

Chronological History of Owens Valley

Condensed from an excerpt compiled by Al Gagnon

- 20,000 years ago Before the white man found the Antelope Valley, Fremont Valley and Indian Wells Valley area, the many Native American Indian Tribes of this valley roamed up and down to hunt, fish and trade one another, it was a great place for them to live, work, play and raise there families, and it's still a great place.
- 1776 Padre Francisco Garces, a Jesuit missionary, twice crossed the Kern River near the mouth of the canyon, at Walker Pass, on his way to the Mission of San Gabriel. He named the river Rio de San Felipe. Father Garces was one of the first white men to visit the Fremont Valley which was later to be known as California City. One of two plaques marking Willow Springs as California Historic Monument No. 130 states that in 1776, Father Francesco Garces stopped at Willow Springs in Rosamond on his return wanderings from the San Joaquin Valley.
- 1822 Alta California belonged to Mexico after its independence from Spain.
- 1826 Jedediah Smith, Ewing Young, Joseph Walker and Kit Carson frequented the mountain passes of the Sierras and explored the streams of the San Joaquin Valley, the valley route became a popular route for Native Americans, Spaniards and American explorers. They brought back tales of high mountains and the potential for beaver pelts to his trapper friends in the Rockies.
- 1833 Joseph R. Walker came past Mono Lake area on his way to Monterey but didn't mention having seen the lake.
- 1841 The Bartleson-Bidwell party struggled over Sonora Pass on their way to rich farmlands promised them in Mexican California. Many other settlers followed over the pass even before gold was discovered.
- 1843 Joe Walker led several wagon trains south through the Owens Valley and west over Walker Pass to the Central Valley from Owens Valley. After their escape from Death Valley, the Jayhawkers '49er parties split here to go west and south to the California gold fields. Here bandit Tiburcio Vasquez preyed on stages and freighters traveling between the Kern River mines and Los Angeles and the mines of Bodie and the Panamints.
- 1845 Walker and John C. Fremont explored and mapped Owens Valley. Kit Carson, Richard Owens, and Ed Kern explored and named places. For a month they camped at the confluence of the North and South Fork of the Kern River.
- 1848 Alta California and the whole southwest territories were ceded to the United States government by Mexico as a result of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo after an 18 month battle. The United States territories stretched from sea to shining sea.
- 1848-49 Gold rush in the Sierra foothills.

- 1849 The Jayhawkers passed through our area on their way to the gold fields of the Western Sierras.
- 1849 The Bennett and Manley parties were marooned in Death Valley. They arrived on Christmas Day and had many problems, ran out of food, sent for help, got rescued because the guys found water at Indian Wells and Willow Springs. The famous 1849 pioneers of Rogers and Manly came through the Antelope Valley on their 300 mile walk to Los Angeles trying to get help for the Jayhawker party they had left behind in Death Valley.
- 1850 California became a state on Sept. 9, with 27 counties. (Kern Co. was then a part of Mariposa Co.) Other visitors to Willow Springs included the Jayhawk Party, who struggled into the oasis in 1850, after their grueling trip through Death Valley.
- 1852 Mono Lake was "discovered" and named by an Army patrol while chasing Indians out of Yosemite Valley. The men discovered gold flakes in the area. It didn't take long for prospectors to pour over the Sierra to explore the Mono and Owens basin mountains for riches.
- 1859 Indian wars broke out in the Owens Valley. The Army set up Camp Independence on July 4 with the intention of keeping peace between the Paiutes and the settlers who were moving cattle on to the Indian lands. Alney McGee brought cattle from Tulare over Walker Pass, and Sam Bishop brought cattle and horses in from Fort Tejon. Problems continued until 1863. Over 200 Indians were killed in various battles.
- The Battle of Bishop in 1862 involved 50 settlers and 500 Indians. Finally a treaty was signed in July, 1863. The Army escorted 998 Indians to a reservation near Fort Tejon and Camp Independence was temporarily abandoned. The Army maintained a presence at Fort Independence from 1865 to 1877, though most of the remaining Indians gave up their traditional way of life and began working for the white settlers. Paiute lands had been overrun with cattle and sheep. The pinion pines, which the Paiutes depended upon for a pine nut crop each fall, were rapidly being cut down for fuel for the mine smelters.
- 1860 Discovery of silver in and around the Owens Valley and gold farther north in and near Bodie. Dr. Darwin French discovered silver in the Cosos and started the Darwin mines. The Comstock was producing silver east of Lake Tahoe in what is now Virginia City. Much gold was being mined around Mono Lake, and large gold mines were producing in Aurora.
- 1860 - on Willow Springs became a stage and freight station and general watering place used by Remi Nadeau in freighting silver from Cerro Gordo. Nadeau, the Searles Brothers, Borax Smith and others used the station while developing the Death Valley borax deposits and the Inyo and Kern River mining operation. They followed Horse Thief Trail, which later became known as Walker Trail.

