# Desert

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*Author's car crossing the playa of Black Rock Desert in northwestern Nevada.*

# On Black Rock Desert Trails

**When Dora Tucker and Nell Murbarger first began exploring the Black Rock country in northwestern Nevada they did not realize what a high, wide and wild country it was. On the Black Rock a hundred miles doesn't mean a thing. In the 10,000 square miles of this desert wasteland there isn't a foot of pavement nor a mile of railroad—neither gasoline station nor postoffice. Antelopes out-number human beings fifty to one. There's plenty of room here for exploring.**

By NELL MURBARGER
Photographs by the author
Map by Norton Allen

AS AN illustration of what the Black Rock country affords in the way of variety and contrast, we made a 150-mile loop trip out of Gerlach last June. Our previous exploring of the region had been mostly in the northern and eastern sections, so we hadn't the slightest idea of what we might find in the southern part. We knew there was a ghost town—Leadville — approximately 50 miles north of Gerlach, and we'd heard rumors of a petrified forest somewhere in the vague beyond. Otherwise, it was anyone's guess.

When I had finished gassing the car and filling our two five-gallon water cans at the Gerlach service station and Dora had replenished the grub box at the little grocery store and postoffice across the street, I asked the station operator if he thought we could make it through to Leadville.

Running a critical eye over our dust-covered car and clothing, the old man nodded. "Reckon so. But I'll be damned if I know why you should want to! Ain't nothin' there!"

Thanking him, we accepted his report as a favorable omen and headed out into the desert. Almost invariably we find our best prowling in places where folks have told us there "ain't nothin'."

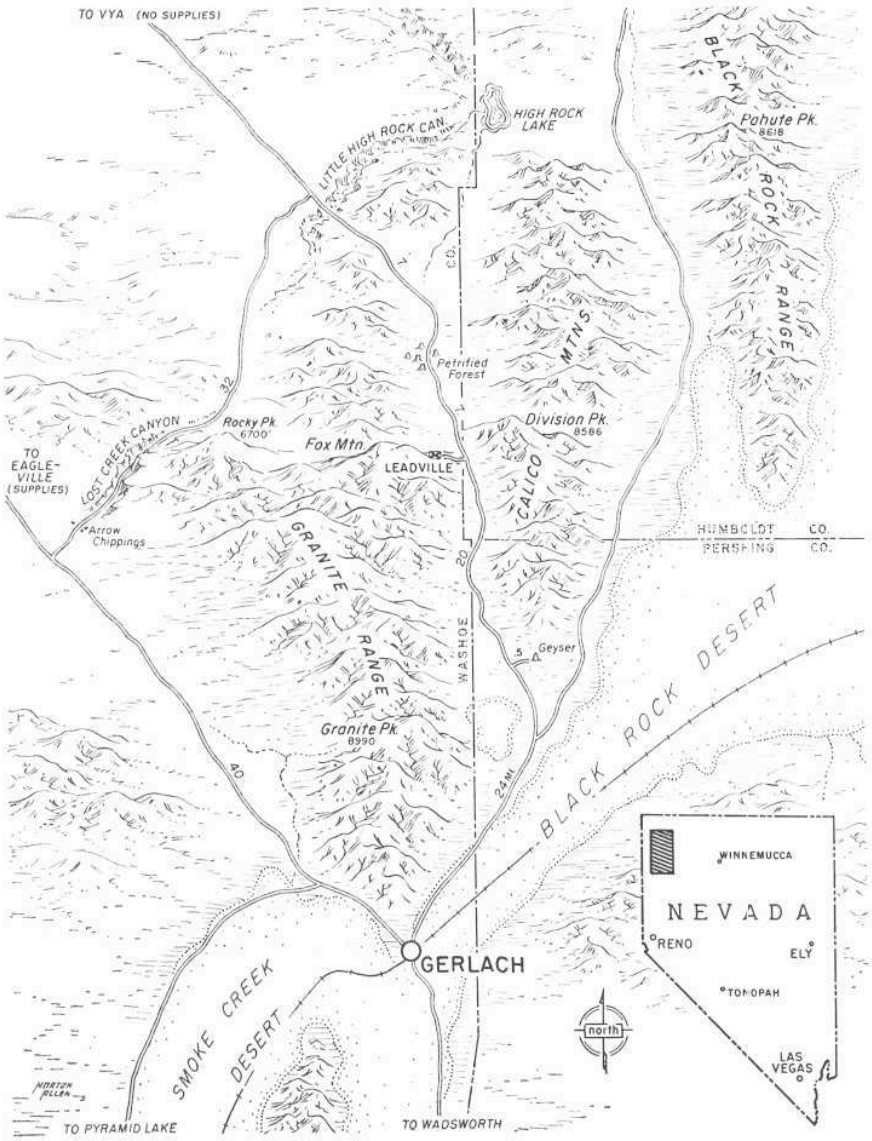
Rising precipitously from the dead white flat where the gypsum-mining town of Gerlach swelters in the summer sun, the Granite range lifts its rocky brown crest to a height of nearly 9000 feet. As our road skirted the eastern base of this gaunt escarpment, we ranged our eyes up one rough canyon and down another, searching for a single green tree, one sign of water or one evidence of human life. None was visible.

To our right lay a land equally austere but arranged on a horizontal plane, rather than vertical. Beyond the narrow tangle of greasewood that fringed our road spread all the sweeping immensity of the Black Rock desert.

While all this northwestern region is known as "the Black Rock country," the desert from which it derives its name actually is a stark white alkali playa, averaging a dozen miles in width and stretching for 100 miles from Gerlach to Kings River. Merging imperceptibly with the Black Rock on the southwest is the section known as Smoke Creek desert, inclusion of which extends the overall length of unbroken playa by at least one-third.

Sixteen hundred square miles of bare, dead nothingness; a silent void where no flowers bloom and no birds sing; a million flat acres producing scarcely enough vegetation to sustain a jackrabbit. Such is the Black Rock desert—one of Earth's most spectacular monuments to a vanished way of life which had its beginning in the Glacial Age of many thousand years ago.

As changing climatic conditions gradually brought about melting of the ice cap which blanketed most of temperate North America, run-off waters collected to form lakes. In the region




which is now Nevada, the largest of these bodies is that known to geologists as Lake Lahontan. From a point considerably south of present-day Carson City, one arm of Lahontan stretched north along the present line of the Black Rock desert and up Quinn River valley to the Oregon line, or a trifle beyond. Another arm spread west to the vicinity of Susanville, California—giving the lake a total surface area of roughly 8400 square miles.

From what science tells us, Lake Lahontan must have been a pleasant place. Its clear, cold waters teamed with fish of many varieties. Prehistoric Indians camped on its shores, cast their spears at humpless camels, lured ducks with feathered decoys, and implanted their strange picture writings on cliff faces. Giant ground sloths lumbered along the shoreline, browsing on low-growing shrubs and leaving their paw prints in the soft ooze where delighted paleontologists would discover them eons later.

Naturally, the melting glaciers could not last forever. When their waters no longer cascaded down the mountainsides, Nevada's climate grew arid; and with evaporation exceeding inflow, Lahontan began her long march into oblivion. In the first recession of water from her shallower fringes, the Black Rock desert emerged.

Pausing on the powdery shore of that ancient lakebed, we looked across its somnolent breadth to the blue line of the Kamma Mountains, 20 miles to the east. Black pyramids of volcanic rock—the "black rocks" for which the place is named—here and there broke the stark surface of the dry sea like the dorsal fins of giant sharks, while shimmering heat waves gave to the expanse an illusion of billowing swells. As heat increased with advancing summer, this place would become a virtual cradle of mirages. Even at this time, in early June, we soon had spotted three. Two appeared as islands surrounded by cool, blue, lapping water; the third involved a row of green trees and a meadow where we knew that no green blade existed.

Fanning out over the lakebed was a network of roads; this million-acre playa in dry weather being one vast race course, so hard and smooth that a car may be driven anywhere on its surface at high speed. Wet weather transforms the same area into a morass as slick as grease and completely impassable. A few small wind twisters, or "sand augurs," as the natives call them—were spiraling lazily over this flat. Otherwise there was no visible motion.

We had been on the road since six o'clock that morning and even when we left Gerlach were already in the mood for lunch. As our road veered away from the lakebed to head north into the desert hills, we spotted a clump of trees a little way off to the right. Except for the mirage, these were the first trees we had seen since leaving Gerlach, and, so far as we knew, might be the last before our return there. It seemed a logical place to eat.

To our surprise they proved to be Russian olives, and apparently were very old. Their gray-leafed boughs were tipped in the gold of a million tiny trumpet flowers whose heady fragrance came to us in the car even before I had stopped the engine. A pair of robins had a nest in one of the upper boughs and in another of the half-dozen trees, a mourning dove was giving voice to his plaintive call.

While no remnant of house or outbuildings remained, it was evident there once had been located here an establishment of considerable size, possibly a ranch or stage station. The charred truck of a burned freight wagon lay a few yards distant and scattered over the hard-packed earth beneath the trees were chips of ancient harness leather, a few square cut iron nails, and enough sun-purpled glass fragments to fill a water bucket. Many of the pieces were tinted so dark they appeared nearly black.

Dora, who has been my desert prowling partner for 25 of her 70 years, is at heart a rockhound—but when eligible rocks are not available, she turns an equally covetous eye toward Indian and pioneer relics — everything from prehistoric pottery to battered bullwhips. The result is an unsurpassed zest for living and an overflowing house, porch and garage full of trophies at her home in Las

*Baffled by a chunk of petrified wood too big to carry home, Dora Tucker sits on the fossilized trunk of the fallen giant and contemplates the number of cabochons which might be cut from one section of the three-part trunk.*

Vegas. Naturally, the possibilities of this place held tremendous fascination for her.

Even before we had removed the mess box from the car she was stealing calculating glances at our surroundings, and as quickly as she could assemble a Dagwood sandwich she was off prowling the old building site, eating as she searched.

If I remember correctly, the stop netted her a slightly delapidated hashknife and the major portion of an ox-shoe.

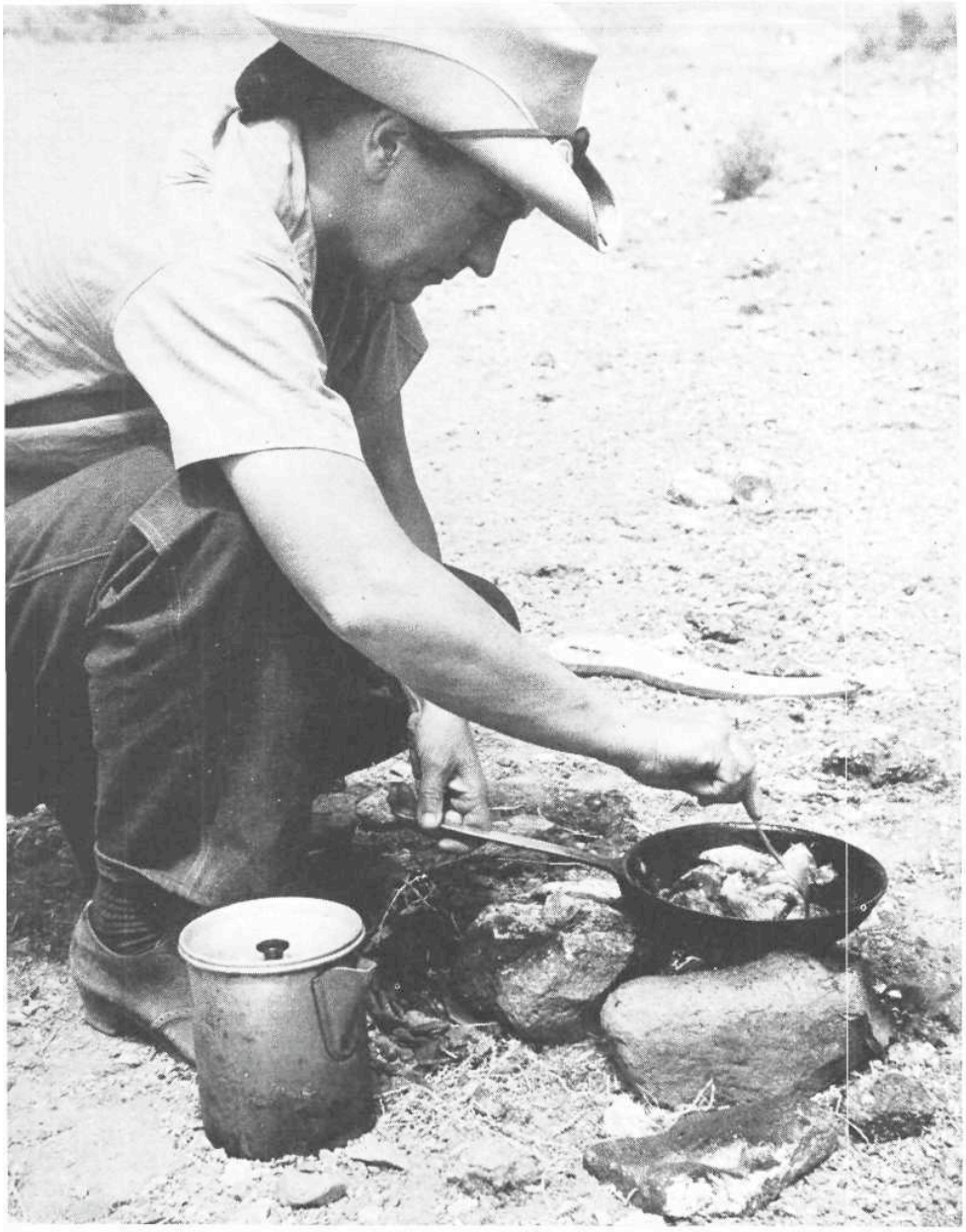
Soon after leaving the old oasis of the olives we saw a strange appearing, cone-shaped formation about a half-mile to the northeast. Similar in form to the brick charcoal ovens occasionally encountered in old mining camps, the cone seemed to be emitting jets of smoke or steam.

