

# Where the Falls Turned to Stone

By Roger Mitchell

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As summer approaches, more and more desert enthusiasts will be turning towards California's High Sierras for their vacations and weekend trips. Many of these mountain bound travelers will be from Southern California and their route will take them north on highways 6 and 395, across the Mojave Desert. At Little Lake they will leave the vast expanse of the Indian Wells Valley and enter the Owens Valley. It is here, at the gateway to this gigantic graben, that one of nature's oddities is preserved in stone.

During the most recent ice age, less than 50,000 years ago, the Owens Valley was somewhat different than it is today. Glaciers covered many of the Sierra peaks to the west and the runoff from these vast icefields made the Owens Valley considerably more humid. Pleistocene inhabitants of the valley included bison, bear, dire wolves, giant ground sloths and even an occasional sabre tooth tiger and mastodon. These animals lived along the banks of what is now called the Owens River, which in those days was a sizable body of water. The river started far to the north in the vicinity of what is now Glass and Deadman Creeks. Gathering in size it flowed into the Lake Crowley basin, then continued south cutting a gorge in the volcanic tableland north of Bishop. Entering Owens Valley, the river decreased in velocity as it spread out forming lakes and shallow marshland. The largest of these lakes was the Owens Lake; its semi-dry bed remains today. Lava fields once again thwarted the flow of the river as it left the valley to the south. The basaltic lava proved to be no great obstacle, however, and the river found a course across it. Where the lava flows terminated, the river left the valley in a series of what must have been spectacular waterfalls.



Evidence indicates this river was a popular attraction for primitive Indians who lived in the area. The Southwest Museum has uncovered, near Little Lake, house sites and artifacts belonging to the ancient "Pinto Man" of some 5,000 years ago. Most of the glaciers had melted about 6,000 years before the coming of Pinto Man, but it seems likely that falls were still flowing.

Today the glaciers have shrunk to a tiny remnant of their original selves, and with them the once mighty Owens River. What meager flow the Owens River now has, is all but taken by the insatiable thirst of the City of Los Angeles. The falls remain, nevertheless -- dry perhaps -- but today's visitor need not exercise his imagination much to hear their roar and feel their mist. For the traveler bound up the Owens Valley, Fossil Falls offers an interesting geologic interlude requiring no more than an hour's time.

As you drive north on highways 6 and 395, the divided road now bypasses Little Lake (DESERT, June 1965). About 3.2 miles beyond, a volcanic cinder cone sits conspicuously in the middle of the valley

floor. Just before reaching the southwest base of the cone, a wide graded road crosses the highway. As indicated by a county road sign, this is Cinder Road built by a firm who quarries the reddish-brown ash for use in cinder blocks.

Turn east here and after 0.5 miles turn right again on the old road leading back in a westerly direction. Follow this road 0.6 miles to its end at the Fossil Falls parking area. From here it is less than a mile by good trail to the top of Fossil Falls.

As you hike along the trail, notice the rocks around you. The dark ones, most prevalent, are basalt lava which flowed from vents and fissures in the Coso Mountains to the east. The reddish-brown material is cinder thrown from Red Hill, the crater behind you. Also seen occasionally are pieces of lightweight gray pumice and shiny black obsidian, further testimony of this region's violent volcanic past.

At the falls the lava flow seems to have cooled and stopped, forming a high bluff. It is here the ancient Owens River plunged downward in a series of steps to the valley below. Notice how the water has smoothed the coarse basalt and eroded weird shapes at the top of the falls. Notice too, the numerous potholes ground by the action of boulders swirling in the once turbulent water. This, then, is Fossil Falls, a geologic curiosity left high and dry in a world of constant change.