13 years, it is still closed against civilian entry, and chances are it will never be returned to such economic uses as mining, graz-

ing, home and recreation sites, or homestead entry—this due to the asserted fact that most of this land is badly contaminated by unexploded mines and missiles, and that estimated costs of decontamination would be from \$12 to \$18 per acre.

But, although such contamination may preclude other usage, it would not, presumably, interfere with the suc-

cessful operation of an air-to-air gunnery range. As a consequence, many Nevadans feel that before the Navy or any other branch of the military is permitted to gobble still more millions of acres to be ravaged and cast aside, it should be forced to give serious consideration to the joint use of this immense area of idle, unproductive, tax-free, and now-useless land.

Among those subscribing to this belief are Nevada's senators, Geo. W. Malone and Alan F. Bible. Following approval of the Sahwawe-Black Rock Ranges by the Senate Armed Services committee in the closing days of the 2nd session, 84th Congress, Senators Malone and Bible forced an amendment on the senate floor by which the Black Rock area was removed from that bill of approval until such time as the Navy proves its complete inability to utilize the Tonopah range in conjunction with the Air Force and the Atomic Energy Commission. Not until Congress reconvenes next January may that required proof be submitted and passed upon.

Meanwhile, the fate of the Black Rock country—and all its people—hangs in the balance.

REPORT REVEALS AMAZING EXTENT OF LAND GRABS

During the 2nd session of the 84th Congress, Representative Claire Engle of Red Bluff, California, introduced H.R. 12185 which would forbid any further withdrawal of public lands for military and naval purposes without authority from Congress. Twelve other similar resolutions were introduced by other congressmen.

In a report accompanying his resolution, Congressman Engle presented the following facts.

In 1937, the land owned or controlled by the Defense agencies totaled—including civil functions land—3.1 million acres.

In 1940, on the eve of World War II, the figure stood at 4.3 million acres.

On June 30, 1945, the Defense withdrawals had increased to 25.1 million acres.

On June 30, 1953, at the close of the Korean War the figure had dropped to 21.1 million acres, including 3.9 million acres for civil functions.

On June 30, 1955, the withdrawals had climbed again to 25.4 million acres, with applications on file from various Defense agencies for an additional eight million acres.

In other words, the Defense agencies have now posted No Trespass signs on a domain greater than the combined areas of Connecticut, New Jersey, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont and Rhode Island, and are seeking additional lands amounting to nearly the area of Maryland.

Congressman Engle, and Senator Malone of Nevada are making a vigorous fight not only to block further withdrawals of public land by the military, but also to force the various armed forces to coordinate their training operations so that a considerable portion of the withdrawn lands may be restored to the public domain.

If you are one of those who share the view that the Defense agencies have gone too far in their encroachment upon the public domain, you can help correct the situation by writing your protest to your representatives in congress.