- 1861 Mono County was formed from Calaveras County. Aurora was designated County Seat (though it was later discovered to be in Nevada and demoted.)
- 1864 California State Geological Survey set the border with Nevada, explored Sierra, and discovered Mt. Whitney to be tallest peak. William Brewer came through the Indian Wells Valley and is supposed to have said "A more god-forsaken, cheerless place I have seldom seen - a spring of water - nothing else."
- 1866 Portions of Tulare and Los Angeles counties were split off to form Kern and Inyo Counties. Havilah was chosen Kern County Seat as it was the largest town in the county at that time. Havilah boasted the county's first newspaper. Independence was designated county seat for Inyo County. Mines and mills were operating in many areas of the Owens Valley. Ranching, particularly raising of vegetables and fruit orchards, was thriving throughout Owens Valley and south in to the Indian Wells Valley to supply the mines and settlements.
- 1868 The toll wagon road was completed over Sonora Pass to connect the Mono and Bodie mines with the markets on the west side of the Sierra.
- 1870 Bridgeport became the Mono County seat when Aurora was discovered to be in Nevada and its mines were declining; the Bridgeport Valley had over 9,000 acres in production of wheat, oats, barley, hay, potatoes, butter and cheese.
- 1871 Cerro Gordo mines were going great guns, with 4,800 people and 1,600 mules living there. Mine production was 2,200 tons of ore that year. Heavy wagon loads of 83 pound bars containing silver and lead, with minor amounts of gold and copper, were hauled daily down the Yellow Grade Road by Remi Nadeau's sturdy mule drawn freight wagons to Swansea. In 1872 the ore was shipped by steamers Bessie Brady and in 1877 also on the Mollie Stevens across Owens Lake to Cartago, then again by wagon to L.A. before 1876, then by the train at Mojave to L.A. In 1873 Colonel Stevens set up his sawmill at the head of Carroll Creek to provide lumber for building, but also wood to turn in to charcoal at the two kilns beside the west shore of Owens Lake. The steamers took the charcoal back across the lake to the smelters after unloading their silver bars. The Bessie Brady burned in 1882. Export of Cerro Gordo ores to refineries in San Francisco gave the small port city of Los Angeles a big boost.
- 1872 On March 26 a magnitude 8.5+ earthquake hit Lone Pine, killing 29 people and causing long fault scarps over 20 feet high to form. These hills can still be seen today north of Lone Pine. This earthquake remains the largest so far in the State of California.
- 1874 Cerro Gordo Mine in the Inyo Mountains needed more water and installed an 11 mile long pipeline, which brought 90,000 gallons of water per day to the site. Daily production was 18 tons of ore which was smelted into 400 bars of silver bullion.

- 1874 Tiburcio Vasquez, whose hideout was in Robber's Roost, robbed stages and freight wagons along the eastern Sierra, especially near Coyote Wells (Freeman Junction) until he was captured later that year. To discourage such robberies, the Cerro Gordo mine began making bullion ores into 300 pound balls that could not be carried on a horse!
- 1878 Large scale irrigation projects began in the Owens Valley to supply the ranches with water by way of ditches from the Owens River. This caused declining amounts of water for Owens Lake and it started dropping. Gold was discovered in Mammoth in 1875, the rush to Bodie was in the 1870's, in 1876 gold was found at Lundy and Tioga. The Great Sierra Mining Co. built a wagon road to Sonora in 1878 to haul in mining machinery to these mines.
- 1881 The Mono Mills Railroad, later called the Bodie & Benton RR, was built from Mono Mills on the south-east shore of Mono Lake to Bodie to provide lumber and firewood for the town's people and large timbers for the mines. It ran until 1917.
- 1881 Borax was discovered in Death Valley in 1873, but in this year William T. Coleman bought the claims and developed the Harmony Borax works. His 20 mule teams hauled borax from Death Valley to Mojave, 165 miles in 10 days, from 1883 to 1888.
- 1880 -1900 No new strikes were found in the Owens Valley area, and silver prices dropped drastically. Mining declined as did the fortunes of the farmers.
- 1883 Twenty Mule Team Trail established from Death Valley, the route ran from the Harmony Borax Mining Company works, later acquired by the Pacific Coast Borax Company, to the railroad loading dock in Mojave over 165 miles of mountain and desert trail, wagons were used until 1889. Carson and Colorado narrow-gauge railroad was completed from Keeler on the east side of Owens Lake at the bottom of the Cerro Gordo road, to Carson City, NV. This railroad changed the way freight in the Owens Valley was handled. Ores could now be shipped north on the train to Carson City smelters, and vegetables and farm products from the Owens Valley had a better means of transport to markets north and south. Most trading was then done with San Francisco rather than Los Angeles. The rail line was sold to Southern Pacific in 1900. In 1905 the Standard Gauge rail was completed from Carson City to Tonopah and the narrow gauge abandoned. In 1943 service was abandoned north of Laws and the track pulled. In 1960 the "Slim Princess" made her last run and stopped in Laws. Visit her at the Laws Railroad Museum 6 miles north-east of Bishop. General Fremont climbs Turtle Back Mountain renamed Galileo Hill.
- 1905-1907 The City of Los Angeles began buying Owens Valley properties and water rights.
- 1907 Funds were appropriated from Congress for construction of the Los Angeles aqueduct.

