

Owens Lake Loop Trip

By Mary Frances Strong
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BORN EONS ago in the glacial heights of California's mighty Sierra Nevada Range, the Wakopee River was but a mere stream cascading down the great mountain's eastern slope. As it hurtled southward, numerous streams contributed to its size until the designation "river" was deserving. This additional volume gave the river power. It now began cutting, grinding and sweeping away any material in its path until it had carved a magnificent gorge before reaching the broad basin between the Sierra Nevadas and the White Mountains.

Here, the gradient diminished and the topography changed. The river meandered almost aimlessly along a 75-mile course before entering a lake at the southern end of the basin. Verdant meadows surrounded the river;



trees lined its banks and game flourished. Prehistoric Indians came to hunt, then settled when it seemed life might be less harsh in this environment.

It was a time of abundant moisture and eventually Lake Pacheta was over 200 feet deep and occupied a surface of some 240 square miles. Waves lapped the base of the imposing mountains that flanked her east and west shores. When filled, the overflow drained south then easterly and finally a chain of three beautiful desert lakes formed in the deep basins of Searles, Panamint and Death Valleys.

Gradually, the glaciers melted and a climatic change began which brought periods of abundant moisture followed by periods of drought. The lakes in Panamint, Searles and Death Valley desiccated and large accumulations of saline minerals were left behind in the latter two. While Lake Pacheta diminished in size, it remained an entity, thanks to the flow of the Wakopee River.

During the last 4,000 years, the brines of Owens Lake have concentrated through evaporation and a sizable, crystalline body of commercial importance has been deposited. As expected, Pacheta Lake and the Wakopee River have played important roles in the history and development of the region.

Today, one name "Owens" is applied to the basin, river and lake. Known collectively as the Owens Valley Region, the area has become a year-round recreational playground. Almost any outdoor hobby can be practiced here from active sports to passive bird-watching. As a result, the Owens Valley and its immediate environs play host to hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. Yet, because of the immensity of the valley, it does not appear to be crowded.



Keeler was "end-of-line" for the Carson & Colorado Railroad. Its townfolk were mighty proud of their two-story station. The large chunk of dolomite at right center embraces an historical marker.

A great deal has been written about the Valley's recreational pleasures between Lone Pine and Bishop. Lesser known, perhaps, but of considerable interest to those who enjoy visiting historical sites, is Lake Pacheta - now known as Owens Lake. John C. Fremont encountered this large body of water during his third expedition in 1845-46. Not knowing, and possibly not caring what the Indians called the lake, he promptly named it "Owens" in honor of expedition member Captain Richard Owens.

Fremont's party was not the first through Owens Valley. While searching for a new route from Salt Lake City to California, Captain Joseph Reddeford Walker camped at the southwestern edge of the lake in the spring of 1834. An historical marker at the junction of Highways 395 and 160, just south of Olancho, commemorates this first visit by a white man. Peter Skene Ogden and Jedidiah Smith were also early visitors.

A nonstop, circle tour of Owens Lake could be made in just a few hours but such a superficial sampling would do little to satisfy the devotee of the past. The rewards received when following historical trails take time to reap. Exploring the sites; conjuring visions of "how it was;" savoring the magnificent scenery, as well as admiring the "remains" are the necessary ingredients for the enjoyment of such a tour. A little knowledge of the region's history is also important.

The trails established by Ogden, Smith, Walker and Fremont were soon utilized by many white men who headed for distant bonanzas. Some liked what they saw and returned. Others told of the beautiful valley with its lush meadows and ample water. As a result, a few cattlemen came with their herds. One of them, A. Van Fleet, erected the first house in 1861 - a stone and sod cabin. Other ranchers soon followed.