We could see that the formation was of thermal nature, but not until we had waded through the marshy area to its base could we realize the magnitude of it, or the magnificence of its coloring. Composed of layers of lime and silica deposited by the hot, mineral-impregnated waters which coursed down its sides, the cone had the soft, rippled texture of rich velvet and ranged through all the shades from deepest maroon and brilliant orange to dappled fawn and pale ivory.

Spouting from invisible fissures in the apex of the cone, five streams of hot water played constantly in the air. Shooting fountain-like above the rock a height of five or six feet, their boiling spray cascaded over the rock and its terrace according to the vagaries of the wind.

While the place had every aspect of a natural formation thousands of years old, we learned later that this is Nevada's youngest geologic wonder. When a local stockman drilled a well in 1919, he brought in this untamable hot geyser instead of the cold water he had anticipated. Useless for stock purposes because of the high mineral content of the water, the outlaw well was left to flow and in 30 years has built up this amazing landmark!

We were enjoying a lazy sort of discussion on the unfailing democracy of the desert waterhole, where a man and his horse and the little creatures of the wild will drink fearlessly, side by side, when two buck antelopes, which had been drinking at the far end of the dam, bounded off through the sage, their white rump flags flashing against the sombre landscape. Gaining the summit of a low ridge



*The author cooking a supper snack over a sagebrush fire in a land where there is no other firewood.*

they came to a halt and abruptly backfaced for a last look at us, then moved on over the ridge and out of sight.

The road was surprisingly good. Occasional stretches were a little corrugated and in certain sections it was somewhat dusty. These, however, are minor faults compared to wracking chucks, jagged rocks and high centers. Of these evils it was completely free.

We had been keeping sharp watch for a side trail which might take us to the old mining camp of Leadville, situated high on the east flank of Mt. Fox, in the Granite range. When Dora spotted the yellow splash of mine dumps and a few unpainted buildings at the head of a steep ravine, a mile or so to the left of our road, we felt certain this was the place we sought.

Turning the car into the first side road leading in that direction, we headed up a rough canyon which grew rockier and steeper as it climbed the range. Few stretches of the trail, if any, were wide enough to permit passing but this wasn't too important since no one else appeared to be using it. In many places the wheel tracks were badly guttered by winter storms and some careful maneuvering was necessary to avoid high centers.

As the garageman in Gerlach had forewarned us, there was virtually nothing left of the old camp. Several large mine dumps, a few prospecting holes, half a dozen tar-papered shacks, a tunnel, some old mine buckets—that was about all.

Unlike most of Nevada's historic mining camps, little glamour is attached to Leadville's name, her youthful days having been marked by more hard work than hard liquor. Original development work was carried out here in 1909 with production beginning the following year. While the ore showed good values in lead and silver, with minor content of zinc and gold, production costs were high and the effort failed to pay out financially.

In 1927, after more or less regular production for 17 years, all operations ceased and the camp folded. There are those who believe that plenty of good silver ore still remains in the mine, which, they declare, "was getting better with depth."

Assisted by low gear and four-wheel brakes we eased back down the ravine and again took up our northward course.

Another seven miles and we arrived in a forest of petrified stumps! The first we glimpsed—a handsome specimen which stood close to the road on the left—was nearly six feet in diameter and broken into three neat cross sections, stacked one atop the other. A well-preserved length of the main trunk lay where it had fallen at the stump's base. Soft buff to golden brown in color, the wood was beautifully grained with black concentric lines and appeared to be of fine gem quality.

Dora, the relic hunter and botanist, speedily reverted to Dora, the rockhound. By the time I had my camera and equipment out of the car, she and her rock sack and pick were disappearing over a ridge 200 yards distant.

Browsing along the slope, up one gully and down another, we found the remains of many trees, some of them rather badly disintegrated, others splendidly preserved. Well up on the steep hillside, where it could overlook its lesser contemporaries as well as a wide desert valley beyond, we found a gigantic stump—"The Monarch" of the Black Rock.

It was a magnificent specimen. In height it ranged from 15 feet on the lower side (where the hill dipped down sharply) to six feet on the upper side. Its diameter still is open to question. Using a steel tape I measured the stump as accurately as possible under the difficult circumstances of its growth. I felt I was being conservative in figuring its circumference at 45 feet—an average diameter of roughly 15 feet.

Since returning home, however, I have read that the world's largest known petrified tree is in Big Bend National Park in Texas, and that it measures 14 feet at its greatest diameter.

Whether our Monarch of the Black Rock sets a new world's record, or whether my measurement was in error, is something we eventually hope to learn.

After a night's sleep under the stars and a good breakfast cooked on a campfire of sagebrush — the largest

living growth in this strange land where 15-foot trees once flourished—we sorted our rock specimens, obliterated all evidence of our camp, and headed back down the wash.

For half a dozen miles north of the forest, our way led through a dense stand of sage, climbing and descending a series of rolling hills and gullies. Some of the draws were alive with jackrabbits and once a fat sagehen stalked across the road in front of us. There were no fences, no houses, no sign of man's presence. Somehow, one knew instinctively that this wild desert land surrounding us had not changed in the slightest degree since John Charles Fremont dragged his little howitzer through here more than a century ago.

Riding over these same hills in 1846—possibly down the very defile through which we were traveling—Capt. Jesse Applegate and two companions had pioneered the famous Applegate Cut-off to Oregon, a route which was to be followed by scores of bearded emigrants toiling Westward in pursuit of a dream.

One of Applegate's men—a scout named Garrison—had been slain by Indians in High Rock Canyon, only a short distance to the east of our road; and Levi Scott, third man of the party, had been seriously wounded in the attack. This was no isolated instance. For 50 years Black Rock had been known as bad Indian country.

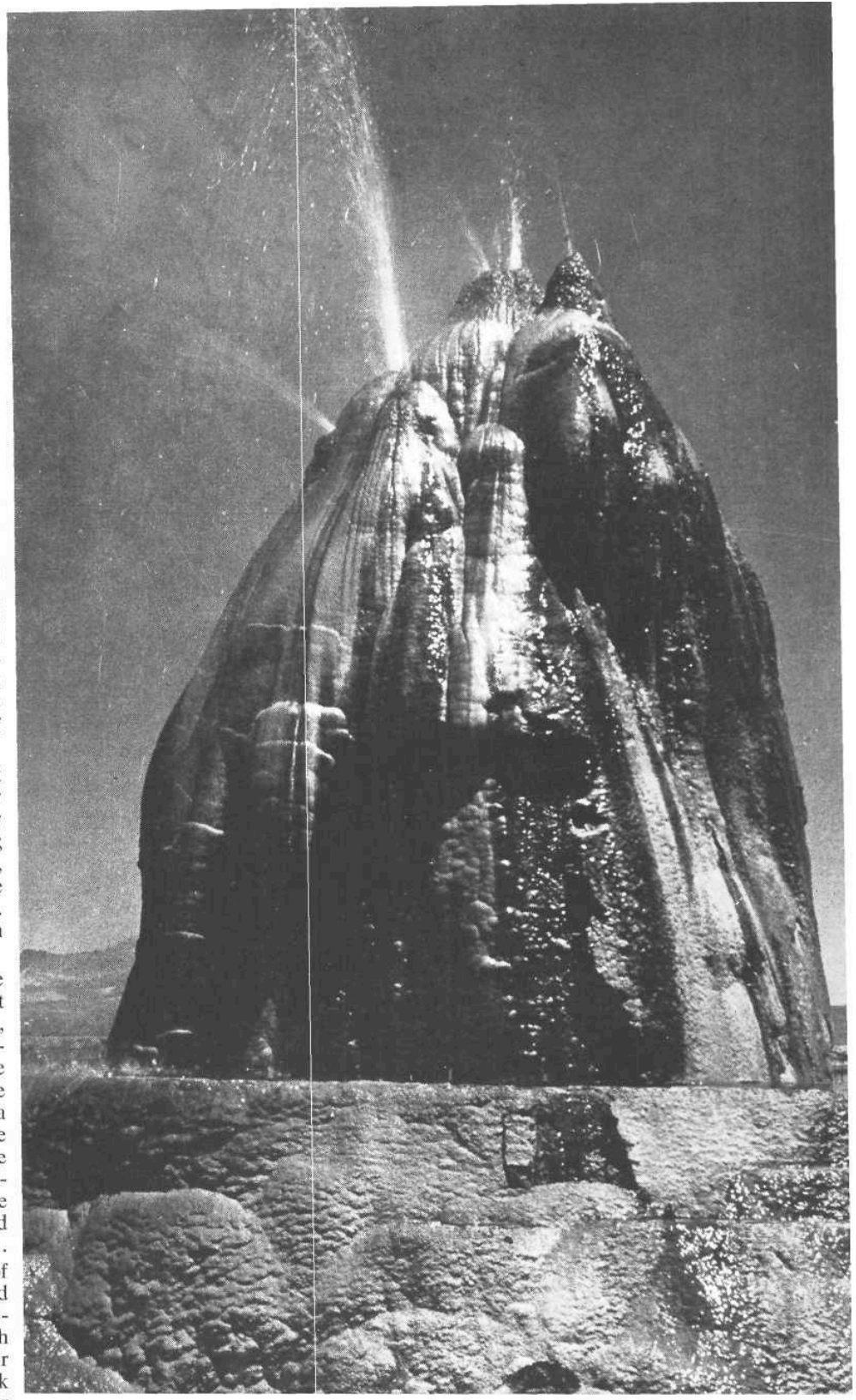
While on a prospecting trip to the western edge of the Black Rock desert in 1850, the veteran frontiersman, Peter Lassen, and a companion, likewise were slain by Indians in this same vicinity. As we angled through the rimrock gash of Little High Rock, a tributary of the main canyon, we gained a vicarious thrill from the knowledge that near its mouth—possibly five miles from our road—the last Indian massacre in the United States had occurred in January, 1911.

Three sheepmen and a cattleman of Surprise Valley, in California, had been attacked and murdered by renegade Indians as they rode through Little High Rock en route to their stock camps on the edge of the Black Rock. Spurred by the natural lust for vengence, plus huge rewards offered by the men's families sheriff's possemen and aroused citizens had pursued the offending tribesmen until every member of the band, with exception of a young squaw and her baby, had been overtaken and slain.

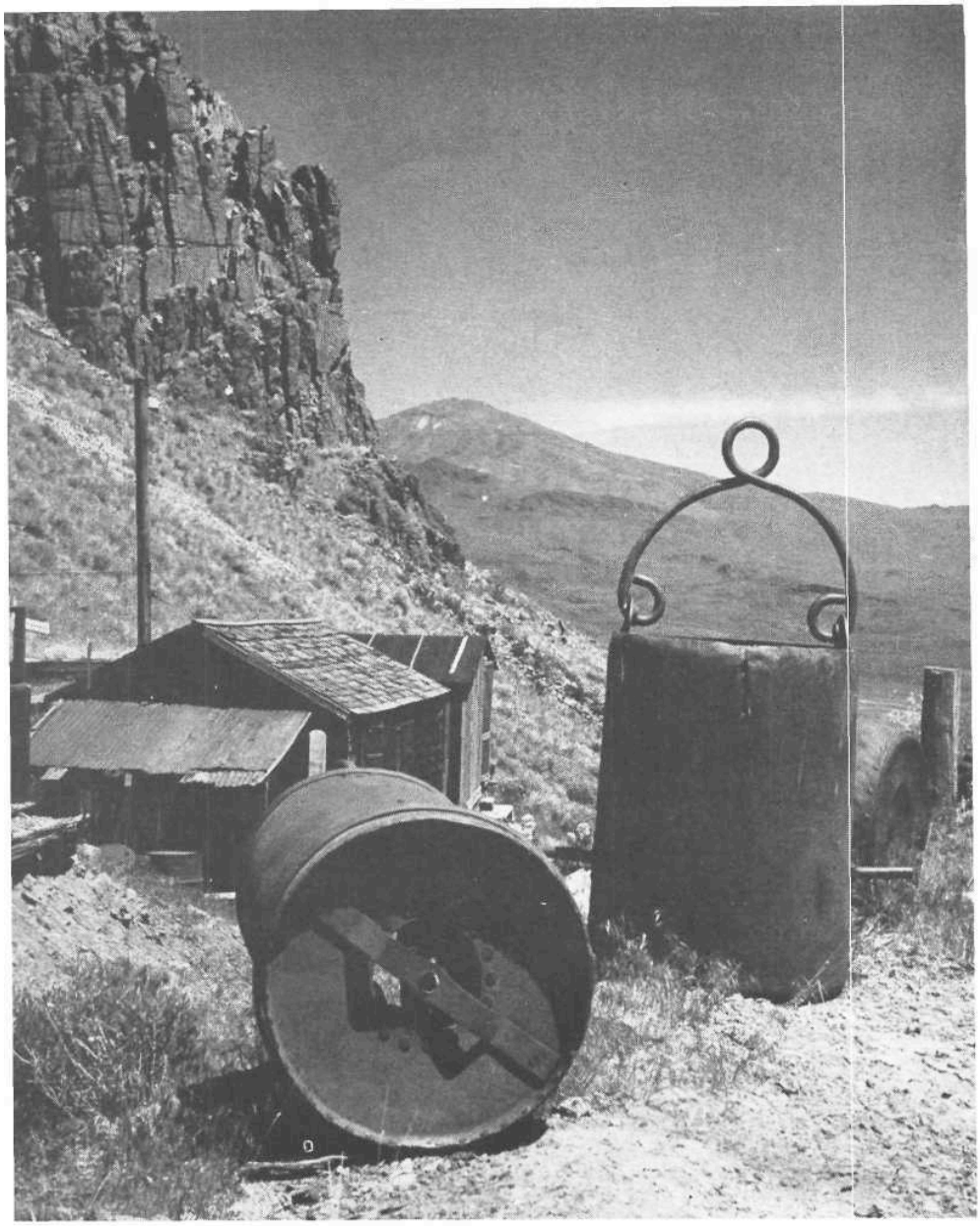
We were approaching the broad swale of Long Valley and were undecided whether to go on to Vya or turn back to Gerlach. The problem was neatly solved when we came suddenly upon an unexpected trail branching to our left. Pointing down it was a small faded sign which read "Lost Creek Canyon."

