

Dirty Sock and Beyond

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Dirty Sock, once a spa for Indians and weary prospectors now has modern facilities and swimming pool.

EVER BEEN to Dirty Sock? If not, there is a possibility you have missed a number of other interesting spots around Owens Lake in Southern California's Inyo County.

Fall, winter and spring are the ideal times for exploring the Owens Lake region. Starting at the southern end of the lake a hard surface road toward Death Valley leaves U.S. 395 at Olancho. This route skirts the wind-swept Olancho sand dunes where numerous desert movies have been made. At 4.9 miles, where the power lines crosses, a left turn on a dirt road for .3 of a mile ends at a spa, known through the years as Dirty Sock. On some maps it is designated as Artesian Pool.

Like most mineral water locations there is a slight odor of chemicals which may be the reason for the name. Old-timers are divided on the spring's name. Some claim it used to smell like old socks while others believe it got its name from prospectors and weary travelers soaking their tired feet and washing out their socks. From past descriptions it appears the odor rising from the water is now far less offensive and the temperature of the water has changed from hot to warm.

Whatever Dirty Sock was, today it is a pleasant spa with a swimming pool, shaded picnic tables and scenery varying from the: snow-tipped, rugged Sierras of southern Inyo County to the great white expanse of the nearly dry Owens Lake. Man-made facilities add comforts and a windbreak hut the desert still edges in and

leaves no doubt that 100 years ago the old pool, reflecting the peaks of the Sierras, was a welcome sight to any traveler.

This spa, open to the public, not only commands a colorful view hut overlooks and is part of an exciting historical era. Geologists find evidence that 4,000 years ago the shoreline of a huge lake was 200 feet above the present valley floor. The mountains towered far higher and have worn down by slow moving ice and water headed for lower levels. At one time the lake overflowed into Death Valley. Later, evaporation left the present saline deposits on the valley floor and along the foothills of the Sierras.

The early explorers found friendly Indians around the lake and Dirty Sock was the scene of squaws doing their early morning wash. But when settlers moved in, taking the land they wanted without regard for the Indians' hunting area or living pattern, trouble started. Battles raged in the Dirty Sock area when the white man attempted to interfere in the Indian's ritual of eliminating ineffectual medicine men.



In Keeler the last of the old railroad cars that ran on the Carson and Colorado RR, rest in total abandonment a short distance from the depot that still carries the name but no longer serves a train.

No battles disrupt the peace around Dirty Sock today. Prospectors on foot and burro have been replaced by men in four-wheel-drive vehicles using metal detectors in their prospecting for gold and treasure.

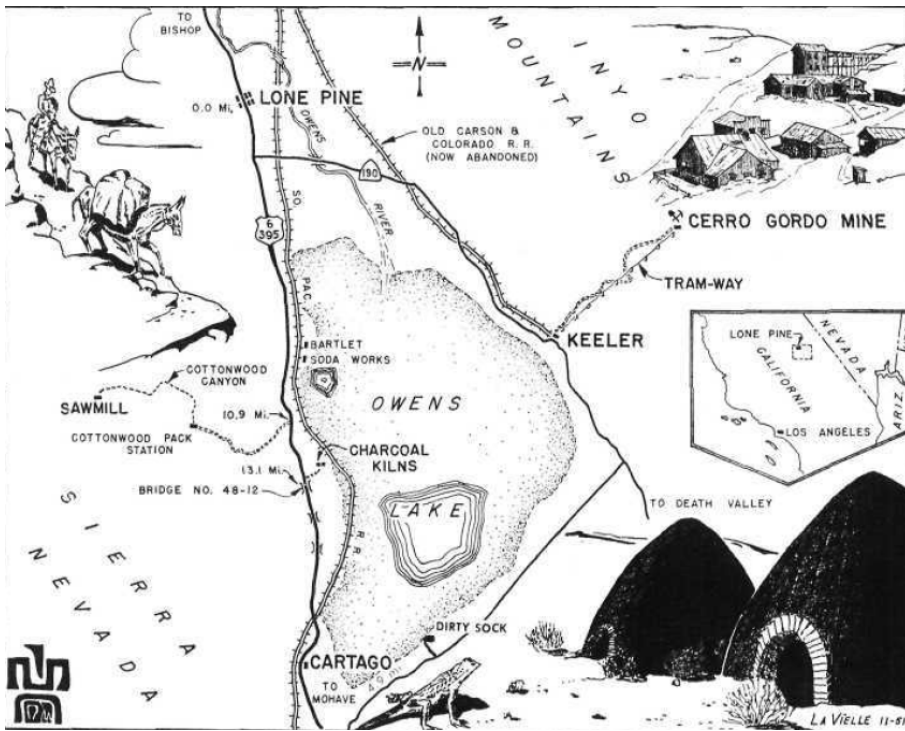
Few settlers remain in the valley since the water is drained off for use in Los Angeles and the Indians come to Dirty Sock as any other tourist to enjoy the warm mineral water, the view or to picnic in the sunshine.