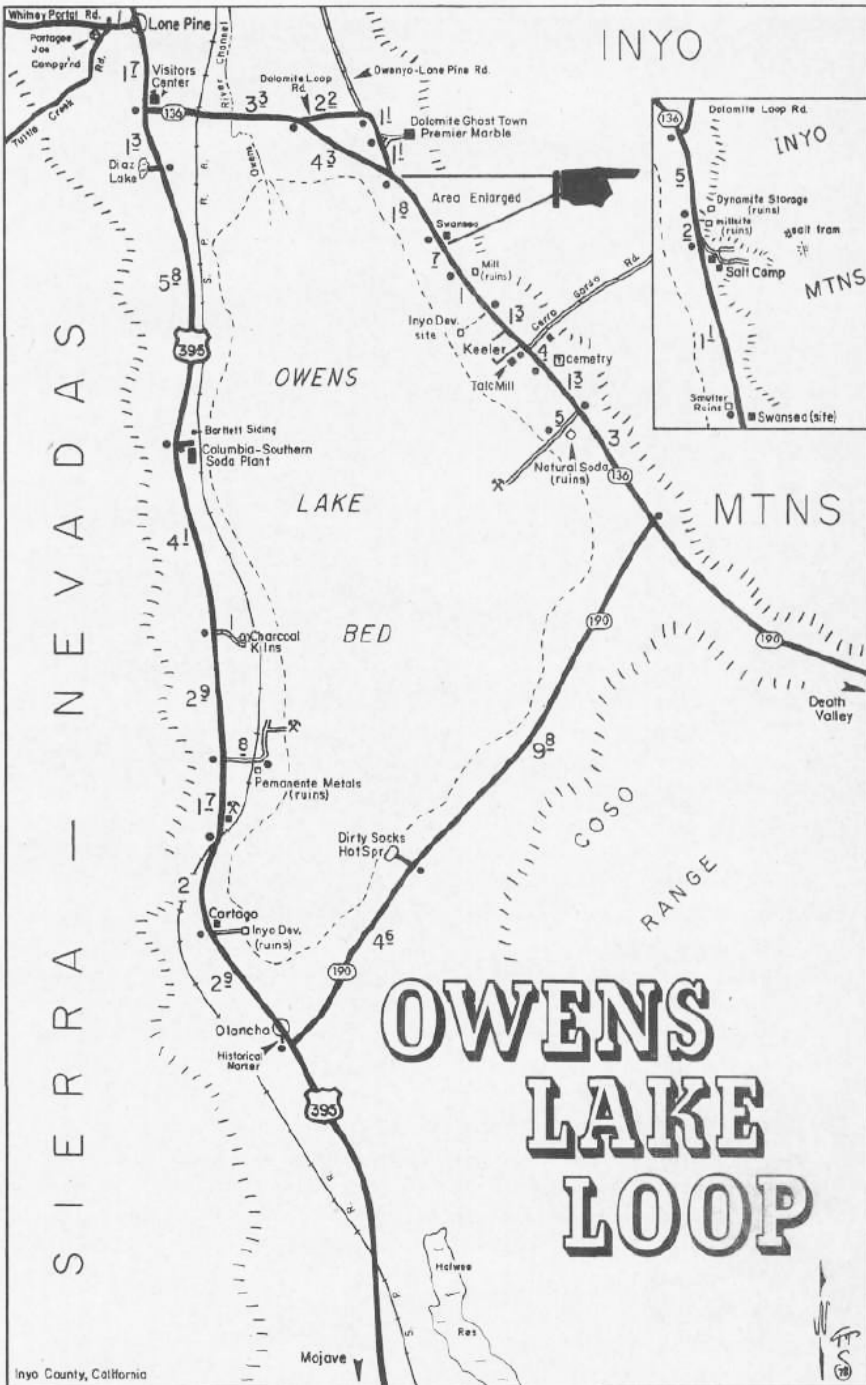
The permanent residence of white men did not set well with some of the Indians and a "war of sorts" began. Renegade Indians raided mines and isolated ranches and it became necessary to station a Company of the U. S. Cavalry near what is now Independence. The uprising was eventually quelled, but not before there was wanton bloodshed by both sides. With the Valley proclaimed "safe," homesteaders and prospectors began arriving en masse. Ore bodies were discovered - towns sprang up and the settling of Owens Valley was underway.

