

The Mysterious Lake

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DYING IN the uppermost region of California's vast desert land is a strange inland sea called Mono. This third largest body of water in California, Mono Lake, lies in bleak grandeur at the eastern foot of Yosemite National Park's twisting Tioga Pass.

In his book, *Roughing It*, describing his journeys in the West, Samuel Clemens calls Mono Lake one of the strangest spectacles on earth. "Mono Lake lies in a lifeless, treeless, hideous desert, eight thousand feet (6,409) above the level of the sea, and is guarded by mountains two thousand feet higher, whose summits are always clothed in clouds. This solemn, silent, soundless sea – this loneliest tenant of the loneliest spot on earth – is little graced with the picturesque," he wrote.



Yet, Mono Lake is picturesque in a weird, unearthly way. Its gray, sluggish water, saturated with alkali, is beached by jagged white alkaline deposits. Two barren islands rise from the torpid water. The largest, Paoha, sends eerie clouds of vapor over the surface of the still lake from its unceasing hot springs. Nearby a cold spring bubbles. A herd of once domestic goats, left there years ago by its former inhabitants, roam this lonely island. The smaller island, Negit, is a volcanic crater. Its solo inhabitants are seagulls who come annually to nest, 100 miles east of the Pacific Ocean. The gulls of Negit are protected by the State of California.

No other life exists in Mono Lake, except a small salt water shrimp, white and feathery and the larva of the small ephydra fly. One source states that the Mono Indians who once lived here were called *Monachi*, meaning fly people, as they existed on the pupae of this fly. There is doubt whether this diet was considered a necessity or a delicacy, and whether the Indians were Mono or Paiute. There are no fish, no frogs, no other life beneath the calm surface of Mono lake. Except for the sea gulls, only wild ducks skim its glass surface.

Mono Lake has no outlet; no water flows from it, although a few small streams flow into it. Its level is receding now because of diversion of water for the Los Angeles Aqueduct long before it reaches Mono Lake. Early observers state the water level appeared then neither to rise nor fall. Where the water went was a mystery.

There is little information on Mono Lake in gold rush or travel literature. In 1852, 46 years before Samuel Clemens mentioned it, gold was reportedly discovered near Mono Lake by soldiers in pursuit of Indians. It was these soldiers who, at that time, also discovered Yosemite Valley. Nothing ever came of the discovery at Mono Lake, but the beauty of Yosemite Valley lured others who came and fought to preserve it for everyone.

Mono Lake figured in the story of *The Lost Cement Mine*, a vein of cement-like rock full of gold. Samuel Clemens saw a piece in 1862 and reported, "Lumps of virgin gold were as thick in it as raisins in a fruit cake." The Lost Cement Mine was found and refound through the years. But each discoverer met with foul play, or could not find it again.

When gold miners began mining on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada, Mono Lake again gained attention. With the need for lumber to build new camps, lumber was transported from the Mono mills on barges to the northeast end of the lake. From here it was loaded onto teams and taken to the roaring mining camp of Bodie (now a National and State Historical Monument) 16 miles northeast of Mono Lake. Then, in 1881, with the completion of a narrow-gauge railroad called the Railroad in the Sky, commercial transportation on Mono Lake was no longer necessary, but stories are still told about how Chinese cooks during the lumbering era cleaned silverware by merely dipping it into the lake's corrosive waters.

Descending glaciers formed Mono Lake 20,000 years ago. Volcanic action contributed to the strange, silent land surrounding it. A few miles south, ash heaps of pumice rise gray and forbidding. In nearby Inyo National Forest lie the Mono Craters.

Winters are severe. An old timer states, "Only one ,who has experienced winters here can realize how the fury of the blinding snow, driven by the wintry blasts, can sweep those barren slopes. Nor can one imagine the depth of snow which can pile up in a few hours." Winter temperatures are often below zero.

Samuel Clemens wrote that Mono Lake lay off the usual routes of travel. This is still true. The spectacular passes through Yosemite National Park, in addition to other passes between Reno and Bakersfield, are dosed in winter. Mono Lake is 25 miles south of Bridgeport and 70 miles north of Bishop, California. Lee Vining is Mono Lake's nearest town. U. S. 395 passes Mono Lake on its long, lonely way down the length of California's eastern side.

Camping and picnic sites, as well as a boat-launching ramp, are available at Mono Lake. Nearby camping facilities are in the Toiyabe and Inyo National Forests, which almost surround the Mono Lake region.

"Mono Lake," concludes Samuel Clemens and probably anyone who has seen it, "is one of the strangest freaks of Nature to be found in any land."