

Into Southern Inyo County

By Russ Leadabrand

IN THE SUMMER Of 1947 an amateur archaeologist by the name of Willy Stahl discovered evidence that ancient man had lived on the shore of diminutive Little Lake in eastern California. Subsequent excavations indicated that the inhabitants of the Stahl Site, as the aboriginal campground was called, dated back some 3,000 to 4,000 years.

These Pinto People-named after the distinctive projectile points they fashioned from local obsidian-are the earliest known residents of a strange and spectacular part of California.

This is the southern half of Inyo County, a land of towering peaks and lonesome sand wastelands. Civilization, even now, lies mainly along a thin ribbon of flatland through the center of the county. In every direction from this thread of habitation lie history and spectacle.

Nowhere else in the state is there such a contrast of geography. The statement that you can see Mt. Whitney from Badwater in Death Valley National Monument-a visual link between the highest and lowest points in the state-is apocryphal. But it is quite possible to drive from Whitney Portal, high on the Rank of the Sierra massif, down to Badwater in less than a day. Much of southern Inyo stands on edge. And thereby hangs its charm.

Our byway exploration of this unusual region starts at Little Lake, near the southern boundary of Inyo County.

Fed by underground springs, Little Lake is captured behind walls of burned lava, part of a volcanic action that could have happened 25,000 years ago.

There is a store, gas station and post office at the southern end of Little Lake where the highway climbs over a rocky dike and moves past the ancient lava flow and cinder cones up into Rose Valley.

Little Lake, seven-eighths of a mile long and covering a hundred acres, is a part time resort. From March to June it is open to the public for fishing; bass, crappie and catfish live in the chilly waters. By June underwater grasses used for duck feed start to choke out the fishing activity. Later in the year it is a private hunting club.

Sullivan's, the Little Lake resort, welcomes fishermen, rents boats and plays host to campers and picnickers between March and June. Fees are reasonable.

North of Little Lake less than a mile, on a short spur of dirt road that dips in toward the lava wall east of the highway, is the Willy Stahl Site, excavated by the Southwest Museum under the direction of M. R. Harrington between 1948 and 1951.

Here were found a number of prehistoric house sites and a small shelter cave in the lava. At the end of this little spur road can be seen the hummocks or raw earth made by the museum staff. Obsidian chips are everywhere. Back to the northwest is the outcropping of lava that contains the shelter cave.

A water-worn slot in the lava shelf, known locally as the Fossil Falls, can be reached by hiking northeast from the Stahl Site along the dry creek bottom. An easier way is to drive north on Highway 14-395 beyond the Stahl Site road to a second road that leads to the east.

Here are the directions to the falls from the *Indian Wells Valley Handbook*:

"The turn-off road, to the right, is marked by an orange-painted rock. Follow this road 0.4 mile to another orange rock, turn right onto a less-traveled road, and drive 0.4 mile to a parking area. A well-marked foot trail leads to the falls. For a good view climb down the West wall of the canyon. At the base of the lava cliff to the south of the site are some interesting petroglyphs..."

Dominating the landscape to the north is the great dome of Red Hill, a crimson cinder cone that is being whittled away by rock companies.

On up the highway, at a spot known variously as Oasis and Coso Junction, is the paved turnoff to the east that leads back to Coso Hot Springs. Unfortunately this sulfurous and bubbling site lies beyond the boundary fence of the Naval Ordnance Test Station. Permission to visit the spot on Saturday or Sunday can usually be obtained by writing to the Commanding Officer, Naval Ordnance Test Station, China Lake, California.

Farther north and east of Highway 14-395 is Haiwee Reservoir, a part of the Los Angeles aqueduct. From Haiwee the water runs south through a covered concrete ditch and a series of spectacular siphons all the way to Los Angeles.

At Olancho the highway forks.

The road to the right runs east along the lower edge of Owens Lake to a junction with State Highway 190. Southeast along this route lies Darwin, Panamint Valley and Death Valley.

To the northwest on Highway 190 a few miles from the junction is the lakeside community of Keeler. In the burned Inyo Mountains above Keeler hides one of southern California's most colorful ghost towns: lofty Cerro Gordo.

Inyo County historian W. A. Chalfant put the value of Cerro Gordo's mineral production during its boom years at \$17,000,600. According to popular legend the rich lode was first found in 1865 by three Mexican prospectors, one of whom was named Pablo Flores. The Mexicans ran into Indians, two of the prospectors were killed but Flores was allowed to go free on the guarantee he would not return to the rich slopes. In 1866 there were miners on Fat Hill-an easy translation of Cerro Gordo. By 1868 the 154 boom was on. The mines produced a rich silver-lead bullion, produced it faster than any camp in the history of the west. It was a wild and wicked outpost.



The ruins of the great smelter at Keeler, where ore from the Cerro Gordo was reduced.

Every day freighters filled with the eighty-five-pound pigs of rich silver-lead edged gingerly down Yellow Grade. The silver route lay south through the Mojave Desert on to San Pedro. The stretch of wagon road around the southern curve of twelve-milewide Owens Lake ran through wheel-swallowing sand.

A pair of lake steamers was built: the *Bessie Brady* and the *Mollie Stevens*. The loaves of silver-lead bullion piled up at the bottom of Yellow Grade faster than the steamers could haul them away.

A fascinating piece of folk lore claims that a wagon load of bullion slipped off one of the steamers and fell into the lake. Historian Frances C. Krautter, Keeler chronicler, writes that the *Mollie Stevens* was supposed to have capsized, loaded with bullion, in mid-lake. Neither story has been verified. If there ever was a load of bullion on the bottom of Owens Lake, chances are that it has long since been found by a close-mouthed treasure hunter. Owens Lake stands empty now, much of its bottom a dusty plain. Its water was drained away by the aqueduct.