The region around Owens Lake remained in its pristine state, even though hundreds of people hurriedly traversed the narrow shelf of land separating lake and mountains. Lone Pine, on the northwest, was the nearest



The C&C Railroad provided much needed transportation for miners and ranchers. Operations ceased in 1960 and all narrow-gauge track was removed except this short section at Dolomite Siding.

settlement except for the Shoshonean village of "Olanches" on the lake's southwestern shore. This tranquility was due for an abrupt change when Pablo Flores and two companions discovered rich silver-lead ore near the crest of the Inyo Mountains in 1865.



The Mexicans filed claims and were soon smelting exceptionally rich ore in crude rock ovens called "vesos." When news of the strike reached Virginia City, Nevada, the stampede was on. In a few months, over a thousand people had climbed the torturous trail to the 8,000-foot level in the Inyos. A road did not exist, nor was there a drop of water!

Quick to see the potential of the deposits, Mortimer Belshaw and his partner, Abner Elder, began buying up claims. Then, in 1886, they developed the famed Union Mine near what became the camp of Cerro Gordo.

The Owens Lake Silver-Lead Furnace and Mill was one of the first developments along the lake shore. Built by Colonel Sherman Stevens in 1869, James Brady assumed its operation in 1870 and built the town of Swansea. Over the next four years, the daily output, in combination with one mill at Cerro Gordo, was 150 bars of bullion - weighing 83 pounds.

Freighters hauled the bars from Cerro Gordo to the refineries at Los Angeles. It was an arduous journey, three days of which were spent negotiating the sandy wastes along the southern end of Owens Lake. James Brady, Swansea's mentor, came up with an idea to eliminate this grueling section of the route by freighting the bullion across the lake. An 85-foot steamer, the "Bessie Brady," was built. She made her maiden voyage to

Daneri's Landing (now Cartago) carrying 30 tons of bullion. The idea proved a great success and the little steamer plied her trade daily.

Fuel for the furnaces had become a problem. For miles around Cerro Gordo, the mountains had been stripped of pinyon pine and juniper. Colonel Stevens came to the rescue. In 1873, he built a sawmill and flume on the upper reaches of Cottonwood Creek. Its purpose was to supply lumber for building at Cerro Gordo, as well as wood for charcoal.



One of several buildings remaining at the Salt Camp north of Swansea has stood the ravages of time and climate quite well. This was the terminal for the tramway that hauled salt over the mountains from Saline Valley.

The new enterprise was so successful that, three years later, it was incorporated as the Inyo Lumber and Coal Company. The flume was extended to the lake shore where two kilns had been erected for the production of charcoal. To transport their products from Cottonwood Creek, another steamer was needed. The "Mollie Stevens" made her maiden voyage in June 1877 carrying timber for the Union Consolidated Mines at Cerro Gordo.

On the "Fat Hill," the ruthless, high-handed methods used by Belfast were not being tolerated. Owens Valley Silver-Lead Company sued when Belfast deliberately let his toll road deteriorate until wagons could only haul half as much ore to the smelter at Swansea. They won their suit but were financially ruined. Operations ceased early in 1874 and the demise of Swansea was quick. During the summer, a heavy cloudburst almost

buried the town and smelter with mud and debris.

The 1880s brought about considerable development in the Owens Lake Region. This was largely due to the construction of the Carson & Colorado Railroad, scheduled to run between Mound House, Nevada and Fort Mohave, Arizona. By 1881, the track had been completed to Hawthorne, but unexpectedly the C&C announced a change in its route. The railroad would now turn west over Montgomery Pass; then south through Owens Valley to a possible junction with Southern Pacific at Mojave, California.

This news was warmly received by the Valley's merchants, farmers and miners. Not only would freight charges be less, delivery and pickup would almost be to their doors. "End-of-line" was later changed to Hawley (now Keeler) on the eastside of Owens Lake. The



Only a few graves are readily visible at the old Keeler Cemetery. Many other lie unmarked among the sand and brush.

"Slim Princess," as the little, narrow-gauge line was affectionately known, successfully served the many communities and mines along her route for over three-quarters of a century.