The road was narrow and crooked and so seldom used that desert weeds had grown up between the wheel tracks and sagebrush raked our car on either side. It was a friendly little road, however; one that bounded over hills and hummocks like a roller coaster and eventually led us to the top of a broad, flat tableland.

Throughout the morning we had



*Boiling mineral waters, charged with lime, silica and other elements, have in 30 years built this huge geyser cone. Its colors range from deep maroon to vivid green and jet.*



*Only waste dumps, an abandoned tunnel, a few miner's shacks and old iron buckets mark the site of Leadville, Nevada ghost town.*

been noting scattered pieces of obsidian, but upon gaining this high mesa top, we found the surface of the ground literally paved with cobbles of jet black volcanic glass. Roundish in shape and unusually pure in composition, the globules were oddly uniform in size, averaging perhaps a pound each in weight. For mile after mile this strange black paving flanked our road on either side, the sun glinting from broken shards of the glass as from a million faceted diamonds.

As we topped a low rise, Dora pointed to a small, natural clearing along the road where half a dozen pronghorns were taking their ease in the morning sun. For a single, startled instant, every head was turned our way; and then they had whirled and were gone, bounding lightly over the sage like giant jackrabbits. In the next five miles we encountered other antelopes; a pair here, a lone buck there, or a solitary doe. While not inclined to stand idly by until they might be photographed, they seldom ran far before turning back to regard us curiously.

We had been traversing the mesa for perhaps an hour when we came to a ravine and eventually were surprised to find a tiny, clear stream bubbling over the rocks alongside our road. We knew then that this must be Lost Creek Canyon.

Half a mile farther and rounding a bend, we caught our breath in incredulous wonder. The sloping sides of the ravine suddenly had narrowed to red rock cliffs which rose sheer on either side. Filling the canyon's bottom, from wall to wall, was a grove of tall quaking aspen, as beautiful as any we had ever seen in the high mountains.

In the broken rubble at the base of the cliffs, choke-cherry bushes were hanging white with their fragrant blooms, and great thickets of wild pink roses were just beginning to break into flower.

Stopping beneath the giant trees we replenished our water tanks from the cold little stream, and on sudden impulse decided to lay over here for a couple of hours so that we might cook and eat lunch in this pleasant and wholly unexpected oasis.

We still didn't know where our little lost road might lead, but if it continued in the direction we had been traveling for the last 20 miles, we knew that it must eventually intersect Nevada 81, the graded road between Gerlach and Eagleville, California. On that chance we voted to continue for another ten miles. If, in that distance, the road reached an unforeseen end or otherwise became impassable, we still would have adequate gasoline to take us back the way we had come.

It was this decision which added to the trip's other experiences—a jasper bed and an Indian campsite.

Dora, who has an eye like a predatory eagle, first spotted the jasper from the moving car, but not until we began ranging over the field did we find that Indians, too, had known of this deposit and extensively used it.

Everywhere on the ground there were flakings of flint, jasper, chalcedony and obsidian, and in less than an hour we had gathered our pockets full of chipping stones, crude scrapers, and a few pieces which might conceivably have served as spear heads. All the work was poor and most of it appeared unfinished, causing us to believe that these might have been pieces of stone which failed to chip satisfactorily and were discarded before completion. A portion of broken arrowhead found at the same place showed fine workmanship.

Some of the jasper was of good quality with nice coloring and before we left, Dora had cached several pounds of it in various nooks about the car.

About a mile beyond this point, our adventurous little trail unexpectedly merged with Nevada 81, and with a tug of regret we turned left toward Gerlach, 50 miles to the southeast. As we entered the fringes of town, I asked Dora if she realized that in two days of exploring and 150 miles of travel we had not seen a single automobile or one human being.

She nodded. "I was thinking the same thing," she said. "I was thinking what a wonderful thing it is that there are a few places on earth where that is still possible."

# Josie Pearl, Prospector on Nevada's Black Rock Desert

**Deep in the Black Rock Desert of northwestern Nevada, Josie Pearl lives alone, 96 miles from the nearest town, self-sufficient, and facing the challenge of each new morning with enthusiasm. A desert lady with a desert heart, she has helped sick miners and given needed love to wayward boys. She was at hand when Bob Ford was killed and was a close friend of Ernie Pyle who wrote her, 13 hours before he was killed, "the happiest I will ever be again is the day I stick my feet under your table and eat a pot of those Boston baked beans."**

By NELL MURBARGER
Photos by the Author

SPIRALING OUT OF the north, a sinuous dust devil grew as it moved across the desert, gathering more thistles and broken sage, more dust. The dancing column vanished in the heat haze to the south, and the yellow flat slipped back under its briefly-broken hush.

Once again, there was only vastness, rimmed by ragged hills, and marked by the thin tracery of the road.

I was no stranger to this upper left-hand corner of Nevada. I knew the nearest town to the northwest was the one - store - and - postoffice village of Denio, Oregon, 72 miles away; and that to the west, there was no town closer than Cedarville, California, 170 miles.

Between those outposts and Winnemucca to the south, spread 10,000 square miles of sage and solitude, silence and sand — a territory more than one-fourth as large as the entire state of Indiana, but without either postoffice or point of supply.

Somewhere, deep in the heart of that immensity, I hoped to locate a lone woman—a woman who had been described to me as one of the most remarkable characters in the West.

Until two days previously, my acquaintance with Josie Pearl had been limited to three pages in Ernie Pyle's book, *Home Country,** a collection of his best newspaper columns originally written and published in the 1930's.

"Josie Pearl was a woman of the West," Pyle had written. "Her dress was calico, with an apron over it; on her head was a farmer's straw hat, on her feet a mismated pair of men's shoes, and on her left hand and wrist $6000 worth of diamonds! That was Josie—contradiction all over, and a sort of Tugboat Annie of the desert. Her whole life had been spent . . . hunting for gold in the ground. She was a prospector. She had been at it since she was nine, playing a man's part in a man's game . . ."

I had read the book, and enjoyed it, and eventually had forgotten it.

Several years passed; and then I happened to be spending a night with John and Marge Birnie, at the Old Mill Ranch, near Paradise Valley, Nevada. As we had sat talking that evening, Marge had remarked that I should write a story about Josie Pearl.

"Not that lady miner Ernie Pyle wrote about in *Home County?*" I exclaimed incredulously. "Don't tell me she's still alive!"

"And going strong!" laughed Marge. "But she's far more than a 'lady miner'! She's a great personality. She's straight out of the pages of the Old West—and she's the last of her kind!"

If I had been told that Kit Carson was waiting for me at the gate, I

*Josie Pearl—her dress was of calico, but in her wardrobe a $7000 mink coat. She lives alone on the Nevada desert many miles from her nearest neighbor.*

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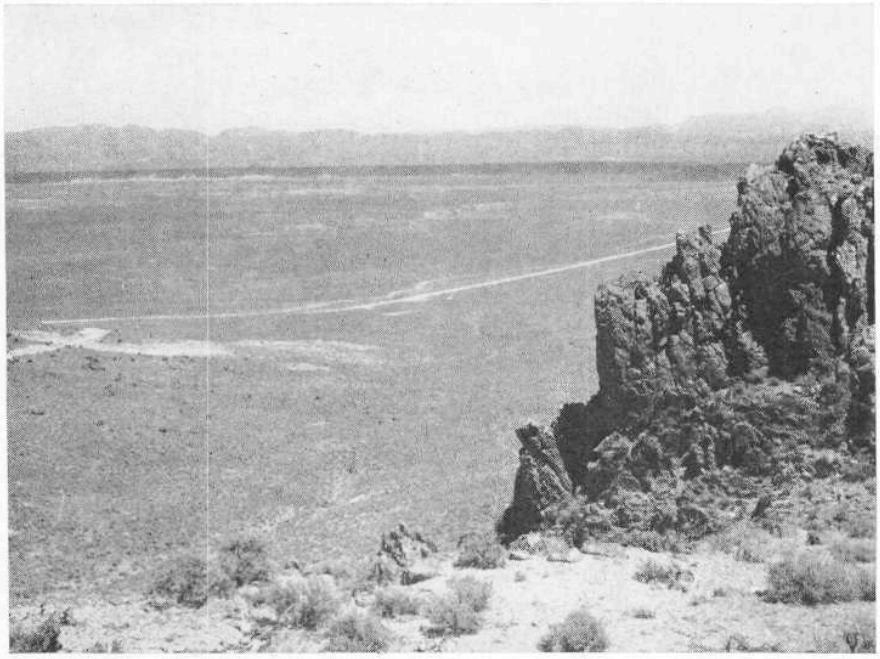


*Enroute to Josie Pearl's home, 96 miles from Winnemucca, Nevada, Author Nell Murbarger took this photograph of the expansive desert.*

couldn't have been more astounded. Nearly 15 years had elapsed since Pyle had written his story of this woman; and, even then, he had carried the impression that she was very old. And now, to learn that she was still "going strong" was almost unbelievable.

Although the Birnies knew her well, they could not tell me how to reach her home—a situation I was to find quite prevalent during the next two days, which I spent making inquiries around Winnemucca. Everyone I approached seemed to know her—and favorably — but none could give me explicit directions for finding her.

"I've never been to her place," they would say, uncertainly, "but she lives up near the north end of Black Rock desert . . ." Or, perhaps, they would describe her residence as "somewhere in the vicinity of Summit Lake," or "over beyond the Quinn River Country."

However described, it was vague. But now that my interest was aroused, I was determined at least to make an attempt to locate her.

Because it had seemed the logical approach to any of the geographical points mentioned, I drove north on U.S. 95 to the junction of State Route 8-A, 33 miles beyond Winnemucca. Halting at the turn-off — like a diver hesitating before the plunge —I sat there for several minutes, ranging my eyes over that wide and lonely land spreading ahead; and then, I eased my foot from the brake, and the car and I were rolling down that long, empty road, leading to the west.

In this section of Nevada, human inhabitants are few so the first opportunity I had to check my navigation was at Quinn River Ranch. 38 miles west of the turn-off. Only the ranch cook was in evidence. Like everyone with whom I talked at Winnemucca, the cook knew Josie Pearl, but not where she lived.

"When she goes to town," he said, "she comes up from the south. I'd say take the Leonard Creek road to the next ranch—the Montoya place—and ask there. It's not far," he added. "Maybe 25 miles . . ."

This Leonard Creek Road was a primitive sort, not in the least hazardous, so long as speed was held down, but generally narrow, frequently given to sharp turns, and always dusty. As I dodged sand pockets and shuttled through hedge-like aisles of sagebrush, I thought of Ernie Pyle traveling that same trail all those years before.

"There really wasn't any road to Josie Pearl's cabin," he had written. "Merely a trail across space. Your creeping car was the center of an appalling cloud of dust, and the sage scratched long streaks on the fender."

Leaving Quinn River Ranch, the road skirted the southeasterly base of Pine Forest range, soon heading west across the northern fringe of Black Rock desert.

Stretching to the southwest for more than a hundred miles, this bleak playa —this barren bed of prehistoric Lake Lahontan — is a place of expansive silence. At its widest point, the playa is nearly 15 miles across. Here, at its tip, it was soon left behind, and the little road went climbing into the rough range beyond.

Another few miles revealed the Montoya ranch — officially, the Pine Range Livestock Company. Here, for the first time, I learned that I was really on the right road, and that Josie's place was only five or six miles back in the hills. Since leaving Winnemucca, 95 miles before, I had been traveling in uncertainty.

At last, I spotted the house in a small clump of poplars, about a hundred yards off the trail.

"Josie Pearl," Pyle had written, "lived all alone in a little tar-paper cabin surrounded by nothing but desert. From a mile away you could hardly see the cabin amidst the knee-high sagebrush. But when you got there it seemed almost like a community—it was such a contrast in a space filled only with white sun and empty distance . . ."

Bringing my dust-layered car to a halt in the yard, I looked about me. Everywhere there were tables and boxes and benches, each one covered with ore samples, rocks, petrified wood, geodes, rusty relics, purple glass, miners' picks, prospectors' pans, parts for cars, and miscellaneous trivia. At one of the tables, a woman was working, her face screened from view beneath the bill of an old-fashioned sunbonnet.

"Pardon me," I said. "I'm looking for Josie Pearl's place."

"Well," answered the woman, somewhat gruffly, "You've found it! I'm Josie. What's on your mind?"

For the first time since my arrival, she glanced up. I found myself looking into one of the most unforgettable faces I have ever seen. Years were in that face—a great many years—but there was in it some indefinable quality that far overshadowed the casual importance of age. The eyes that bored into mine were neither friendly nor unfriendly. Rather, they were shrewd and appraising; as steady as the eyes of a gunfighter; as non-commital as those of a poker player.

She was not a large woman, but healthy-looking and robust, with determination and self-sufficiency written all over her. I felt instinctively that should she ever decide to move one of the surrounding mountains to the other side of the canyon, she would go about it calmly and deliberately, some evening after supper, perhaps. And she would move it—every stick and stone of it—and would ask no help.

That was my first impression of Josie. It still stands.

She wasn't sure that she wanted her life story written for *Desert Magazine*.

"Not that I don't like *Desert,*" she hastened to assure me. I do. Good magazine. Good down-to-earth stuff in it. It's just that I don't go much on publicity . . ."

But persistence and persuasion eventually won the day.

"All right," she agreed at last. "Since you put it that way, I'll give you the story—but don't be surprised if you find some of it a little hard to believe. I'm close to a hundred years old, girlie," she went on, her sharp eyes boring into mine, "and I've had about as strange a life as any person living!"

As we started across the yard toward the cabin, Josie glanced at my car. "You traveling alone?"

I said I was. "Good! Then you'll stay overnight." There was no question mark at the end of that statement.

"Her cabin," again to quote Ernie Pyle's observations, "was the wildest hodge-podge of riches and rubbish I'd ever seen. The walls were thick with pinned-up letters from friends, assay receipts on ore, receipts from Montgomery Ward. Letters and boxes and clothing and pans were just thrown—everywhere. And in the middle of it all sat an expensive wardrobe trunk, with a $7000 sealskin coat inside . . ."

