

East of Independence

By Mary Frances Strong
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FOR THOSE who enjoy stalking the past, California's Owens Valley has no parallel. This great trough, separating the mighty Sierra Nevada Range from the lofty White and Inyo Mountains, is cradled by magnificent scenery, steeped in history and rich in outdoor pleasures. It is a living showcase where the present has blended well with the past. All the accouterments for an exciting weekend trip or outstanding vacation are yours for the taking. With so much to see and do in Owens Valley, a problem arises in deciding where to begin. Why not explore, as we did - "East of Independence?"



A good dirt road leads up Mazourka Canyon to Badger Flat at 9,000 feet in the Inyo Mountains. It is a very picturesque drive and along the way are many interesting mining operations. This placer claim has all the comforts of home within easy reach of the "diggings."

A short distance south of the little town of Independence, in central Owens Valley, a paved road leads easterly across the valley floor to the base of the Inyo Mountains. Along this route and its immediate environs lie numerous sites of historical interest. Here, the valley's first gold was discovered, hostile Indians were fought and original towns rose. Settlement did not come easy.

Prehistoric Indians were the first to occupy lush and lovely Owens Valley. Numerous artifacts and petroglyphs left behind indicate their presence over a long period of time. When the first white men entered the valley, they found a large tribe of Piutes in residence. They were friendly to the explorers - Jedidiah Smith (1826), Peter Skene Ogden (1829), Joe Walker (1833) and John C. Fremont (1844).

The California Gold Strike of 1849 became the match that lit the flame of mass migration to the western frontier. It also brought an end to the friendliness of the Owens Valley Indians when prospectors and settlers began to usurp their lands. During the next decade, marauding bands of Indians burned cabins and murdered both settlers and prospectors. This action served their purpose. Fear of Indian attacks brought a halt to settlement of the valley.

Upon the urging of settlers, a military directive was finally sent to Lt. Colonel George C. Evans, at Los Angeles. It ordered him to "prepare for a Mono-Owens River Expedition." On July 4, 1862, Colonel Evans arrived at Oak Creek with a contingent of the Second Cavalry consisting of 200 men and 46 supply wagons. Because of the date, the site was named Camp Independence. This show of force and a half-dozen serious skirmishes eventually brought an uneasy peace to the valley. Once again, settlers and prospectors began to arrive.

"Free Gold" was found east of Camp Independence and the San Carlos Mining and Exploration Company organized. A rich vein of galena and some promising silver prospects were soon located and claimed. Such news spread quickly and San Carlos Camp began to take shape. The Indians were quiet and, in early 1864, the military force was recalled. Camp Independence was abandoned.

Indian degradation quickly began again. Lone teamsters and travelers, isolated settlers and prospectors were ambushed. When Mrs. Mary McQuire and her six-year-old son were wantonly murdered, settlers brought pressure to bear on the military. Camp Independence was reactivated and the resultant "Indian War" brought

peace throughout the valley. It is not a pretty story but has been ably told by W. A. Chalfant in *The Story of Inyo*. Camp Independence remained garrisoned until final abandonment in 1877.

Summer of 1863 saw numerous changes taking place in central Owens Valley. Freight wagons regularly rolled through, both to and from the new strike at Aurora and other northern camps. Settlers arrived almost daily. East of Camp Independence, along the Owens River, rival towns of Bend City and San Carlos were developing.

San Carlos was first to boast a population of over 200, some 30 houses and business district which included stores, assay office and butcher shop. A newly opened express office was handling supply shipments and a ferry provided transportation across the river.

Three miles south, Bend City became a "metropolis" with all the services necessary for gracious living. Included among the businesses were blacksmith shops, eating houses, a saddle and harness maker, shoe shop, tailor shop, Chinese laundry and saloon. Two hotels offered overnight accommodations. In order to outdo San Carlos, their ferry service was replaced with a bridge.



At Tuttle Creek Campground, one of two near Independence, the Sierras provide a magnificent background. Tuttle Creek flows right – in the direction of a panoramic view of the Owens Valley and lofty Inyo Mountains.



