

Dirty Sock

... A "For Free" Spa on the Mojave Desert

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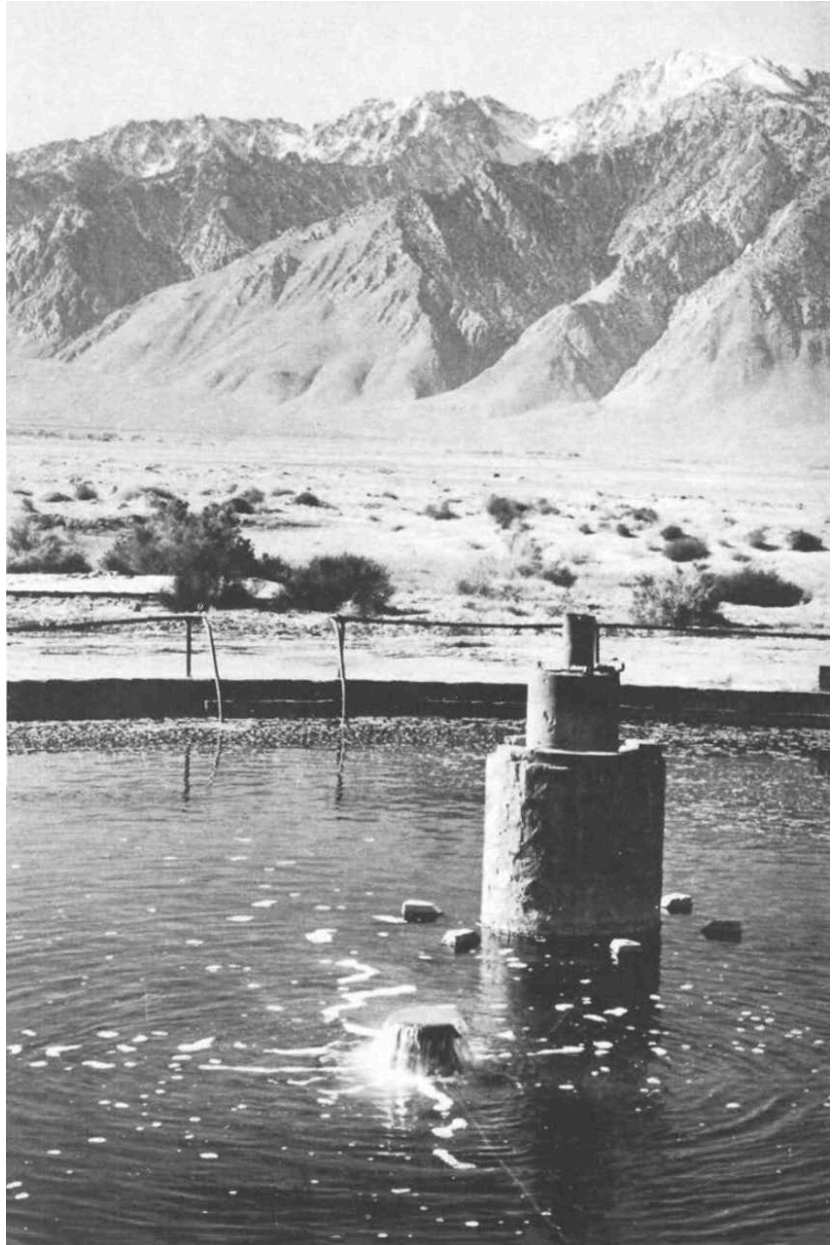
DIRTY SOCK is a little-known desert waterhole of uncommon reputation. It bubbles beneath the Sierra's "Sleeping Princess" -- just east of her tresses.

To locate it more specifically, leave Highway 6-395 at Olancho, California, and proceed 4.9 miles on the Death Valley Cutoff Highway. At the point where the power lines cross the highway, turn off on a dirt road to the left. Proceed .3 mile on this road -- and there is one (in a long list of many) of Inyo County's singular attractions -- an artesian well spewing forth 200 gallons of supposedly beneficial water every minute.