The pin-ups were all there, just as Ernie had described them—the assay reports and newspaper clippings and letters and picture postcards and tax receipts and cash register slips. During the considerable lapse of time between Ernie's visit and mine, I'm sure that the collection on the walls had grown progressively deeper; and while I didn't see the $7000 sealskin coat, I'm willing to concede that it was lurking somewhere in the shadows.

"Have a chair," said Josie. "Anywhere you like. Here—this is the best one." With a vigorous sweep of her arm she sent sailing to the floor an accumulation of newspapers and magazines, and motioned me to the cleared seat. "Now," she said, "what is it you want to know?"

The story of Josie's life was presented with as much chronological order as may be expected in a freshly-shuffled pack of cards. It was presented while we were out in her small garden, cutting "loose leaf" lettuce and lamb's-quarter greens for supper, and gathering rhubarb for a pie. It was presented while Josie was rattling the grate and building a roaring fire in the big cookstove, and concocting the rhubarb pie, and grinding meat for hash, and making hot cornbread; while she was out in the chicken yard feeding her assorted fowls and rabbits and gathering eggs, and getting in wood for the night, and filling the lamps and cleaning their chimneys, and shooing flies away from the door and scolding the dogs.

*Home for Josie Pearl is this building "surrounded by nothing but desert," as Ernie Pile once wrote, ". . . almost like a community . . ."*

When Josie was still a small child, her parents had left their Eastern home to settle in New Mexico, where her father became interested in mining. It was an interest that quickly communicated itself to Josie, and at 13 years of age — when most little girls of that hoop-skirted era were still playing with dolls—she had found her first mine, subsequently selling it for $5000. By the time of the mining boom at Creede, Colorado, Josie was a young woman, and nothing could keep her from joining the stampede.

"Was that ever a time!" she shook her head with the memory. "I guess maybe you've heard Cy Warman's poem:

*"The cliffs are solid silver,*
*With won'drous wealth untold,*
*And the beds of the running rivers*
*Are lined with the purest gold.*
*While the world is filled with sorrow,*
*And hearts must break and bleed—*
*It's day all day in the daytime,*
*And there is no night in Creede!*

"That's the way it was—everything roaring, night and day. Gambling, shootings, knifings. I got a job as a waitress. Bob Ford and Soapy Smith always ate at one of my tables. Every Sunday morning each of them would leave a five dollar gold piece under his coffee cup for me. Fine fellows, both of them. I never could understand how Bob could have shot Jesse James like he did . . ."

I asked if she was in Creede when Ford was murdered.

"Indeed, I was!" said Josie. "I was waiting table when I heard the shooting and folks began yelling. I ran outside to see what was happening . . . and there lay Bob, all bloody and still. Yes," she nodded, "I was there . . ."

In 1892, Josie became the wife of Lane Pearl, a young mining engineer and Stanford graduate. For a while she operated a boarding house, patronized largely by men from the Chance, Del Monte, Amethyst and Bachelor mines, of Creede vicinity. Later, she and her husband moved to California; then to Reno, where she worked for a time at Whittaker hospital. And then came the strike at Goldfield.

"We were among the first ones there," she recalled. "I got a job waiting table at the Palm restaurant, owned by a Mr. French, from Alaska. He paid me four dollars a day, plus two meals, and my tips. There was no end of gold in circulation, and all the men tipped as if it were burning holes in their pockets.

"Mr. French had a rule against hiring married women, so I had taken the job under my maiden name. Lane would come in and sit down at one of my tables and eat, but we never let on that we were husband and wife. One day, Mr. French said, 'You know, Josie, I think that young mining engineer who eats in here all the time, is sort of sweet on you.' They never caught on."

With Goldfield beginning to languish, Lane Pearl was called to take charge of one of the leading mines at Ward, Nevada, a present day ghost town, a few miles south of Ely. He was still employed there when the influenza epidemic swept the country in 1918. Not even the most remote mining camps were spared, and in November of that year, Lane succumbed to the dread malady. He left his wife of 26 years, by then a woman approaching middle age, and at loose ends.

Even the loss of her idolized husband could not dull her love for the rocky soil of Nevada, and its mining towns. Restlessly she began drifting from camp to camp, operating miners' boarding houses from one end of the state to the other.

"At Betty O'Neil, a camp southeast of Battle Mountain, I made $35,000 in three years, running a boarding house . . . and then turned around and sunk the whole thing into a mine, and lost it. More than once I've been worth $100,000 one day . . . and the next day would be cooking in some mining camp at $30 a month! But I always managed to keep my credit good. Right today," she declared, "I could walk into any bank in this part of the state and borrow $5000 on five minutes' notice!"

The older she got, the more mining became an obsession. Eventually she had gravitated toward northern Humboldt county, had acquired some claims there in the hills, and had been working them since.

"Of course," said Josie, "I still do a bit of prospecting, now and then. Just knock off work at the mine, jump in my old pick-up, and strike out to see what I can find. Last week I was up in Idaho, looking at a uranium prospect. Scads of money in some of this new stuff . . . Scads of money!"

At Winnemucca I had been told that Josie had nursed half the sick miners in northern Nevada, and had spent thousands of dollars grubstaking down - at - the - heels prospectors who were eating their hearts out for one last fling at the canyons. When I referred to this phase of her activities, she brushed it aside impatiently.

"My real hobby," she declared, brightening, "is boys—homeless boys. Lord only knows how many I've taken in and fed and clothed and given educations. Lots of 'em were rough little badgers when I got them. Penitentiary fodder. What they needed most was love and understanding and to know that someone was interested in what they did. I'm proud to say every boy I've helped has turned into a fine man —not one of them has gone wrong. I receive letters from them all over the world. Most of them have good jobs; some are fighting with the armed forces; some are married and have families."

The dream of her life, she confided, is to make enough money to build and endow a home for boys.

"Something like Father Flanagan's Boys' Town," she said. "That's all I'm working for, now."

When I asked how she had happened to meet Ernie Pyle, she explained that she had gone to Albuquerque to visit her sister, who lived near the Pyles and had been nursing Mrs. Pyle through an illness.

"Naturally I met them both, and Ernie and I started to talk about the West, and about Nevada, and mining, and I told him that if his travels ever brought him to Winnemucca, I wanted him to come and see me. He said he would—and he did—several times.

"We corresponded back and forth all the rest of his life. In the last letter he wrote me, he said 'The happiest I will ever be again is the day I stick my feet under your table and eat a pot of those Boston baked beans!'

"Thirteen hours later," said Josie quietly, "he was killed . . ."

Dark clouds had been bunching over the bare hills to the northwest, and even before we finished with supper, a stormy gale was sweeping across the yard and the air had turned bitterly cold. With the dishes washed, the assorted livestock fed and sheltered and the lamp lighted, we drew our chairs close to the glowing cook stove and there we talked far into the night.

Josie seemed to draw upon an inexhaustible fountain of experiences. She told of loneliness; of what it meant to be the only woman in mining camps numbering hundreds of men. She told of packing grub on her back through 20-below-zero blizzards, of wading snow and sharpening drill steel, and loading shots; of defending her successive mines against highgraders and claim jumpers and faithless partners.

"More than once," she said, "I've spent a long cold night in a mine tunnel with a .30-30 rifle across my knees . . ."

And there had been lawsuits. Lawsuits without end.

"She said gold brought you nothing but trouble and yet you couldn't stop looking for it," Ernie Pyle had written. "The minute you had gold, somebody started cheating you, or suing you, or cutting your throat. She couldn't even count the lawsuits she had been in. She had lost $15,000 and $60,000 and $8000 and $10,000, and I don't know how much more. 'But what's $8000?' she said. 'Why $8000 doesn't amount to a hill of beans. What's $8000?' Scornfully."

How well, how very well, he had known her.

Late that night, long after Josie and I had retired and the fire in the cook stove had died to gray embers, I lay wakefully in the darkness, listening to the wind as it beat at the windows and doors and whistled down the stove pipe and clutched at a piece of loose canvas and flung gravel against the side of the cabin. Now and then a jagged flash of lightning split the dark sky and distant thunder rolled and rumbled through the ranges.

Some time, on the day to follow, I would return to Winnemucca—to electric lights and sidewalks and dime stores and super markets—and Josie Pearl would be left alone to face the recurring storms of this high, lonely land. She would be left alone to cope with possible illness and accident, with primitive roads, and miring mud, and snowdrifts, and summer's withering heat and drouth and failing springs; and, most particularly, with the problem of daily needs that forever roost on the doorsteps of those who live a hundred miles from the nearest town.

It was impossible to imagine a stranger sort of existence for a woman —particularly a woman of advanced years; yet, I had that day seen enough of Josie to know that as long as she lived and retained her health, she would face the challenge of each new morning with hope and courage and a wonderful enthusiasm for whatever that day might yield.

"She's straight out of the pages of the Old West . . . and the last of her kind," Marge Birnie had said.

I was beginning to understand what she had meant.

## ANSWERS TO QUIZ

Questions are on page 8

1—Iron pyrites.
2—Overland stage operation.
3—Salt beds in the bottom of the sea.
4—Fossils.
5—Craft for crossing water.
6—A California-bound gold-seeker.
7—Bisnaga.
8—Nickel.
9—Utah.
10—Wickenburg.
11—Colorado River.
12—Coronado.
13—Raton, in New Mexico.
14—Virginia City.
15—Lieut. Beale.
16—Bird.
17—Monument Valley.
18—Utah.
19—Painter of the desert landscape.
20—On the California-Nevada border.

# Lost Hardin Silver

## *Mystery or Hoax?*

*It rose from the desert floor like a broken fang — the ruins of a 90-year-old silver ore mill at Hardin City ghost town, Nevada.*

By NELL MURBARGER
Photos by the author
Map by Norton Allen

**Had Charles Isenbeck, German scientist, really found the lost silver lode that J. A. Hardin and his companions once stumbled into? Or was he the greatest fraud ever to live in Hardin City? The silver had been there; many people saw it. Then—it suddenly disappeared.**

WHEN LONG shadows creep through the canyons, and the night grows dim and large, desert men press closer to dying campfires and talk seems drawn to lost mines and buried treasure. Up in northwestern Nevada, the tale men tell is that of the Lost Hardin Silver.

Three generations of men have pondered that story, but the mystery of the Hardin Silver is still unsolved!

In the first place, there would seem ample reason to doubt that any silver ever occurred in the locale ascribed to the Hardin deposit; yet, 90-odd years ago, men were so confident of that treasure's abundance, they founded a frontier town, built homes and erected three ore mills.

Groundwork for the Hardin story was laid in 1849 when a California-bound emigrant train—comprising 14 wagons and 200-odd members—one night made camp at Double Hot Springs, a few miles north of Black Rock Point, in Nevada's Black Rock Desert.

Upon breaking camp, on the morning following, the wagon captain delegated three men to go in search of wild game for food—one of that trio being J. A. Hardin, a wheelwright. The huntsmen, according to the plan, were to swing through a low range of hills paralleling the trail on the east, and later cut back to overtake the slow-moving wagons.

After several hours of unrewarded tramping through the hills, the men started down the west slope of the mountain to rejoin their party.

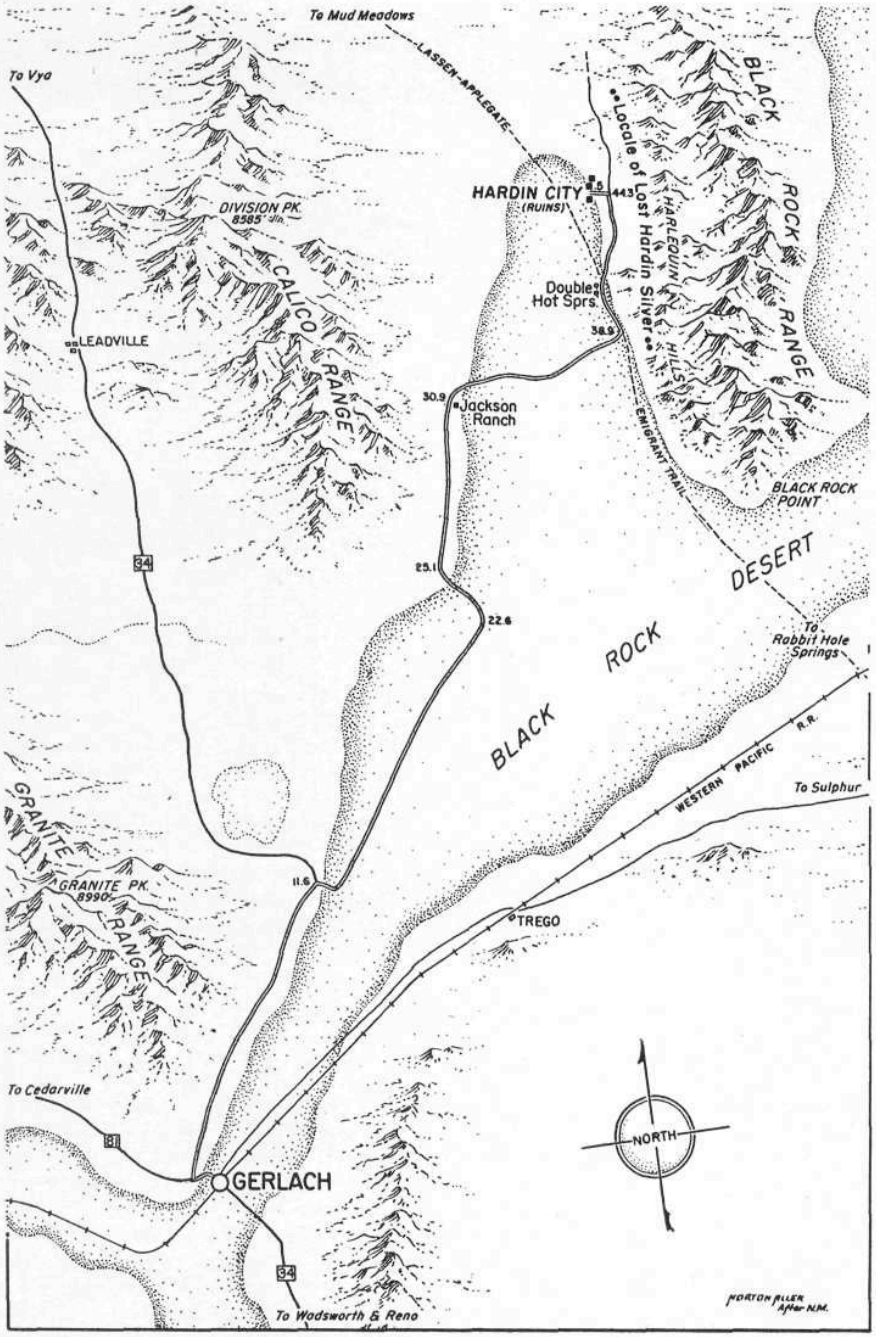
During their descent they came upon a deposit of soft material, similar to volcanic ash. Floundering across it they were attracted by glittering bits of stone scattered on the surface. One of the trio suggested it might be native silver, and the men filled their hunting bags with as much as they could carry.

