

Coso

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COSO HOT SPRINGS

Little factual evidence exists that any large numbers of Indians used the Coso Hot Springs for other than occasional visits. Lack of fresh water in the vicinity make it an unlikely place for good hunting or good camping for primitive people. Closest fresh water is at Haiwee Spring about seven miles north of the hot springs or at Little Lake to the west.

As early as 1875 a geological team of the U. S. Army mentioned the hot springs in a massive technical report of a detailed survey of the United States west of the 100th meridian. This report makes no mention of an Indian population in the Coso Hot Springs area.

A botanist studying the Death Valley area in 189., Dr. Frederick Vernon Coleville, reports only about 25 Coso-Panamint Indians living in the Panamint Mountains.

The late Dr. A.L. Kroeber of University of California, who is still considered the ultimate authority on Indians of California, conducted intensive field studies throughout California in the 1920's. In his "Handbook of the Indians of California", first published in 1925 by the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution and reissued in 1952, Kroeber comments that the Kosō (Coso) Indian population was of the meagerest. In his words, "It is exceedingly doubtful whether the country would have supported as many as 500 souls; and there may have been fewer. In 1883 an estimate was 150; in 1891, less than 100; a recent one (in the 1920's), between 100 and 150."

As the gold fields in northern California played out miners drifted to the south exploring for precious metals throughout the eastern Sierra Nevadas, the White Mountains, the Inyos, the Coso and the Argus. A big strike at Corro Gordo high above the east side of Owens Lake; the discovery of silver at Coso Village, in the eastern Coso Mountains; and the mines at Darwin brought waves of prospectors to the area.

Ranchers saw excellent opportunity in the then green meadows of Owens Valley and the seasonal annuals of the desert hills. They formed the permanent base of whiteman population in contrast to the drifting population of prospectors and miners. Early patents on the lands of Coso Hot Springs were for cattle grazing.

But since man is ever searching for magical cures for his ailments, the mud and mineral water of the hot springs attracted the attention of enterprising promoters. A little health spa grew up in the area. Hot mud was piped into tubs for bathing; steam pits for cooking food were used and fresh water was derived by a primitive condensation method. (South of the white house near the entrance to Coso Hot Springs some of this crude condensation equipment may still be seen.)

Mineral water was bottled and sold also. Today, an old Coso Water bottle is a collectors item.

In an old brochure, Marcus Dailey who had the spa under lease, claimed the mud and the water cured everything from rheumatism to stomach ulcers and kidney ailments. Unabashed, he claims: "Mark Dailey's Original Coso Hot Springs holds the unique distinction of being the only springs in the world where all steam, mud, and mineral waters are 100% natural and all treatments are absolutely without human or scientific aid of any kind." Guests were required to furnish their own cooking utensils, dishes, bedding and food.

A revealing paragraph in the same brochure reads: "If you want to write or wire to Coso Hot Springs call or wire Coso Junction, California, and if you are told there is no such place tell the operator that Coso Junction is in Inyo County and there is a phone there. Our guests have been told on many occasions that there is no such place." Hardly evidence of great demand for the curative powers of the springs!

Presence of the quick-silver bearing mineral, cinnabar, was not recognized in the Coso region until 1929. J. J. Sanders who owned the property at the resort discovered presence of cinnabar first at Devil's Kitchen. Shallow trenches were dug here and at the hot springs during 1929 to sample the ore-bearing material. In 1931 and 1932, a little quicksilver was produced. In 1935, a battery of Johnson-McKay retorts with a daily capacity of one ton of ore was installed on the knoll between Devil's Kitchen and the hot springs. This operated seven months on selected ore.

In 1938 a Herreschoff furnace with a daily capacity of 25 tons was erected on the site of the retorts. This plant operated for a period of five months during 1938 and early 1939. Operations ceased in 1939 and the plant was removed in 1940. Failure to continue the work was due in part to metallurgical difficulties encountered in treating the unusual cinnabar ore.

According to records of the California State Division of Mines, the Coso district produced 231 flasks of quicksilver worth \$16,865 between 1931 and 1940. Of this total, 92 flasks were taken from the retorts and 124 from the furnace in 1938 and 1939.

During the 1920's and 1930's the property on which the mines and the resort are located was in almost continual litigation, bankruptcy proceedings and shifts of ownership. Several foreclosures are found in a complex of title chains of record during these decades.

The property, including all private holdings, on which the hot springs, mines and Devil's Kitchen are located was purchased in fee by the United States Navy when the Naval Weapons Center was established.

The Navy has developed instrumented test ranges in the area and on weekends admitted hundreds of visitors under controlled conditions to enjoy this quaint old historic site.

By a memorandum of understanding between the Naval Weapons Center and the Bureau of Land Management, about 500 head of cattle are grazed in this region under annual permit. Domestic stock is brought on this range in November and removed at the end of May each year. Burros that you may see in the area are some of the feral (wild) herds that roam lands of NWC at will. Wild, (feral), horses are frequently seen on the steep lava mesas that rise east of the hot springs. While burros are protected by law throughout the state of California, the Naval Weapons Center also protects its herds of feral horses as part of its extensive program of natural resource conservation and management.

All natural resources and historic and archaeological sites on lands of the Naval Weapons Center are administered under the same regulations that apply to national parks and monuments. Collection of specimens, souvenirs, disturbance to old buildings, petroglyphs, etc. is not permitted at any time.

The ground around the fumaroles (mud pots) is treacherous. Although it may appear solid, this is a brittle crust in many places where you can break through to boiling mud or super-heated steam vents. DO NOT GO BEYOND SAFETY FENCES. Keep children and pets under control at all times at the hot springs and at the Devil's Kitchen to prevent injuries.

Roads and trails beyond the resort area at Coso Hot Springs are suitable only for four wheel drive vehicles. Soft sand plus very rough terrain are encountered a short way along the old trails.