In 1882 Captain Julius M. Keeler first laid out the community that now carries his name-it was first called Hawley-at the bottom of Yellow Grade. In 1883 the Carson and Colorado Railroad inched into Keeler after a marathon track laying across impossible desert and mountain terrain down from Mound House near Virginia City, Nevada.

By then Cerro Gordo was already fading.

There was little timber on Fat Hill. What there was had been quickly harvested for the greedy Cerro Gordo smelters. More charcoal was needed. Lumberjacks went across Owens Lake, up Cottonwood Creek, built a sawmill and flume, floated logs down to a row of beehive kilns on the western shore of Owens Lake. Here the timber was reduced to charcoal; the steamers hauled the charcoal across the lake.

Two of the kilns still stand a half mile east of Highway 14-395 between Cartago and Bartlett.

It is possible to drive up Yellow Grade from Keeler to the decaying ruins of old Cerro Gordo. It is a dirt road, narrow, winding and steep, with sections that would probably terrify a full-time flatland driver. The eight-mile course climbs roughly 5,000 feet, is better suited to four-wheel drive vehicles, but conventional passenger cars do make the drive. Don't try it if you are unsure of your car or your mountain driving ability.

Cerro Gordo is a gaggle of ruined buildings. The old two-storied American Hotel sags, stares out through broken windows. A ruined smelter chimney is a lonely monument. In a ready-to-collapse barn is a mountain of old harness.

A caretaker and his family are the sole residents of Cerro Gordo and they are the friends of souvenir hunters. Rockhounds are usually given free run of the mine dumps.

And the view of dry Owens Lake and the Sierra Nevada on the far side of the valley is breathtaking on a clear day. When the wind blows the entire area is obscured by soda dust laddering up from the floor of Owens Lake.

In 1961 the narrow-gauge Carson and Colorado, which had connected the Owens Valley communities to Keeler and Laws for many years, suspended operations. The tracks and ties were all hauled away. The lonesome Inyo wind will soon erase the last trace.



Rails of the narrow-gauge Carson and Colorado north of Keeler have been removed, and the wooden ties hauled away.

North of Keeler, back on Highway 14-395, is the busy, modern, friendly community of Lone Pine. Behind Lone Pine is Mt. Whitney, highest mountain in the United States until Alaska was added to the Union.

In 1962 they noted the centennial year of the area's settlement. Camp Independence, after which Lone Pine's highway neighbor of Independence was named, was first occupied on July 4, 1862. But historians claim that Putnam's, then Little Pine and finally Independence-as the community was variously known-was first settled in 1861.

Lone Pine has two corners of Inyo County scenery securely in its pocket. From the center of the community a road winds west out of town through the Alabama Hills up the brooding face of the Sierra Nevada to Whitney Portal.

The Alabama Hills, once labeled the oldest hills in the world, are thought now to be of more recent origin. But the early theory had a valid basis. The Alabama Hills *look* like the oldest hills in the world. They are weathered and storm-worn into a wonderland of smooth

domes and pinnacles and hidey-holes. In the middle of the low range is an area called Movie Flat. Hundreds of motion pictures and television shows have been filmed in this gigantic cliché of all western settings.

A few miles west, and soaring in an awesome sweep, is the Sierra with the sawedge cluster of peaks that make up Mt. Whitney and frosted with snow part of the year. It is an easy drive of fourteen miles up from Lone Pine to Whitney Portal. From here you can, in season, camp and picnic, hike on up Mt. Whitney, or simply stare in fascination at the gigantic mountain.

North of Lone Pine and the highway-hugging the Alabama Hills is the site of another sort of ghost town.

Manzanar, a stop on the vanished Carson and Colorado, was named after the old orchards here. During World War II the government moved 10,000 Japanese into a relocation camp at Manzanar.

The Japanese, many of them U.S. citizens, lived on this remote and inhospitable plain almost until the end of the war, made their living as best they could, demonstrated their talent and spirit by building handsome formal Japanese gardens in the wasteland. The Japanese were highly regarded by many Owens Valley residents.

Little is left of the sprawling camp of Manzanar. Near the highway there are two small stone buildings, the gatehouses at Manzanar. Nearby is a large garage building. Every other trace of the relocation center has been erased. Many people would like to forget that Manzanar ever happened.

At Independence, in the courthouse of that county seat, is the Eastern California Museum, a delightful collection of Indian and historic lore collected from all along the Owens Valley.

The museum is open daily and the collection of ancient historical photographs alone makes the visit more than worthwhile.

There are ore samples and memorabilia from vanished and forgotten camps like Bend City, San Carlos, Reward, Eclipse, Owensville and Black Rock. A locomotive, Old No. 18 from the Carson and Colorado, sits in silence in adjacent Dehy Park.

From Little Lake and its vanished Pinto People to Independence and its museum, Southern Inyo County has a strong flavor of yesteryear. There is an aura of nostalgia about it, pleasant yet bittersweet.

Still there is promise here. Dawn still catches fire in the spires of Mt. Whitney and every day is a new adventure on its slopes. Cerro Gordo could bloom again. Wise men could tap Coso Hot Springs' underground lode of steam for power. With water the Valley could once more boast of orchards.

The most promising of the rewards is offered the byway explorer. Geography, history and legend have been dealt with a lavish hand.

One suggestion. Enjoy them at leisure.

Excerpt taken from *Exploring California Byways from Kings Canyon to the Mexican Border*
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