When they rejoined their companions that evening at Mud Meadows, the ore samples caused a stir of excitement among the emigrants in the train. But provisions were low and the Black Rock country was swarming with hostile Indians and it was agreed that the caravan should not delay for further prospecting.

Eventually the wagon train reached California, and Hardin settled in Petaluma, established a wagon shop, and soon was doing a flourishing business. His companions found profitable employment, and since the Indians in Nevada were reported to have become increasingly hostile, a return trip was deferred from month to month.

As years passed, prominent and wealthy Californians urged Hardin to lead an exploration party to the scene of discovery; and after months of delay, Hardin, in 1858, agreed to do so.

Using Double Hot Springs as his




initial landmark, the leader retraced as best he was able the route taken by his hunting party nine years before. All went well until he reached the exact point on the mountain where he believed the silver should be; and there Hardin halted and stared about him in bewilderment!

On all that slope, there was not one landmark he could recognize! The only explanation seemed to be that devastating landslides had smothered the area. Either that, or the Petaluma man had misjudged his distances or directions, or had confused his landmarks.

Although he hunted it all the rest of his life, he never found the Lost Hardin Silver.

Others sought it, too.

L. D. Vary, O'Donnell and Jennison, and Judge Harvey and Steve Bass, Johnny Thacker, and Jo Voshay—all of them left campsites on the Black Rock. But the deepest mark of all was left by Charles Isenbeck.

Isenbeck was a humbug or he was the most astute scientist and shrewdest operator who ever worked on the Hardin silver! It's all a point of opinion.

Up in Idaho, at that time, the Poorman mine was disgorging riches from a black, waxy-looking ore. When a prospector who had seen that ore, now discovered in the Black Rock country a vast deposit of a faintly similar material, word spread that the source of Hardin's silver had been found, and the rush was on!

But Black Rock ore failed to return anything but goose eggs. Samples were sent to assayers all over the country; and every assay certificate brought back the same disheartening tale—not even a trace of silver!

When someone recalled the occurrence of a "similar ore" in the vicinity of Freiberg, Germany, a sample of the black, waxy stuff was forwarded to Charles Isenbeck, eminent Freiberg chemist.

Isenbeck's report on that ore had the immediate effect of turning night into day, and bringing rejoicing out of despair! The ore was rich beyond man's wildest dreams—some of it running as much as one pound of silver to four pounds of rock!

Or, so said Isenbeck, and the German chemist thought he could work out a process of milling the ore.

Isenbeck was given all the time he wanted—more than two years of it—during all of which period he was carried on the payroll of Black Rock's most important mining company as a research chemist and was pulling down a fabulous salary. (Rumor said $1000 per month!)

In his report for the fiscal year 1866-67, filed with the State Surveyor General, Humboldt county's assessor and surveyor gave extended praise to the Black Rock district and, in closing, planted this thought: "If Isenbeck succeeds as he expects, the people of Blackrock and the whole country should erect a statue to his memory built of solid silver . . ."

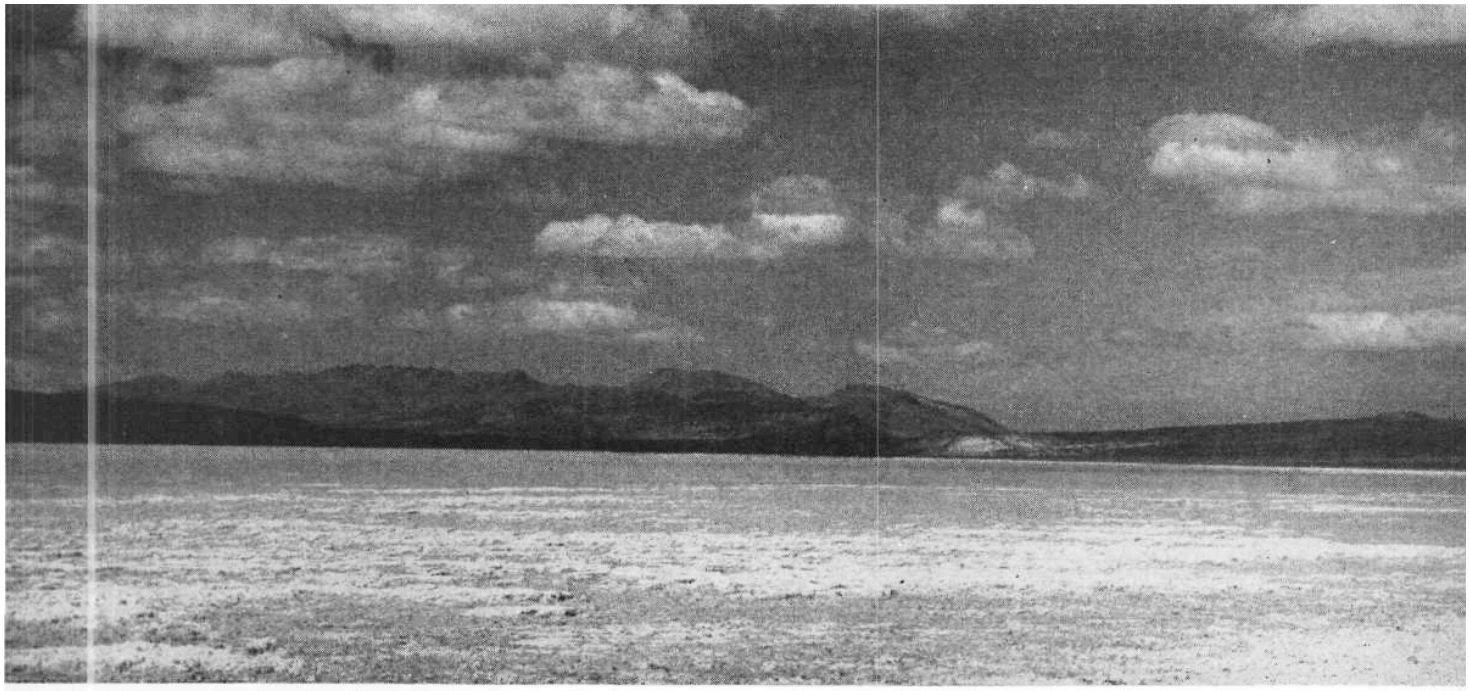
But the *Humboldt Register,* of Unionville, took a dim view of this report—or of any report favorable to the Black Rock. For several months past the *Register* had been characterizing Isenbeck as a "a prince of humbugs," his followers as "victims of insanity," and the Black Rock as a fraud and swindle. And now, muttered the *Register,* a "statue of solid silver" to Isenbeck alluded to by the Humboldt county assessor "was evidently intended to mean two uprights with a cross beam and a rope in the center . . ."

So time marched on, with half the newspapers within 200 miles of Hardin City battling for the glory and honor of the district, and the other half whetting their knives for the kill.

They had not long to wait.

The axe fell early in 1869 in the form of Uncle Sam's yearbook, *Mineral Resources of the States and Territories West of the Rocky Mountains,* compiled and edited by Rossiter W. Raymond, special commissioner of mining statistics.

After stating that the Black Rock district had been the scene "of hopes



*Somewhere along the edge of the great Black Rock Desert playa millions of dollars worth of silver ore may be hidden forever.*

as wild and disappointments as overwhelming as any recorded in the history of American mines," Raymond carried through with a lengthy resume of the Black Rock story.

"It was not long before the story found credence that a new ore of silver had been discovered in the black wax of Humboldt County," stated the Raymond report. "Respectable assayers in the Pacific states, and in New York, flatly contradicted the popular delusion. But the Black Rock people had an assayer of their own—a man by the name of Isenbeck—who claimed that no one but himself could extract the silver from these peculiar ores. He worked by what he called the Freiberg process, and made use of a peculiar flux . . . Of course, Mr. Isenbeck's secret flux contained a compound of silver.

"Six or seven years passed away in experiments and explorations . . . At last, in 1867, Mr. Isenbeck announced that he was ready to work the rock on a large scale and 13 tons were hauled . . . from different ledges . . . The result announced was $70 to $400 per ton! A renewed excitement was the consequence . . . A mill was built in the Black Rock country to be managed by Isenbeck. Two others were put in active preparation. But Mr. Isenbeck could not afford to use his flux on a large scale; and before operations commenced, he disappeared from the public eye.

"The Black Rock miners, who had shown for six years a grim determination and perseverance worthy of respect . . . abandoned their mines in despair. Houses, mills, everything was left as it stood, and in the summer of 1868 there was not a human being left in the district. Even thieves would not go there to steal the abandoned property. An expedition sent to the region by Mr. Clarence King confirmed the opinion of all scientific men from the beginning, that Black Rock was a swindle . . ."

The mystery surrounding Hardin City had grown ever deeper with the passing of time.

Partly for this reason and partly due to a general interest in the Black Rock Desert, I had begun reading every word I could find on the Hardin silver—old history books, old mining reports, old emigrant diaries, and almost endless columns of blurred six-point type in 90-year-old newspaper files. The more I read of those conflicting reports, the more confused I became; and, finally, I knew I would have to go to Hardin and see for myself

During my five years of Hardin City research it had been my good fortune to meet Nellie Basso, of Lovelock, Nevada. An advanced mineral collector, amateur assayist, and devotee of Black Rock history, Nellie, too, was eager to go to Hardin. But one important obstacle stood in our way: For all our combined researching, we still didn't know how to find the place!

Even Humboldt County officials were unable to offer any help in pinpointing the old town's location.

It was Ed Green, of Lovelock—our guide and companion on many other desert jaunts—who came to our rescue.

"Okay!" he said, at last. "I'll string along with you! If we can find Hardin City, we'll find it! Otherwise, we'll at least see a lot of country."

As it isn't considered advisable to enter the more remote sections of the Black Rock with only one vehicle, our departure from Lovelock on a morning in July found us driving both Ed's pick-up and my old desert-toughened sedan. Our immediate destination was Gerlach, in central Washoe County.

It was here we filled our gasoline and water tanks and gave our tires and cooling systems a final check. Then we dropped in for a brief visit with Sheriff "Cisco" Ashenbrenner. Whenever we're heading into isolated territory, we like to have some responsible person in the vicinity know where we're going and when we expect to be back.

The sheriff advised us to go "to the old Jackson place," 30 miles north of Gerlach, and there cut east across the playa toward the Black Rock range. In that way, he said, we would hit the old emigrant trail just south of Double Hot Springs.

"You'll be traveling across the old lake bed," he explained, "and if you're a praying person, pray you won't hit a soft spot! You can see 'em if you keep your eyes open," he went on. "They're generally a little whiter than the surrounding flat; and if you think grease is slippery, that's because you've never been trapped in one of these Black Rock sinks!"

With our business at Gerlach thus completed, we headed north on the trail of a lost city, and the hoped fulfillment of a long dream.

After following the old Leadville road for about a dozen miles, we turned sharply into the desert, and five minutes later found us rolling soundlessly across the bland face of that great sink where thousands of years ago had lain the deep blue water of Lake Lahontan.

We were entering, now, a wide world —wide, and wild, and terribly big and empty! All around us stretched the pale magnificence of the Black Rock playa—a devil's dancefloor, 60 miles in length; a cream-colored void in which was visible not one sign of life,

neither plant nor animal, nor bird, nor insect; not even one greasewood, or a lone blade of salt grass! Whenever I cross this Black Rock sink, it is with the strange feeling of having been reborn into another era of geologic time.

The entire lake bed was our highway. Wheel tracks led off crazily, circled and reconverged. There were no road signs, or bridges, no guard rails, no gutter. There was no speed limit, no traffic officers, no traffic. As the sheriff had said, you paid your money and took your choice . . . and all the while, you sat a little tensely in your seat, and the cords in your neck grew a little tight as you watched for those treacherous soft areas of which you had been warned.

We bored into the northeast for a dozen miles, then bent to the northwest and the west; and, gradually, the slatelike surface of the dry lake bed was replaced by drift sand and scattered greasewood. Having bounced over the last rough hummock of the old beachline, we again turned north —now on a dirt road that paralleled the east base of the Nevada Calicos.

Thirty-one miles north of Gerlach we passed the old Jackson place; and here, as the sheriff had directed, we swung due east toward the Black Rock range. Seven miles across the unwrinkled face of the playa, another mile of bouncing over the rough hummocks of the easterly shoreline; and, again, we were heading into the north.

Torrents of water, pouring from tinder-dry canyons during this area's infrequent but violent storms, had cut the trail in a series of sharp, deep gashes. Some of these gullies required shovel work; most could be crossed with care, and low gear. There were stretches of knife-like rock, and gravel-filled washes, and pockets where powdery blow sand had drifted deeply over the trail. If it had been difficult to travel this road a century before, it was no less difficult today—it was still the same road—but we eased the cars through, at five miles an hour, and the miles wore away.

A smear of green tules and salt grass, vapory white steam rising from twin cauldrons of near-boiling water, a white-encrusted flat, and a long-deserted cabin built of old railroad ties, announced our arrival at Double Hot Springs. Here the wagon train had made camp on the night prior to the discovery.