About this same time, the Inyo Marble Company began developing an immense dolomite deposit along the base of the Inyo Mountains five miles north of Keeler. State Mineralogist Henry Hanks, in his 1889 Report, described the material as dolomite of the highest quality which, when freshly broken, was as pure and white as the famed Carrara Marble of Italy. Some of the first "Inyo Marble" mined was used in the construction of Sharon's Gate in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. More recently, a million square feet of Inyo Marble was used in the floors of Los Angeles International Airport. It was also used in the famous Hollywood Boulevard terrazzo sidewalk where the names of stars are cast in bronze and placed on a surface of Inyo Marble.

Owens Lake now came under the scrutiny of miners interested in obtaining the minerals from its brine. The lake bed covered an area of 97.2 square miles and consisted of a porous, brine-filled, crystal bed about nine feet thick. It was rich in soda and potash.

The Inyo Development Company was the first to exploit the brines in 1885. Its evaporative ponds and plant were located a mile north of Keeler. Soda and potash were harvested. From 20 to 150 men were employed until 1920. At that time, operations ceased when the brine became so concentrated that only trona, instead of ash, was precipitated.

An ambitious project was undertaken in 1911 to recover salt from a dry lake in Saline Valley. To mine and market the salt profitably, a proposal to stretch a tramway over the 9,000-foot crest of the Inyo Mountains was conceived. There were many skeptics but work began. Two years later, 13 miles of steel cable, carrying an ore bucket every minute, was in operation and hauling up to 20 tons of salt per hour. At the time, the new salt tram was not only the world's longest but had the highest lift.

Four stations along the tram were equipped to control the electrically driven, traction ropes which supplied the thrust for each bucket's two-hour trip. Operators were comfortably housed at each station. A sizable camp was established at the "discharge terminal," one mile north of old Swansea. Here, the salt was crushed before being loaded onto railroad cars for shipment.

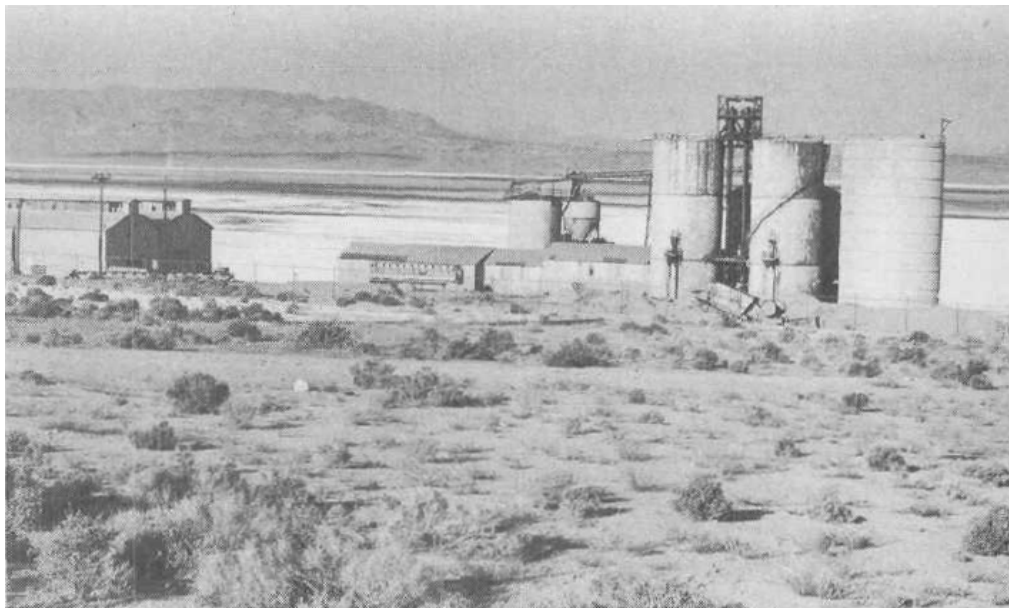
Unfortunately, many problems were encountered. Two years later, mining ceased and the tram shut down. During the next 40 years, salt was mined intermittently by several companies. The last was Saline Valley Development Company, which stockpiled about 2,000 tons of salt in 1954.