The adit of the Green Monster Mine has almost been sealed by a collapsing retaining wall. An early day [1860's] gold claim, it later produced copper.

Mining development was proceeding at a rapid pace. The Union and Ida Mills, along with several smaller ones, were barely able to process all the ore. It seemed as if every hill and gully in the Inyo Mountains was under claim. A year later, the boom was over. However, a few mines did prove out and have been active from time to time over the years.

The decline in mining had a profound effect on the towns of San Carlos and Bend City. Most of the miners and prospectors had departed the river towns for new horizons. To the west, Independence had been founded and became the seat of newly-established Inyo County. Remaining businessmen gradually moved to the "new city." Perhaps the fickle fingers of fate had entered the scene at the proper time, because on March 26, 1872, at 2:30 A.M., a great earthquake occurred.

The adobe villages of Bend City and San Carlos were almost destroyed. The new, brick courthouse at Independence collapsed. Adobe mine buildings tumbled to the ground. Long fissures, one a 12-mile crack,

opened in the valley floor. Land on the east dropped 15 feet as it shifted northward. Owens River changed its course and left Bend City high and dry. Camp Independence reported over 200 after-shocks during the 17-hour period following the quake. Twenty-six people were killed and many injured. Had Bend City and San Carlos been at their peak population, deaths would have possibly been in the hundreds.

Rebuilding commenced at Independence almost immediately with wood construction replacing adobe. Settlement continued and, in 1883, a branch of the Carson and Colorado Railroad was completed from Tonopah Junction to Keeler at the southern end of Owens Valley. With a faster means of transportation for their products, farmers and ranchers prospered. New mining developments also aided the growing economy of the valley.

East of Independence, lode and placer mining continued in Mazourka and Bonanza Canyons, as well as Santa Rita Flat. Bend City and San Carlos had not rebuilt after the earthquake and only a few frame buildings remained in use. A bridge over the river's new bed gave access to mines in the surrounding areas.

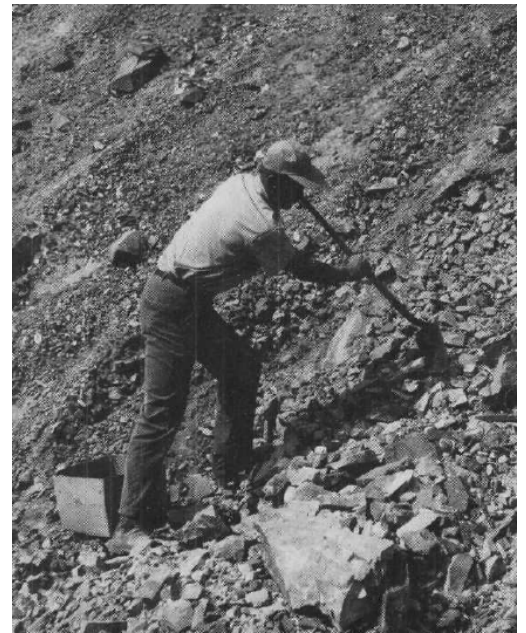
Today, the region east of Independence may be easily explored and most of the sites mentioned visited. Four-tenths of a mile south of Market Street (the main east-west drag of Independence), turn left from Highway 395 onto a paved road which heads easterly toward the base of the Inyo Mountains. The Los Angeles Aqueduct will be crossed in about two miles and, a little over a mile beyond, the road drops over the 15-foot scarp left by the earthquake of 1872. We enjoyed walking around the scarp which illustrates the tremendous force and strength of this particular quake.

Another mile of travel will bring you to a transmission line. Just beyond, to the north, lie the ruins of Bend City. They are easy to miss - just mounds of adobe among bushes of sage and rabbitbrush. First flung to the ground by an earthquake, time and the elements are melding the adobe walls back into the ground.

Walking among the faint ruins, it is hard to imagine this was once a large community - much less being located on a bend of the river. Bottle hunters and relic collectors "dug" the site long ago and carted away the spoils. However, even today, a bottle manages to surface now and then.

Continuing a short distance east, the paved road ends at the site of Kearsarge Station on the Carson and Colorado Railroad. The old, narrow-gauge railbed is still visible as is the McIver Canal - once used to supply water to several mills.