Soon after leaving the hot springs, we began paralleling the Harlequin Hills — a gaudily-colored range that stretches along the horizon a few miles east of the trail.

My eyes were still searching those lonely canyons and bare ridges when Ed halted the pick-up; and when I had coasted to a dusty stop behind him, I saw he was grinning.

"Over there—" he said, jerking a thumb toward the west. "What's that?"

Narrowing my eyes against the wind, I could make out a white stone upthrust, like a broken fang; and all in a quick, incredulous flash, I knew it was an old mill chimney!

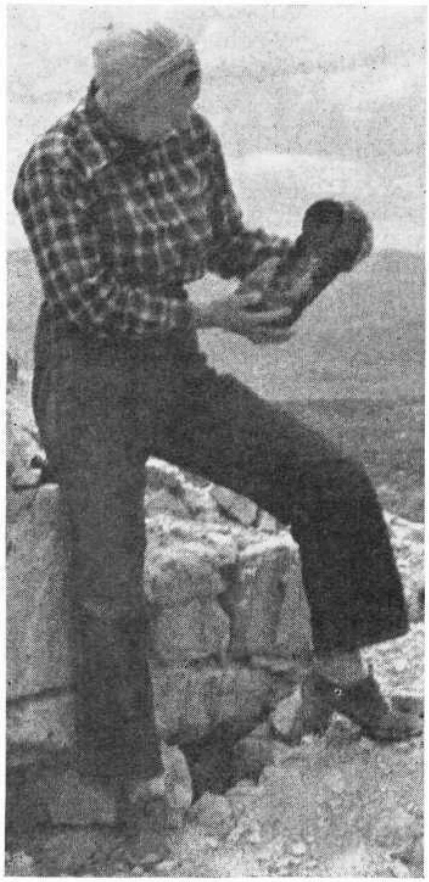
It was Hardin City!

Closer inspection revealed the ruins of two mills—neither one large or tall, but strangely imposing in that wide, empty land where no other man-made structure was visible. Situated about 100 yards apart, each of the ruins was perched on the lip of a low bank that dropped away to a clump of tules, a seeping spring, and a pond of chocolate-colored water huddled in the dead white somnolence of the flat.

Before we had time to examine the mills, we had made another discovery —a 90-year-old quicksilver flask! Half-buried in the white salt crust, the iron container was eaten deeply by corrosion and so fragile it crumbled at our touch.

And while we were still exulting over this find, Ed stumbled upon an old arrastra! In a copy of the *Humboldt Register* for 1865, I had read that Steve Bass was installing at Hardin City one of these Mexican type ore grinders; but after all these years, I had never dared hope that we might find it!

*Author examines quicksilver flask found in mill ruins.*



The pit—about six feet in diameter, and lined by wooden planking—was refilled to the brim with blown sand; the rotted stump of the pivot post was still visible; the old grinding stones were still lying beside the pit; and, nearby, lay the flat paving stones with which that pit had been floored. Concentric lines, etched into their top plane by the circling boulders, left no question in our minds concerning the original use of those stones.

We established camp at the east edge of "town" — our campsite, an almost-limitless flatness encrusted with white mineral salts and sparingly dotted with small saltbrush.

In our prowlings of the following day, we found the ruins of the third mill. Largest of the trio, it was a vivid sort of structure built of black and red volcanic boulders, combined in some semblance of a color pattern. Sections of these walls were still standing to a height of ten feet.

Numerous low mounds, roughly squared, marked the sites where adobe or sod buildings had formerly stood, and melted away; and around these mounds we found old square nails and sun-purpled glass, a few bone buttons, and necks of green bottles—older and cruder in form than any we had seen before! We also found several graves, outlined with volcanic boulders, and with black basalt for markers. Time, and the sand-blasting wind, had erased whatever identification those markers once may have carried.

All the while, naturally, we were keeping sharp watch for the black "waxy material" that had inspired that long-ago excitement; but except for some black stratification in the Harlequin Hills to the east, we had seen nothing that remotely resembled the the ore described.

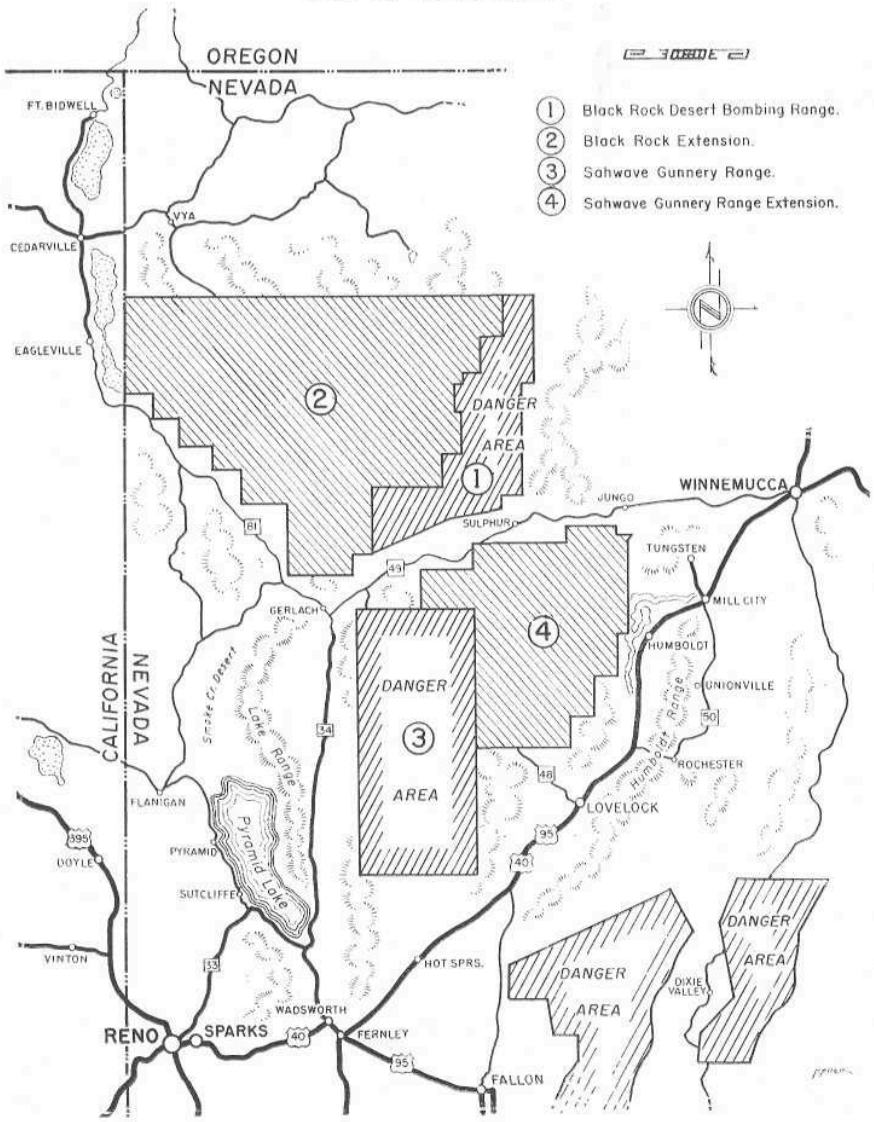
"Candidly," said Ed, who has spent a good share of his lifetime prospecting the Nevada hills, "I don't think there was ever a pound of ore here! Non-metallics, maybe; not silver or gold . . ."

Nellie's faith in the Hardin treasure was still unshaken, but I sided with Ed. After all, there was plenty of evidence to uphold his theory, and not very much to support the rumor of silver's presence. We continued, however, to prospect the washes and flats; and by the time we left the Black Rock, I felt we had given the place a fair examination, and that Rossiter W. Raymond, Uncle Sam's mining statistician, had been right: There had never been any ore here, and Hardin City had been nothing but a swindle!

# 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




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


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-Sahwave 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!

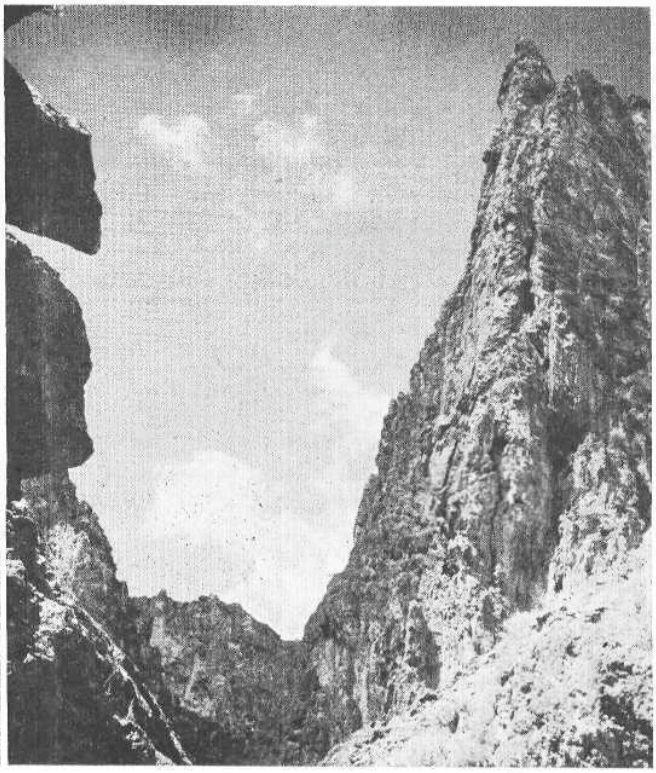
My liking for this strange, remote area stems chiefly, I suppose, from the fact that it is still much like the Old West of pioneer times.

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, rockhounds—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.

*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-Sahwave 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 the1860s. 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.

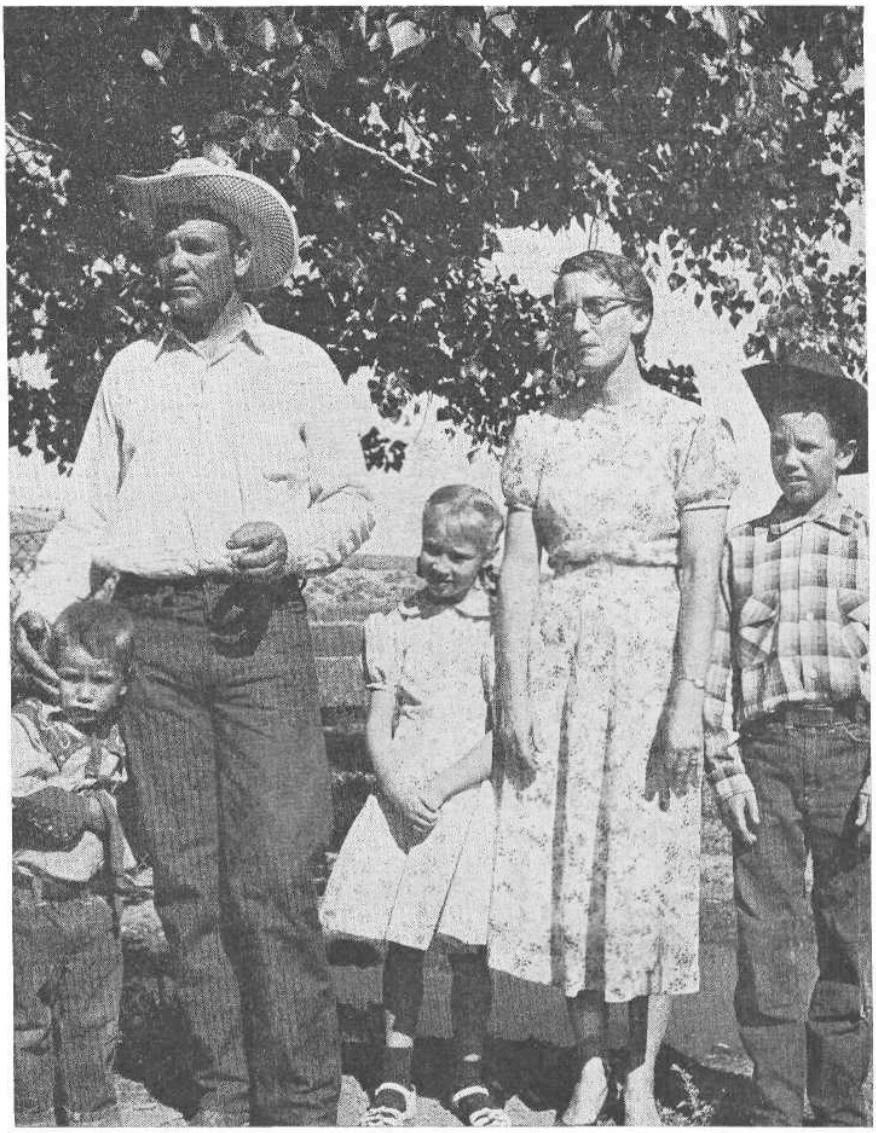
I passed the turn-off road to Lost Creek Canyon, where a delightful grove of quaking aspen shades a small clear stream of water. This and Grass Valley, nearby, constitute some of the most important range of Bare Ranch Cattle company, a California concern, which holds a permit to graze approximately 2000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

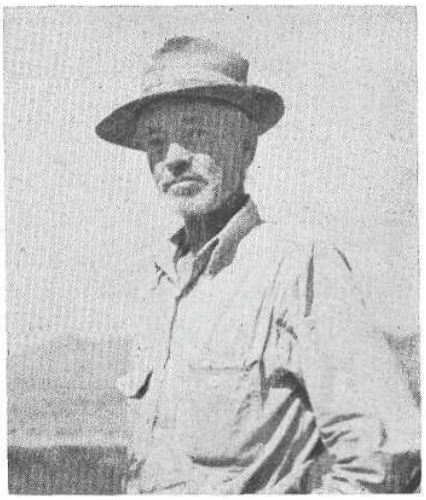
"I don't quite know what I'll do with myself if they take these mountains away from me . . ."

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 . . ."