During 1917, Natural Soda Products established a large plant two miles south of Keeler. Using a more sophisticated method than Inyo Development, 120 tons of dense soda ash were produced daily. A sizable quantity of this was shipped to Japan. There was also a yearly production of 10,000 tons of trona.

A standard-gauge railroad, Southern Pacific's Jawbone Line, was completed in 1917 along the western shores of Owens Lake between Owenyo and Mojave. Inyo Chemical Company quickly established a soda plant on the west shore and operated until 1932. At the southern edge of the lake, California Alkali Company erected a plant at Cartago. Seven years later it sold out to Inyo Chemical. The plant was enlarged and a camp was built to house the 100 men, and their families, who were employed.

Several other companies operated along the western shores from time to time. Permanente Metals had a plant at Marilyn Siding and Pacific Alkali set up shop at Bartlett Siding in 1929. The latter employed a new process for the recovery of soda ash. Fifteen years later, Columbia-Southern took over the Bartlett operation. Research improved the process and a fine, modern plant was built. It operated successfully until 1966 - the last of the active mines on Owens Lake.

A 10-inch rain on December 6, 1966, resulted in a 22-inch accumulation of water on the lake bed.



Columbia-Southern's ponds and salt beds were so diluted it was no longer feasible to operate profitably. Once again, Nature had defeated the best laid plans of men.

We talked with Wally Dugan, Maintenance Superintendent, when he was overseeing the dismantlement of the plant. At that time, 1968, the company planned to move all equipment and return the site to its natural state. He also told us rockhounds would be able to look for crystals on the old ponds when the plant was gone. Evidently, the company changed its plans, as

Columbia-Southern's plant at Bartlett was shut down in 1966 when heavy rain flooded Owens Lake and inundated their ponds and salt beds.

the plant and office buildings still remain at the site.

Due to the railroad, Cerro Gordo, the saline mines on the lake, numerous mines in the surrounding area, as well as a talc mill, the little settlement of Keeler (formerly Hawley) remained a busy supply center, while many of her competitors became "ghosts." Loss of the railroad in 1960 was a tough blow for Keeler. Nevertheless, her residents are tenacious and the old town lives on.

"Touring Owens Lake" will take you to the former sites of mines, camps, towns and historical points of interest around the lakeshore. Where you begin the tour will probably depend upon the direction from which you came to the region.

Along the eastern shore, Premier Marble now owns and operates the Inyo Marble deposits. They have preserved some of the original buildings from the ghost town of "Dolomite." In fact, their office is housed in one of the old buildings. They have always welcomed visitors but be sure to obtain permission to browse around the old town. The site is very photogenic and has been used as the setting for a number of movies including "Nevada Smith," "Oil for the Lamps of China" and "How the West Was Won."

As you drive south on Highway 136 (see map), watch for rock ruins on the hillside to the left. They blend into the background and are difficult to see. This was a temporary, dynamite storage site during the construction of the railroad. The ruins of a former mill site can be seen on the opposite side of the hill.

Farther south, five buildings in various stages of collapse remain at Salt Camp. Park near the base of the hills and look up on the crest. You will see one of the few remaining salt tram towers. This location makes a good overnight campsite offering a fine view of the lake and Sierra Nevadas.

The site of Swansea is privately owned and one of the original buildings is used as a residence. Across the highway, an historical marker identifies the brick ruins of Swansea Smelter.

There is little to indicate the site of the first saline mining on Owens Lake-Inyo Development's operation. A few foundations lie almost hidden in the sand.

The talc mill at Keeler was operating on a small scale when we were there last summer. Browse around and feel the charm of this 96-year-old community. Note the former prestigious "Keeler Swimming Club" on Maud Street and the little church on Old State Highway. These, and the two-story railroad station on Malone Street in the middle of town, will warrant capture by your camera's eye.

Across the highway from Keeler, a graded road leads up the mountains to old Cerro Gordo and its silent mines. At one time, visitors were permitted to browse around for a fee. However, I haven't received a reply to my inquiry regarding its status. The road to Cerro Gordo is the original toll route Belfast built. It is very steep and many stock cars have difficulty making it to the top. Inquire at Keeler about road conditions and status. The tram has been dismantled but some of the buildings remain near the highway.