The station was originally named Independence and there was a movement to re-establish the county seat along the railroad. Several hopeful business men and a saloon keeper set up shop on the site. However, the town showed her "independence" by electing to remain at her present location. For many years, the station was called "Citrus," which was later changed to Kearsarge station, residence for the section boss and a bunkhouse for Chin-ese laborers occupied the site in early years. Only debris now marks the locale.

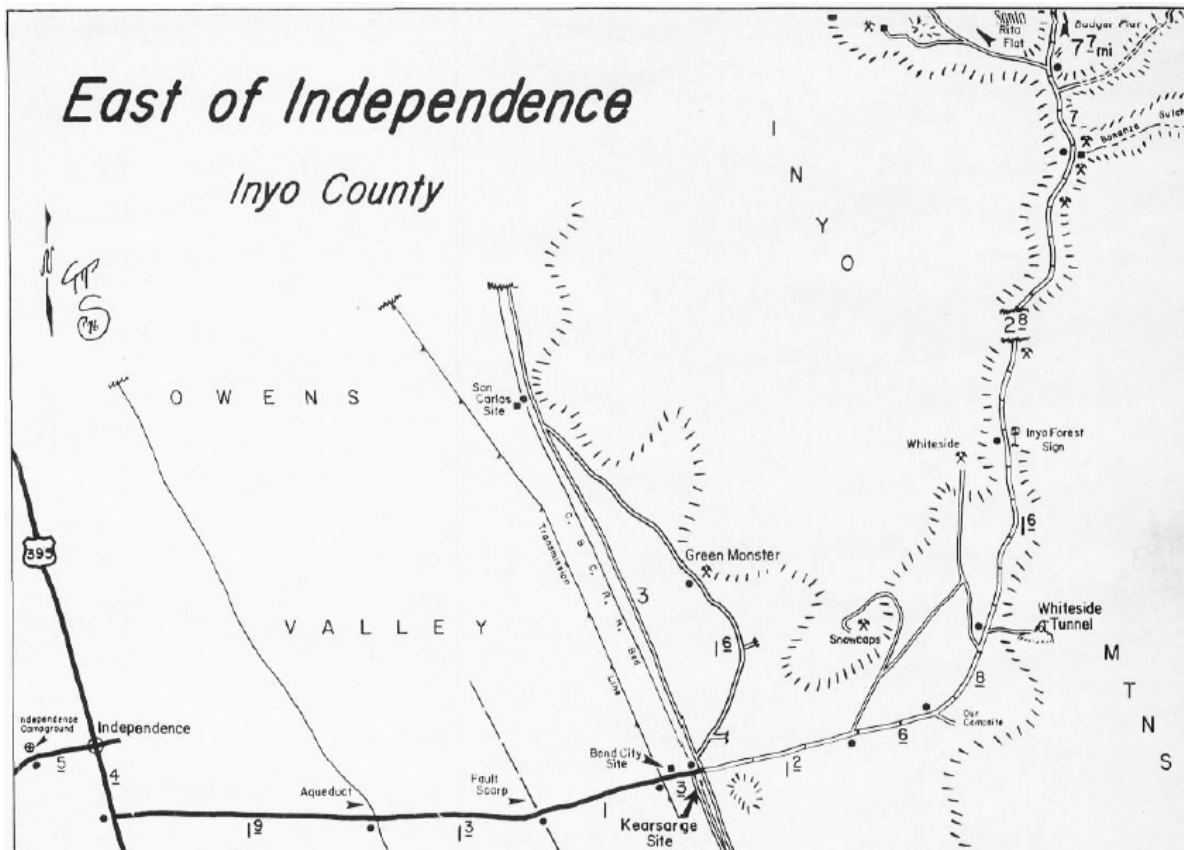


Digging in the mine dump, Jerry uncovered three bismal bottles, silver spoon and a silver matchbox.