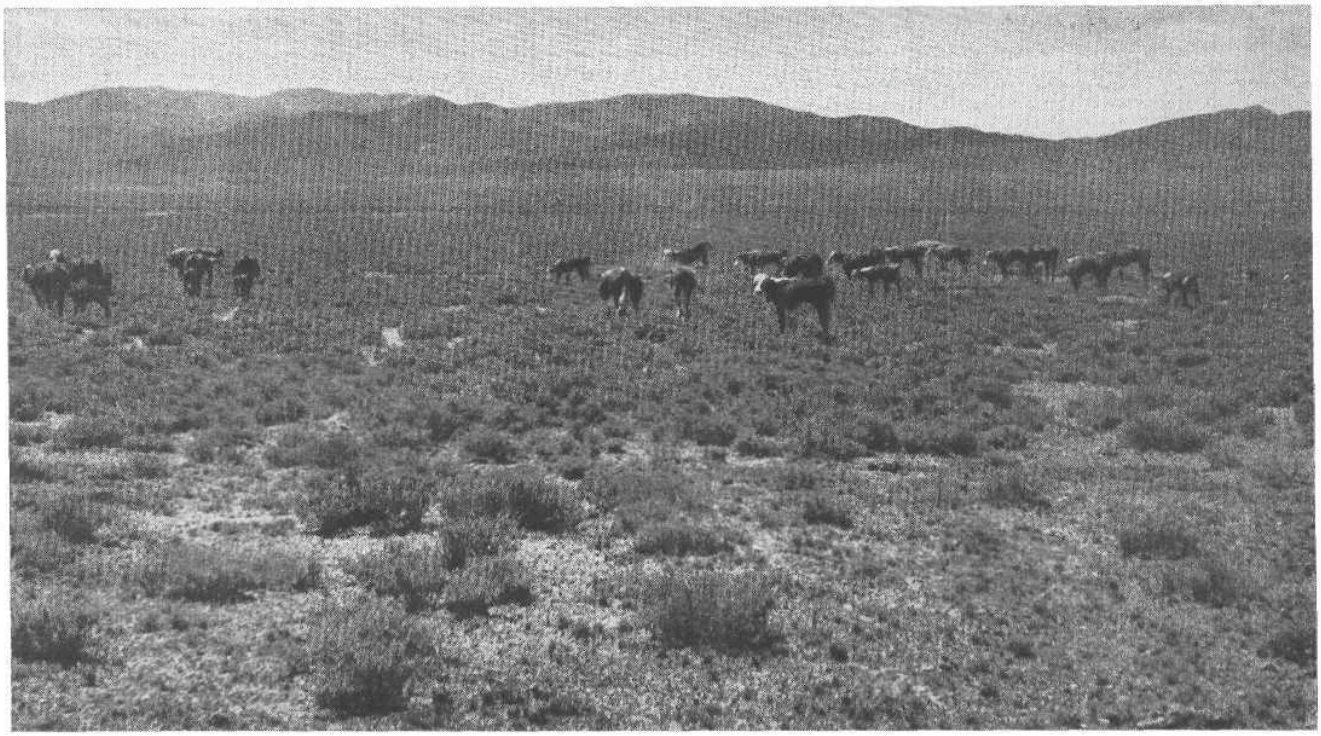
The same uncertainty was expressed by Bob Chandler, lifelong miner and resident in the Rosebud Canyon area since 1947.

"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!"

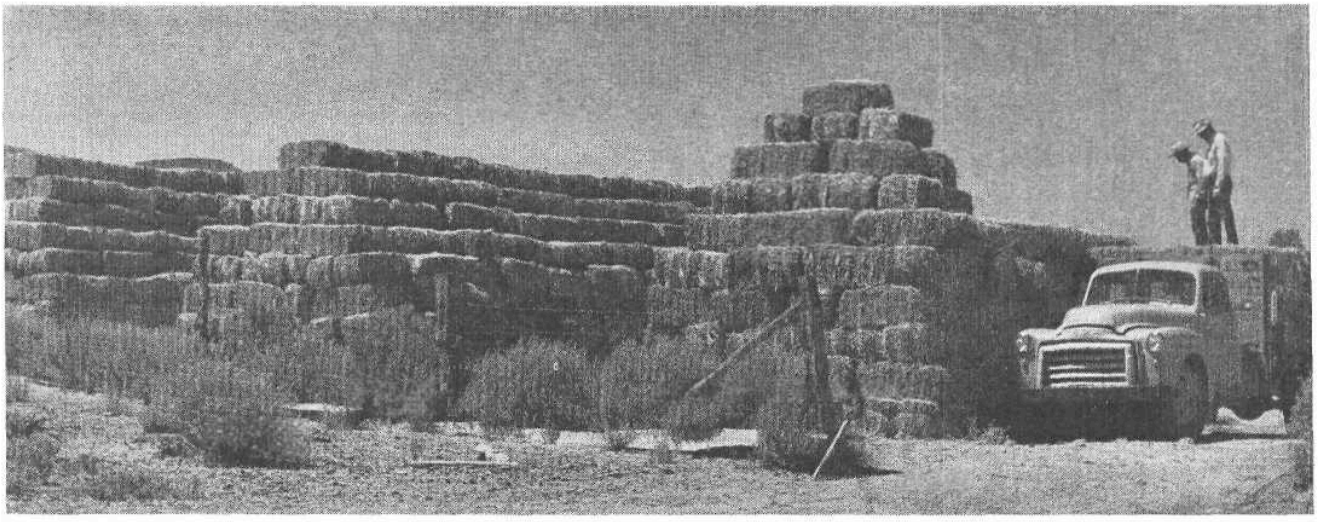
"We took $3500 worth of concentrates from our tungsten property in only 26 days, recently—yet the Navy refuses to recognize it as a working mine," said E. K. Farnham, who, with Mrs. Farnham, has spent the past several years building a comfortable camp and developing a scheelite mine at Porter Springs, 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



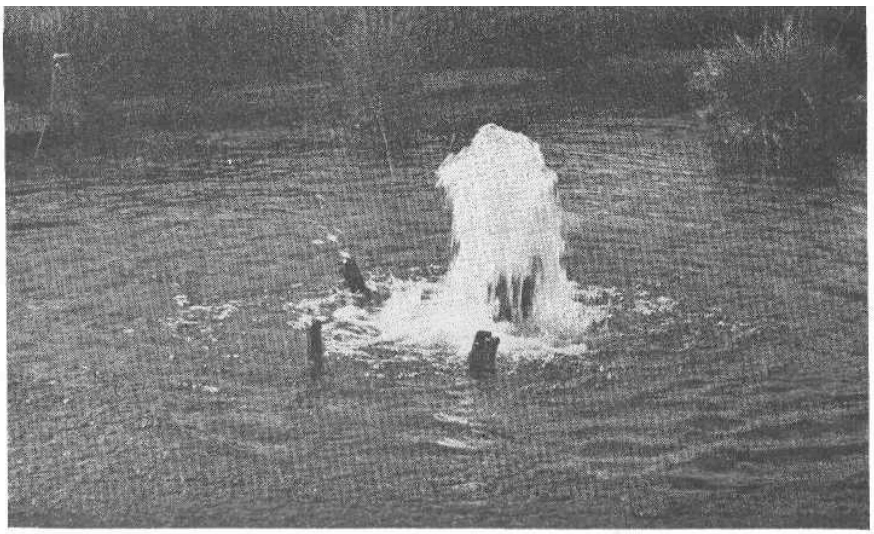
*When the Navy proposed to cease fire for two months in the year so that cattlemen could take their stock on and off the range, one of the ranchers remarked: "They seem to think that all a man has to do is turn a bull and some cows on the range and wait for them to grow into beefsteaks." Actually, the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

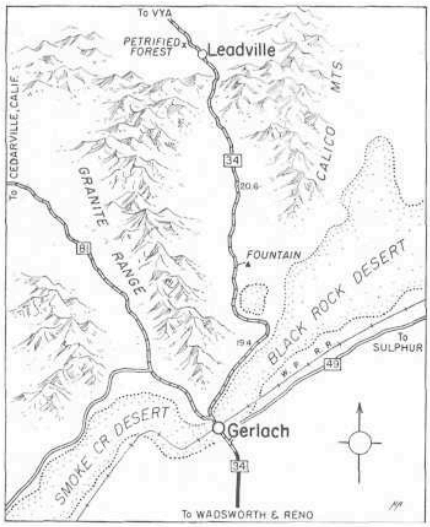
If you are one of those who share the view that the Defense agencies have gone too far in their encroachment upon the public domain, you can help correct the situation by writing your protest to your representatives in congress.

# The 40 Wilderness Miles North of Gerlach, Nevada

By PEGGY TREGO

*Desert Magazine's Nevada Travel Correspondent*

THE GERLACH-LEADVILLE "FOUNTAIN"




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 airlanes 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" 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

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 watercourse 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. ///




Statement Required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Acts of March 3, 1933, July 2, 1946 and June 11, 1960 (74 Stat. 208) showing the ownership, management, and circulation of Desert Magazine published monthly at Palm Desert, California, for October 1, 1960.

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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.)

# Tuff, si!

# Tufa, no!

by

Vern Miller

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.

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.*

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

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, mineralologists 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.

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 Winnemucca 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 tufaceous 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.

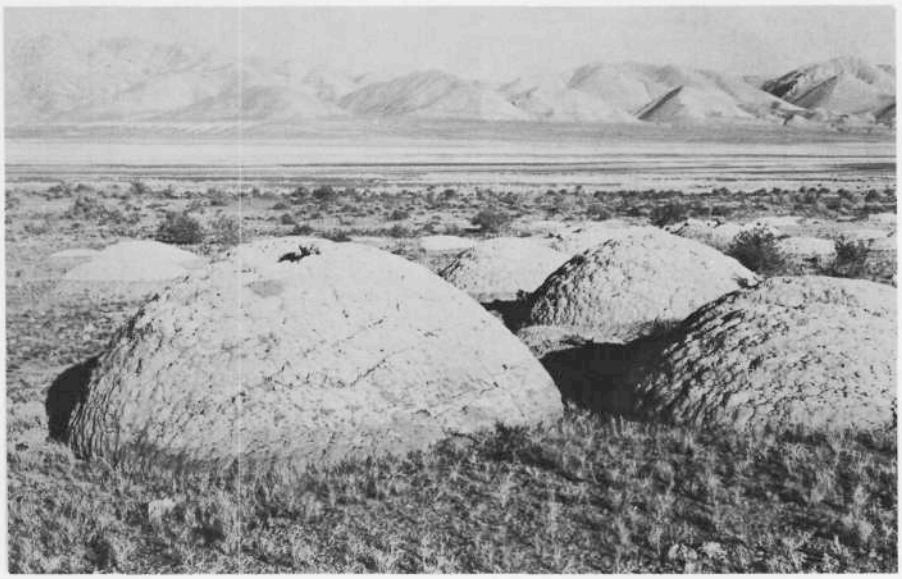
There is no need for rock hunters to chip away at giant tuffs and destroy their beauty in order to obtain a specimen, as smaller counterparts abound in the areas mentioned above.

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! ///

TUFF MOUNDS NEAR PYRAMID LAKE



**Northern Nevada has many interesting places such as seen on . . .**

# A Trip to Leadville

by Doris Cerveri

*Leadville, Nevada*

LEADVILLE, a small town now ghostly and deserted, did not make much of a splash in mining circles although production of lead and silver continued regularly each year from 1910 to 1923. Like all ghost towns it is an interesting place to visit and equally interesting is the route leading to it which passes through several communities abounding with historical significance

The stretch of highway from Reno to Leadville goes through Sparks, follows the Big Bend in the Truckee River at Wadsworth, is contiguous to Pyramid Lake, and continues north past now dry Winnemucca Lake. Sparks, three miles from Reno on U.S. 40 (Interstate 80), got its start when the Southern Pacific Railroad constructed a new installation and moved its round house and about 150 dwellings from Wadsworth. Although considered by many as a suburb of Reno and often called East Reno, it now has a population of approximately 10,000. It started out with about 1000 residents, mostly former Wadsworthites and by 1905 was the railroad terminal for northern Nevada.

From Sparks it is a smooth, scenic 25-mile drive through rugged Truckee River Canyon over a high-speed, four-lane freeway which by-passes Wadsworth. To pioneers of a century ago this portion of their long journey to the California gold fields was an arduous one. The road was so narrow and canyon walls so steep that cumbersome wagon trains had to travel in the bed of the stream for many miles. The river was so crooked they had to cross it as often as ten times in the course of a mile. The present highway was realigned and improved throughout the canyon although most of it still follows the Central Pacific right-of-way.

Known to weary emigrants as early as 1844 was Big Bend where the Truckee River turns before winding crookedly through this canyon. After crossing the Forty-mile Desert upon leaving the Humboldt River they were grateful when they reached the Truckee. Most of them camped at Lower Crossing, now Wadsworth, where there was a refreshing supply of grass for their cattle, cool water to drink, and an abundance of fish to eat. Reportedly the Townsend-Stevens-Murphy Party encountered the well-known Paiute guide, Capt. Truckee, at this place and named the river for him. Capt. John Fremont also camped in the area before continuing south to complete his expedition. Before the coming of the whites, Wadsworth was a seasonal village site for the Paiutes. The most disastrous conflict of whites and Indians in Nevada occurred in the vicinity of Big Bend during the Pyramid Lake Massacre of May 1860.

About 1854, William Gregory set up a trading post here known as Drytown which was a division point for teamsters. Later, when a railroad and supply depot was created by the Central Pacific, Wadsworth came into being and Drytown faded out. One might say Wadsworth started out with a bang for the tough little burg was only three months old when a bartender, Charles W. Humphries killed one W. Merritt. No trial was held because the victim had cussed his slayer prior to the shooting and in those days that was considered justifiable homicide.

The bustling town was considered one of the prettiest in Nevada, and as it was the maintenance point on the Central Pacific Railroad division between Salt Lake City and Sacramento, many people expected it would become the largest in western Nevada. The Southern Pacific Railroad later absorbed the Central Pacific, but Wadsworth continued to be a very prosperous community from 1890 to 1903. As mechanical progress shortened runs across the once perilous desert need for a base town was less urgent. Consequently the railroad decided to close the station and move the shops to Sparks.