Less than a half-mile south of Keeler, the old cemetery lies among sand dunes. It is signed and contains a number of graves, but only a few are marked.

Farther south, the former site of Natural Soda Products is readily visible; though the plant has been dismantled. A huge dump, numerous foundations and weathered lumber cover the area. A road leads onto the lake to a small mining operation. The assorted rubble here is fascinating and "browsing" is great fun.

Follow Highway 190 west across the southern end of Owens Lake and you will be traveling, in part, the route originally used by the freight wagons. Along the way, you will be treated to a majestic, two-fold view - the great expanse of lake bed and mighty mountains on both sides. Stop at Dirty Socks Spring. If your bones are weary, you will enjoy a dip in the mineral pool. The campground and pool (no fee) are maintained by Inyo County who, I am sorry to say, are not doing a very good job. I hope the area has been cleaned since we were there.

The small community of Olancha, at the junction of Highways 395 and 190, has several gas stations, a post office and well-stocked market. This area was the site of the Shoshonean village of "Olanches." Nearby, we came across an Indian chipping ground. There is other evidence of early Indian occupancy on the shores of Owens Lake, such as campsites and petroglyphs. Artifact collecting is not permitted under the "Antiquities Law." This law is now being strictly enforced.

North on Highway 395 at Cartago, the ruins of Inyo Development Company's operation lie east of the little settlement. Sodium bicarbonate, sodium carbonate (soda ash) and crude trona were mined here. The site,

with its many buildings, is very picturesque. It is private property and permission to visit must be obtained from the caretaker.

Farther north, at Marilyn Siding, lie the gigantic concrete ruins of Permanente Metals Corporation. This location is on a high bench above the lake bed and offers a fine view and interesting "browsing" area.

Continuing toward Lone Pine on Highway 395, an historical site, former mine and a recreation area are of interest. The two charcoal kilns used to supply fuel to Cerro Gordo and other smelters lie a mile east of the highway. Watch for a sign. An historical monument has been erected which gives a brief history of the ovens' use. This is a good overnight campsite - one we have used often.

Next stop is at Columbia-Southern's plant. A caretaker was living there and might give permission for collecting crystals. Unfortunately, the heavy rains of this past winter make it doubtful that any crystals remain.

A few miles north of Bartlett, Inyo County maintains a recreational area at Diaz Lake. Camping, boating, water skiing, fishing and swimming are available. There are 200 campsites. No hook ups but cold showers and sanitary facilities are provided. Portugee Joe, Locust Grove and Tuttle Creek Campgrounds, west of Lone Pine, offer good camping areas for overnight or a couple of weeks. Supplies are available at Lone Pine.

A Visitor Center is now open at the junction of Highways 395 and 136, south of Lone Pine. Maps and Information on recreational activities throughout the Owens Valley are available. The Center is new but there are plans to have many interesting exhibits on display.

Owens Lake has played a substantial role in the development of Inyo County. Perhaps, more importantly, it gave its life to benefit man. In 1907, in what Owen's Valley residents will always think of as "the dastardly rape of their resources," Los Angeles citizens voted a 23 million dollar bond issue to finance the construction of the Los Angeles - Owens Valley Aqueduct. The Owens River was diverted to supply thirsty Southern California and Owens Valley was left without control of the water her ranchers and residents needed. Its source of life removed, the great lake began to dry up. The fight over water between the people of Owens Valley and Los Angeles is a story in itself.

This beautiful, lush, valley, that had promised so much, began to decline and there were many dark days. Eventually, a new resource – recreation – was encouraged. The glorious scenery, historical sites and recreational areas now lure thousands of visitors annually.

The immense, white salt crust - the residue of Owens Lake - radiates in the brilliant sun. Here and there, algae has colored the crust a rose-pink and a few deep water holes still exist. There are stories of lost bullion in the lakebed, and, not too long ago, parts of a wrecked steamer were recovered.

The Owens Lake Region has many treasures to offer those who love Western Americana and the great outdoors. Come - and "Tour Owens Lake." You are sure to find new insight of the people who, through austerity and hardship, opened the doors to the recreational region we now enjoy.