In 1917 the Pacific Santa Fe Railroad Company drilled on this southern shore of Owens Lake to get fresh water for the operation of a soda plant. At 600 feet they hit it but it was not sufficient for their needs, so they drilled deeper, went through hardwood logs at 1000 feet, hit shale at 1100 feet. Hot water gushed through the casing at 1200 feet and, in spite of efforts to plug it, has been gushing ever since. The well was abandoned, and Oliver A. Thorsen, retired postmaster of Darwin, eventually acquired it.

In spite of the fastidious few who have tried to change the name of this flow to Olancho Wells or Olancho Warm Springs, it remains as always: "Dirty Sock." How it acquired this uncomplimentary name is a matter of conjecture. The story most often told is that the miners and prospectors used this water -- at least semi-annually -- for bath, cure and laundry. They hung their clothes on the surrounding sagebrush to dry, but their socks, understandably no longer serviceable, were left in the pool. These discarded pieces of apparel supposedly marked the spa for subsequent weary, dirty and thirsty travelers. Actually, the highly mineralized water smells like a dirty sock - or, more succinctly, like many!

This doesn't seem to faze the people who drink it and make fantastic claims for its benefits. They come from all over the United States to fill their bottles with the fully carbonated, mineral, radioactive water. That it tastes like the white of an egg doesn't seem to bother them either, because they keep returning for refills.



Bathing in Dirty Sock is like bathing in champagne – if you hold your nose. The curative claims made for this delightful recreation are as enthusiastic as those for drinking it. The sensation, midway between relaxation and exhilaration, is undoubtedly due to the escaping gases with which the water bubbles. In the high heat of summer when the sun is baking the newly risen dunes, and the wind, white with soda dust, is blistering, the 94° temperature of the water is relatively cool and refreshing. In the winter when the world is white from the Sierra to the Coso Mountains, the steaming warmth of the vapor-shrouded pool is haven from the still white, now bitter, regaling wind.

Only the uninitiated would think of drying with a towel after a swim. Members of the Dirty Sock fraternity come out of the pool all bubbly, and wait stoically until the last bubble has popped. Skin will itch like crazy if you dry with a towel.

Dirty Sock enthusiasts will assure you that its joys and benefits are not limited to bathing and drinking. There is also the surrounding clay which they allege has peculiar curative properties. And the algal growth which forms continuously in the pool and the adjacent lake is used as therapeutically as the clay. Carnegie Institute experts see more importance in algae as a food, however. Dirty Sock is a natural laboratory for the practical application of the concept of feeding the world with the one-celled plant of plenty. Because of the unusual combination of mineral properties, temperature, and the high content of carbon dioxide and nitrogen, this water-hole produces algae in abundance. It is this algae which makes Dirty Sock smell like one. The water itself is odorless.

Migrant ducks, geese, herons and pelicans flock to "The Sock" and stay for weeks growing fat on the algae and peculiar mosquito fish. The latter, which bear their young alive, appeared in the lake about four years ago and have been thriving and multiplying ever since.

At one time, Thorson leased Dirty Sock to a promoter who was going to make Palm Springs look to its laurels. Unfortunately, all that remains of the \$150,000 purportedly spent here is a small lake and a concrete swimming pool 80 feet in diameter. That the waters of Dirty Sock do not gush from the impressive fountain in the pool as was planned is only one story in a long series of misfortunes that stalked the venture. The septic tanks and complete sewer system also remain, but what high-graders left of the buildings, vandals destroyed by fire.

Each weekend and holiday finds cars loaded with Dirty Sock devotees. They picnic, camp-out under the sun and stars or bring their trailers. Many stay for weeks. The families who vacation at Dirty Sock find richness in the seeming barrenness of the 45½ acres which comprise The Sock area.

Youngsters sculpture in the clay (Mother uses it for a beauty mask!), collect sandstone oddities, observe the water-birds by day and the coyotes, foxes and rabbits by night. The kids play in the sand, slide down the dunes, roam and explore, swim and grow healthy and brown. There is no charge, no watchman.

For 40 years the Indian and the white, the young and the old, the sick and the well have come to Dirty Sock. It has never been known to stop flowing. -END