Sleepy little Wadsworth received its second setback when the freeway bypassed the town, but the final blow came last fall when the Southern Pacific was granted their request made to the Public Service Commission to abandon a small rarely-used spur which was Wadsworth's only connection to the railroad system.

From Wadsworth the road continues for approximately 16 miles to the Pyra-

mid Lake Indian Agency at Nixon. A few hundred Paiutes living on the reservation hold their tribal council meetings here, and there is a trading post, post office, school, and community recreation center. For the most part Nixon consists of shacks. Recently, however, several attractive houses have been constructed.

As early as 1860 prospectors probing mountain ledges a few miles west of the south end of Pyramid Lake thought they had found another bonanza when they discovered traces of gold and silver resembling Comstock ore. Five town sites sprung up including Pyramid City, Cold Springs and Jonesville. For the most part, though, mineralized rock uncovered at all these sites proved of little value and the entire district died. Pyramid Lake today is noted for its good fishing, primarily cui-ui and cutthroat trout, and as a recreation area.

Winnemucca Lake, the south-west portion of which is included in the reservation, could be called Pyramid's twin. Actually both lakes are remnants of ancient Lake Lahontan, which once submerged the entire area. Until 1934 Winnemucca contained an abundant supply of fish, and geese and ducks lived in tule marshes along its shoreline.

The paved highway paralleling this dry lake bed traverses low hills, and sage-alkali-covered flatland meets the eye for many miles. In the surrounding area are many curious formations and perfectly shaped tufa mounds, some of which are called beehives. In the distance, and from both sides of the highway, spectacular mountains create a panorama of awesome scenery and desolate landscape. At the north end of the lake is Kumiva Peak, 9240 feet high; on the left Granite Peak rises 8990 feet out of precipitous Granite Mountains.

Numerous caves are located in both Pyramid and Winnemucca Lake areas. Field workers of the Nevada State Museum spent two months several years ago exploring high rocky buttes overlooking Winnemucca Lake where they excavated 10 different sites. Thousands of valuable artifacts were uncovered, as well as other evidence pointing to the habitation of man in the Lake area dating back approximately 10 to 20,000 years. Interesting and unusual petroglyphs, too, have been discovered in the Winnemucca Lake area.

Approximately 78 miles from Nixon, is the small community of Empire. This town is activated by the Pacific Portland Cement Company whose huge gypsum quarry and plant is the largest of its kind in the West. From 15 to 20 carloads of gypsum are shipped out each day and it is estimated their large deposit contains enough gypsum to last for at least 50 more years.

Six miles farther down the highway is the companion of Gerlach, with a population of about 400. This is a division point on the Western Pacific Railroad. It also serves as a supply base for mines, and a few cattle ranches scattered in the area. One mile north of town is Great Boiling Springs. The waters are comfortable for swimming all year around. Fremont camped here in 1843, as did many emigrants who followed the established route across awesome Black Rock Desert to California.

Traveling approximately 18 miles in the opposite direction from the Springs over a fairly good dirt road which skirts the edges of the Desert, one finds to the right about a mile off the road at the Fly Ranch, a multi-colored geyser. This is a geological oddity standing majestically in swampland. It is not a true geyser, although hot water spouts out day and night without a let-up. It started out in 1916 as a drilled artesian well. Throughout the years a large perpetual column of beautifully-colored substance formed by a flow of heavily mineralized water has slowly built up. Now over 20 feet high and still growing, it presents a most unusual sight. At the base of the geyser small holes and apertures constantly burp and spit up little bubbles of hot water.

Leaving this wonder, one continues down the same dirt road until reaching Fireball Junction. A left turn here leads up a narrow, winding road to Leadville. Numerous mine dumps adorn steep hillsides overlooking the Black Rock Desert. About six cabins and the ruins of a mill dot the terrain. Lead and silver ore was found at the Tohoqua mine in quartz veins. Minor deposits of zinc and gold were also found, as well as niter in crevices of rhyolite uncovered on the western side of the range.

In 1920 the Leading Mining Company took possession of the area. Production under this concern was $153,000 in 1921, and about $254,600 in 1922. The property consisted of three main claims developed by two shafts, a 1700-foot tunnel, and a 500-foot winze equipped with two 75 and one 100-horse power and semi-Diesel engine, compressor, electric locomotive, auto trucks, 7500-foot water line, and 30,000 gallon tank. Also in operation was a 35-ton mill and flotation plant. All this was incorporated in 1920 with capital stock of $1,500,000.

Like all mining activities, ore petered out, and production ceased. No one is living in Leadville at the present time, but some prospecting and leasing was done a few years ago. Prospectors and would-be miners never give up; there is always the possibility of finding a new vein leading to a rich bonanza. □

*Big Bend of the Truckee River*

*The old Billy Denio Homestead, right, of the early 1900s, still stands intact. At right, center, is the bunkhouse where the posses from two states took turns trying to bed down from the killing snow and cold before setting out on the trail of renegade Shoshone Mike and his band.*

*Opposite page: Our friends Eva and Ken Jacobs, discuss with Al Robertson the possibility of getting into the canyon to view the massacre site when the way is barred by wall-to-wall water!*

# Northwestern Nevada's Historic Little High Rock Country

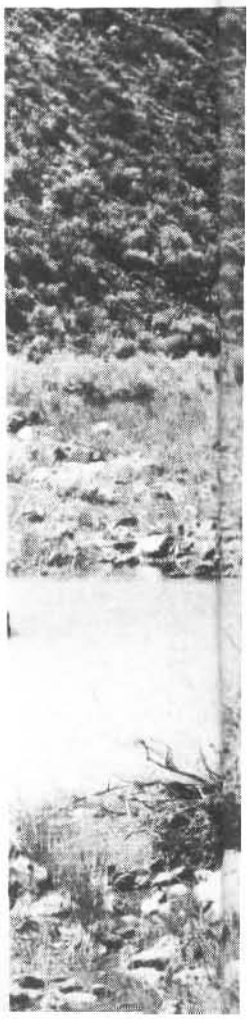
by DOROTHY ROBERTSON

WINTER IN northwestern Nevada is just too cold and windy for an exploring-for-fun trip. Conversely, summer months are much too hot. But both spring and autumn, say the months of May-June and mid-September-October are usually ideal prowling weather months.

This region is wide open sage, rabbit brush, buckbrush, juniper and pinyon pine country. Inhabited homesteads are rare; towns or hamlets are anywhere from 50 to 100 miles apart. So if you like to get away from elbow-to-elbow people, northwestern Nevada is for you!

We love exploring the unmade roads of this outback land. Most of these roads will accommodate the average automobile, but there is a good rule to follow in desert travel: Don't go exploring unknown country without adequate maps, water and gas, and, of course, take a leaf from old Noah's book—go two by two! Then if anything untoward should occur, the second vehicle can go for help.

While poking around this fascinating region we found three areas to be of particular interest. These are: Little High Rock Canyon, where a gruesome Indian



ambush and massacre of four Surprise Valley Basque ranchers (from nearby California) occurred back in 1911; Billy Denio's homestead which lies a few miles northward of the canyon, and site of the infuriated avenging posse that tracked down the Indians, and a knoll of pure opalite that lies between nearby Yellow Rock Canyon and Little High Rock Canyon.

Gerlach is the last gas and potable water stop for approximately the next 100 miles or so. Be sure you have enough of both to see you back to Gerlach, or west to the California line and the little town of Eagleville, on the other side of Forty-nine Pass. Sometimes called the Lonely Road—and for good reason—you could sit by the side of the highway all day without seeing another vehicle—so much for Route 34!

This whole area is Pioneer Country, even from before the days of '49, for this is the Lassen-Applegate Trail road. If you take the time to explore the northwestern end of High Rock Canyon you can see the wagon ruts still embedded in the rocky terrain; see the large caves mentioned by the emigrants. Signs pointing directions and mileage are


*Plaque set up at the mouth of Little High Rock Canyon, pointing the way to the actual massacre site.*

placed along the highway. Here and there historical monuments and plaques appear.

We made our last trip out on Route 34 which junctioned with Route 8A at Vya—nothing there but an old building housing a one-time maintenance station, and turned due south, heading for adventure.

Approximately 23 miles south of the Vya junction a signpost on the east side of the highway designates Little Indian Springs: 3 Miles; Nellie Springs: 1 Mile; Massacre Ranch 17 Miles,and Yellow Rock Canyon: 6 Miles. Follow the unmade road which winds around a low hill-slope to skirt a swampy area (in wet weather), then heads in a northeasterly direction. You will notice that en route there is quite a number of colorful Indian chippings to be seen here. This is the road to Yellow Rock Canyon, but at the road fork designating the Canyon road, turn right and follow the gentle rising slope for a couple of miles to a small knoll which you will see glistening in the sunlight. This is Opalite Hill!

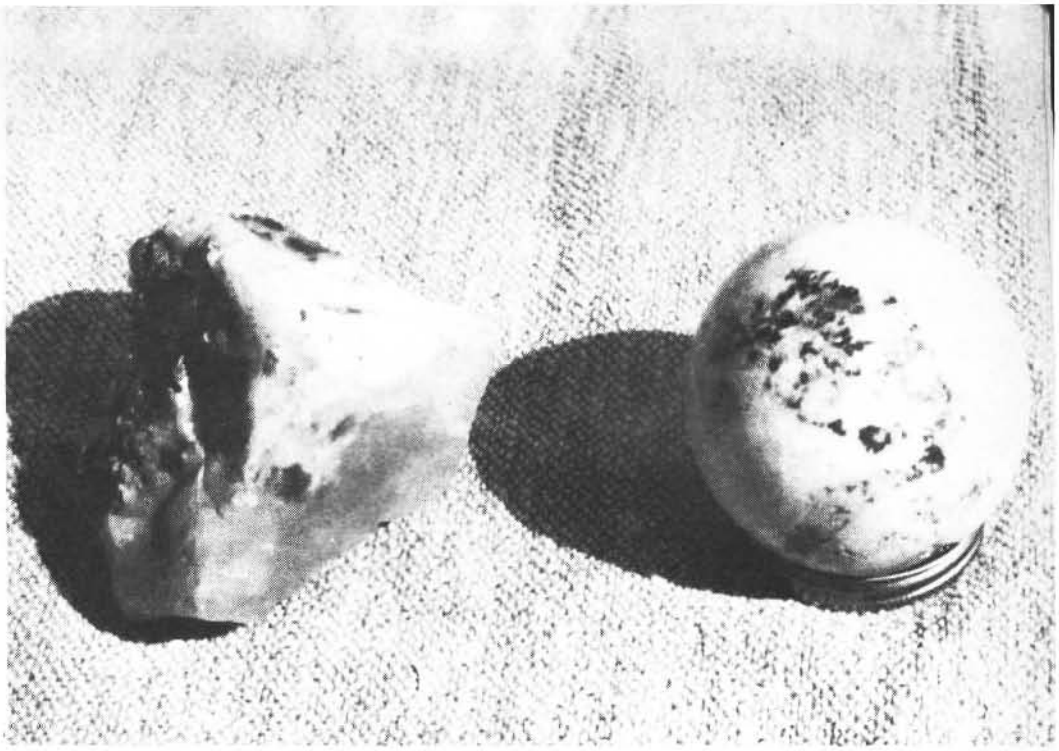
The knoll lies to the left of the road—you can't miss it. The beautiful creamy opalescent vitreous-like material comes in shades of yellow, orange and various browns. The poorer pieces make gorgeous decorative garden rocks.

Since this is a hard material to mine, we just picked up small pieces that lay around. Fractures are conchoidal. Some pieces worked up into nice cabochons, larger chunks worked into nice spheres.

After backtracking to Highway 34, proceed south (left turn) for approximately 12 miles where a wide road leads east. Look to the skyline along the eastern hills, and you will notice a rugged, natural gateway-like silhouette. This is the landmark which is the entrance to Little High Rock Canyon. Fairly new redwood signs now point the way. A short drive leads to the canyon-mouth where the Northern California Cedarville Troop 53, BSA has placed a commemorative plaque showing directions and mileage to the actual site of the ambush-massacre of the four Basque ranchers. This is rough, rugged volcanic country!

When we were there, there had been heavy rains just a few days prior to our visit, and the creek that runs through the canyon was now wall-to-wall. We were unable to hike the two miles in to the actual massacre site, much to my disappointment, for I had been told that the Indians' teepee willow poles were still in upright position on their hidden campsite.

Here, too, at the mouth of the canyon, there are many colorful Indian chippings



*Rough opalite specimen and sphere obtained from a large chunk.*

lying around—chippings made from obsidian, chert, rhyolite, jaspagate and chalcedony.

On your way out again you will notice a rough road branching off in a due north direction. This roadway parallels Route 34, and between tall stands of sagebrush, you can glimpse the highway itself. This road leads to Billy Denio's homestead. (If the road hasn't been messed with, it is only a few miles to the old homestead.)

I noticed at the time that the old signpost was missing. Hopefully, a new one is now in place. In any case, you can't miss the homestead because it is at the end of the road which runs beside a fenced pasture, watered by springs—and Route 34 is on the other side.

It is thrilling to those of us who are history buffs to stand on the site and recreate those olden days, back in 1911 when the old homestead was alive with buckeroos, lawmen and posses of avenging friends and relatives of the murdered men, as they milled around on their horses, getting ready to follow the Indians' trail. Even the old corral still stands, as does the old house and bunkhouse out-buildings.

This high desert country of Route 34—the Lonely Road—is a fascinating place to visit. The air is sweet and fresh and smogless; the effluvia one of sage and pinyon and juniper, besides the ever-present rabbit brush. At night, the coyotes howl and deer and sage hens and chukar call. It is a place to visit and clear the cobwebs of city life from your mind—at least for a blissful few days! □

*Almost hidden mouth of Little High Rock Canyon as seen from the access road in. At a distance, the rugged rocks show along the skyline as a sort of gate-way.*