Ten miles to the east the main road joins State 190; turning to the left, the route continues between the ancient shoreline and the present dry base of Owens Lake. Five miles from the junction with State 190 is Keeler, once a busy part of the 1870's silver boom and a soda operation in the 1880s. Today it has relics of that exciting period and less romantic but active talc mill. The streets lack the rumble of ore and freight wagons but the false front buildings, the large old bell at the firehouse, the ornate school-house and empty railroad depot are standing reminders of life 100 years ago. The large old Carson and Colorado Railroad depot dominates the town and a few blocks north, along a now trackless rail line, stand a few of the freight and passenger cars.

At the other end of town, along Malone Street, a modern swimming pool and hath house give little hint of the early occupants of that location. In the old days the area had been a thriving Chinatown with the usual gambling and opium dens, secret tunnels and hovels.

Opposite the entrance to Keeler is a dirt road climbing to a trail that leads to the rock ruins of the Darwin Oxide works. The road goes on up into the silver country but a good turn-around can be made at a block house just above the oxide company sign. The view is spectacular. Below lies a nearly buried cemetery, a trench to prevent a flash flood from burying the town of Keeler, the remains of a soda plant and evaporative beds out into the great expanse of the dry lake.

Continuing north on 190, three miles from Keeler is a historical marker. Near here the town of Swansea once stood. Buried by debris from a cloudburst in 1874, there are only a couple of rock-walled cabins and part of the Owens Lake Silver-Lead Furnace to indicate where tons of silver ore were worked into bars weighing 83 pounds each at the rate of 150 bars every 24 hours.



Near here the steamship Bessie Brady was launched in June of 1872. From a 300-foot wharf she picked up bullion and steamed across the lake to deposit the load at Cartago, cutting days off the time taken by freight wagon to circle the lake with a load of silver. She carried 700 bullion bars at a time in a three-hour crossing that stockpiled the silver like cord wood, too fast for freight wagons to haul it out to Los Angeles.

Approximately two miles north of the furnace ruins are the remains of a number of wooden buildings scattered over a wide area on the right side of the road. Here was the terminal of the Saline Valley electric tramway. The operation, from 1913-1930, transported salt out of Saline Valley in buckets over a 14-mile route over the mountain to the site along State 190.

A few of the tram towers can be seen high on the mountain side indicating the route traveled. Though the salt on the floor of Saline Valley was considered purer than any other known source the operation was too costly to continue.

From this point the road passes through a dolomite mining area evidenced by the dark, gaping mine holes above snow white dumps. Shortly after crossing the now dry Owens River the road joins U.S. 395 two miles south of Lone Pine.

To continue the trip around Owens Lake turn south on 395 and follow the route covered by Captain Joe Walker, first known white man to travel the valley. He passed this way in 1834, when Owens Lake was a great body of water; wild game was plentiful and Indians freely moved to the warm valley in winter and up into the cool Sierras for summer.

In approximately ten miles a road sign indicates the route to the Cottonwood charcoal kilns. During the silver mining days the mountain slopes to the west were stripped of pinon pine to furnish fuel for steam engines, heat for living quarters and provide charcoal for the smelters. Years of sun and wind have carved the kiln walls leaving interesting patterns, but sealing the fate of the historic structures.

The highway passes Bartlett near where the Pittsburgh Plate Glass Company, until recent months, was actively refining chemicals from the brine of Owens lake. The plant is closed, and discarded tanks, floats and other lake equipment clutter the shoreline adding to the sad story of the decline of activity on and around the lake.



Remains of Owens Lake Silver Lead furnace is a few steps off the highway just north of Keeler. Built in 1869 it closed down in 1874.

More interesting than the sight of the chemical plant's discards is the small town of Cartago. Like many one-time busy communities along the valley route, Cartago's population and income depended on the mines. When the Cerro Gordo mines shut down in 1879 the entire area was affected. Once the unloading port for the steamship Bessie Brady and later the Molly Stevens, Cartago today shows no signs that silver bars were once stacked everywhere.

Little remains to tell of the silver, the miners or the steamships and the little settlement of about 50 persons can easily be missed by the speeding traveler. Out or

sight of the highway, toward the lake's edge, is the barracks, a part-brick building containing a vault and piles of white

material, all dating back to World War I when a chemical company mined the lake for soda derivatives.

Two miles south is Olancho, the start-point for the trip around Owens Lake. Olancho was an early-day mill site and a rest station for valley travelers, the freight drivers and their long teams. When the mining era passed the community became a popular place for outfitting pack trains before going into the High Sierras. Once the gateway to the silver country, Olancho today is the gateway to exploring the past and present of Owens Lake country.



Dirty Sock today – 2017 (Photo courtesy of Ray DeLea)