

Darwin, California

By Lambert Florin

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WE TOOK off our hats, and then looking over the scene of so much trial, suffering and death, spoke the thought uppermost in our minds, saying, 'Goodby, Death Valley!' Many accounts have been given to the world as the origin of the name, but ours were the first visible footsteps, and we were the party which gave it the saddest and most dreadful name that came first to our memories."

Thus wrote William Lewis Manly after he and the Jayhawker parties attempted to cross the long, sunken desert valley called Death. The experiences of these men constitute one of the most tragic episodes in the history of California.

It was on Christmas Day of 1849 that the Manly party entered Death Valley, camping near a spot that would be later known as Furnace Creek. Although all were suffering from hunger, thirst and fatigue, they were able to get as far as the present Bennett's Well. The weary members named the spot "Last Camp," as indeed it was for many of them. Recognizing that it was impossible for most to travel farther, Manly ordered all others to remain in camp while he and a man named Rogers went forth to look for help.

After a journey beset by sufferings and difficulties, they did reach help, but when they returned to Last Camp they found death and desolation. Barely alive were the Bennett and Arcane families. All the others had despaired of ever again seeing their leader and had set out on their own. One, Captain Culverwell, collapsed and died only a short distance from camp. The others simply disappeared.



Other emigrants came through the valley, some meeting disaster, some getting through successfully. One of these latter was a prospecting party headed by Dr. Darwin French. In the spring of 1860 these gold-hungry men found a crude furnace at the first Manly campsite, an incident which gave the spot the name of Furnace Creek. The furnace is generally thought to have been left by overladen Mormons.

Darwin and his men were in search of the fabled Gunsight Mine, presumably located in the Argus Mountains, a spur of the Panamint Range. According to reports, an emigrant party had reached the area after the usual hardships of crossing the desert mountains when a different kind of disaster struck. The gunsight had broken off of their only weapon. An Indian offered to fix it and, after disappearing into a canyon, soon returned and proudly presented them their gun with a newly mounted sight fashioned of gleaming silver! The suffering men went on to the San Joaquin Valley, but the incident of the silver gunsight wasn't forgotten.

This particular deposit of silver remains lost to this day, but Darwin and his party did find some silver deposits, rich ones. A camp was set up to expand operations. The town that grew up on the spot was named Darwin, although by that time the leader himself, not being a working miner, had again set out on a prospecting trip.

The rise of Darwin's town was meteoric. Bullion was shipped out within 10 months and even before that the Panamint stage line included the new town. People were moving in from fading Panamint City and, as might be expected, stage robberies, shootings and hangings went on as they had in the camp in Surprise Canyon near Panamint.

Darwin, however, wasn't content to follow exactly the path of her predecessor. She climaxed her brief period of glory with a full-fledged labor dispute, this still a novelty in 1879. Arbitration was accomplished by gunfire. When enough miners and owners lay dead in the dust, the quarrel was settled with a small pay raise.

Today, Darwin is dead as a mining town, although some operations still survive in its environs. A few houses are occupied by vacationers in winter, one by a retired couple living there permanently. In the little house are many glass cases filled with specimens of ore and mineral, some unequalled in any collection we have ever seen. Darwin's original schoolhouse is shown in our photo.