Ahead lies Mazourka Canyon - a narrow, wash-cut defile in the Inyo Mountains. The earliest prospectors discovered gold in the canyon, but Indian hostility prevented development of their claims. An off-shoot canyon, named Bonanza Gulch, has been the scene of placer mining for nearly 100 years. The area is still under claim and active. Placer gold was also mined on Santa Rita Flat. The Black Eagle, Jumbo, Green Monster, Custer and other mines have produced gold, lead-silver-zinc, tungsten, iron and copper.

A good dirt road leads up through Mazourka Canyon and climbs to Badger Flat at an elevation of 9000 feet in the Inyos. It is a fascinating trip with panoramic views of the valley and Sierras. We lunched under picturesque old cedars of tremendous size then stopped to look over the Blue Bell Copper Mine. Nothing of interest was noted at this prospect.

Down in Mazourka Canyon, a dirt road makes a circle tour of "Pap's Gulch" and Santa Rita Flat. Along the way, there are interesting mining operations to look over but do not trespass on posted property. Also, you will want to see the Whiteside Mine Tunnel - so safe it was designated an "emergency shelter" for the region. It is said to have been a promotional scheme; the mine didn't produce but the tunnel is a sturdy work of mining art.



Returning to the site of Kearsarge Station, turn north and follow the road along the railbed for three miles to the site of San Carlos. At this point, a hill juts out and almost touches the road. The old townsite is on the west. Walk around and you will find considerable evidence of former occupation. If lucky, you may spot an old bottle (there has been plenty of digging) or other mementos of the past.

Travelling historical trails can bring unexpected rewards. Ours came when, upon leaving San Carlos, we elected to follow dirt tracks leading to the Green Monster Mine. It is our habit to look over old copper mines, and as the result a few good mineral specimens have been added to our collection. We parked beside a large dump and scrambled to the top. The entrance to the adit was lined with intricate rock work whose south wall had collapsed and almost sealed off the opening.

Exploring around, we noted a trail heading up the mountain to adits on several levels. There was evidence of a small frame building, rock walls of a dugout on the hill and the rock walls of a large building which had probably been a residence. Immediately southeast of the dump, on the same level, we discovered some well-formed epidote crystals as a coating on aplite rock. They were little beauties of good color and would make excellent micromount or thumbnail specimens. A few small pieces of poor-quality chrysocolla were also found.

The Green Monster is an old mine probably first claimed as a gold prospect in the 1860s. From 1903 to 1906 it was mined for copper, but less than 100,000 pounds of ore was produced. This is a contact metamorphic deposit. Chrysocolla and other copper minerals occur in a garnetized zone in limestone near an aplite intrusion.

Jerry had been nosing around the lower dump and spotted an area which appeared to have been a "dumping ground." He decided to dig a little and turned up three, blown-in-the-mold bottles, a silver spoon and a silver matchbox. The latter was a souvenir of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition at St. Louis, Missouri in 1904. One side was an engraved likeness of Jefferson and Napoleon, the other side an engraving of the electricity building. Inside - were two matches. We were delighted with our mementos!



We were delighted with our "souvenirs" found at the Green Monster Mine. This silver matchbox, Circa 1904, still contained two matches.

There are many other locales to visit in this general area. We explored several old mines and followed the railbed of the Carson and Colorado, both north and south of Kearsarge Station site. For those who have not done so, a visit to the Eastern California Museum at Independence will add considerably to your knowledge and enjoyment of this region.

When there is lots of ground to cover, it is a good idea to set up a base camp and spend your days exploring in different directions. For those who prefer a campground, there is Inyo County's Independence Campground on Market Street, one-half mile west of Highway 395, or BLM's Symmes Creek Campground, three and one-half miles west of Market, then one and one-half miles south. Tables, water and

chic sales are available at both.

We prefer to camp "away from it all," if possible. A more or less level spot for the trailer is all that is required. We chose a site in Mazourka Canyon, about two miles east of Kearsarge Station site, which offered a commanding view of the valley. Each morning we watched the first play of light on the Sierras' eastern face. After dinner, coffee was enjoyed as the last light of evening silhouetted the jagged peaks of this mighty bulwark of mountains.

You will find the beauty of a starlit night and gentle passage of an evening breeze; the clear, crisp air and sunlit skies, plus the magnificent views are reward enough for a return trip “East of Independence.”