- 1908 The Nevada and California Railroad (now Southern Pacific) extended the Owenyo line north from Mojave into the Owens Valley to serve the construction of the Los Angeles Aqueduct and to make freight connections with the Carson and Colorado Railroad at Owenyo station, northeast of Lone Pine. Aqueduct construction continued until 1913. Mules were used more than any other means of transport around the construction. The cement plant in Monolith, east of Tehachapi, was founded to provide cement for this immense project. When completed, the aqueduct included over 12 miles of steel pipe siphons (visible as the black pipe in Nine Mile, Short, and Jawbone Canyons), 142 tunnels, mostly through the Sierra west of the Indian Wells Valley, and 2 major reservoirs, upper and lower Haiwee. Sidings and 53 construction camps were eventually used; those in the Indian Wells Valley included Terese, Siding 16, changed to Magnolia and in 1913 changed to Inyokern, and Siding 18, changed to Brown in 1909, when George Brown built a hotel there. The post office at Brown remained in service until 1948. Water spilled into the L.A. basin in 1913, but the City of Los Angeles continued to buy irrigation districts, water rights, and property in the Owens Valley well into the 1940's.
- 1903 City of Bishop was incorporated and already had electricity from hydroelectric projects up on Bishop Creek. Mine production in most places around the Owens Valley was declining.
- 1905~1913 The Los Angeles? Inyo Aqueduct was constructed across the Valley.
- 1910 The Owens Valley had 4500 settlers producing apples, grapes, corn, wheat, potatoes, alfalfa, honey, sheep (43,000 of them!), horses, and cattle. Artesian wells had existed as far south as Independence, but the intake to the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, LADWP, canal system at Aberdeen shortly dried up the water works in the southern end of the Owens Valley. There was no longer water for the lower Owens River nor for the shrinking Owens Lake. It completely dried up by 1927.
- 1911-1915 Cerro Gordo mines have another boom for zinc ore and salvage more lead and silver ores from the dump piles.
- 1917 Mt. Whitney Fish hatchery was completed. Fish planting began in Sierra lakes and streams, primarily Golden Trout taken from the upper Kern River watershed and stocked in Cottonwood Lakes.
- 1920 A health resort was established at Coso Hot Springs, east of what is now the Coso Junction rest area. Long before that the Native Americans in the area used the hot muds.
- 1923 Construction of the Little Lake hotel finally finished. By then a dam has been built at the south end of the tule marsh and the many springs had made a substantial Little Lake as we know it today.

- 1931 A ceremony was held at Red Rock Canyon to celebrate the paving of Highway 6 from Los Angeles to Bishop. Even with the road, the 30's were a period of decline in the Owens Valley. Los Angeles continued to buy the farms and water rights and the mines were not producing well.
- 1939 Pine Creek tungsten mine started, bringing some employment to the Owens Valley. Los Angeles continued buying lands and water rights into the Mono Basin.
- 1941 Dave McCoy brought the first portable rope tow to the Mammoth Mountain area and to McGee Mountain. Mammoth proved to have better snows. Los Angeles Department of Water and Power began work on Long Valley Dam to form Crowley Lake, and put a tunnel under the Mono Craters to bring June Lake Loop and Mono Basin water to Crowley Lake. Mono Lake began to decline without the creek waters flowing into it.
- 1942-46 Manzanar Japanese Internment Camp, between Lone Pine and Independence, housed over 10,000 people of Japanese ancestry, even though most were U.S. citizens. When the camp was dismantled in 1946, many of the buildings were brought to NOTS, China Lake.
- 1953 Los Angeles completed the Owens River Gorge hydroelectric plants. Lake Isabella dam was completed in March.
- 1954 The road to Mammoth Mountain was paved. Mammoth Mountain Ski Area began; 6 chairs had been installed by 1965; 26 chairs by 1993. In 1997 a major interest in MMSA was sold to Interwest, a Canadian firm with plans to further develop both the ski area and the town.