

The Mono Pass – Bloody Canyon Trail

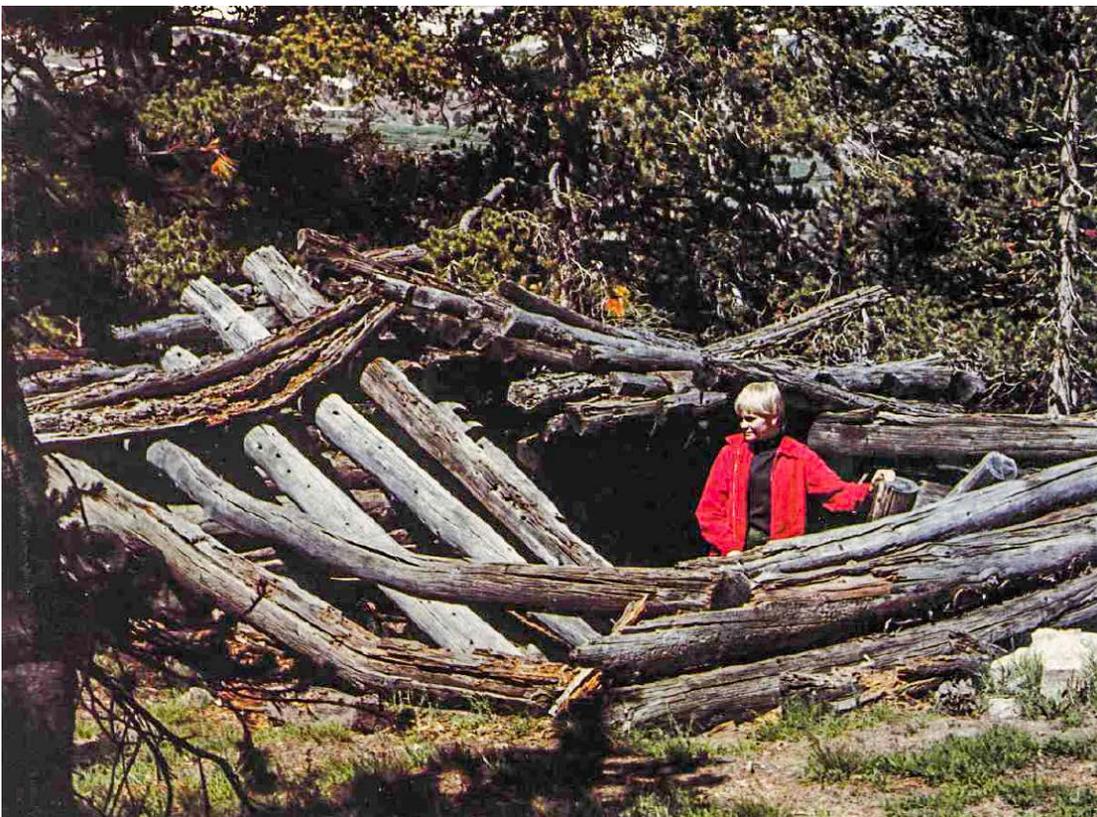
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ANYONE WHO has traveled the Tioga Pass Road (California State Highway 120) through Yosemite National Park cannot but be awed by this spectacular and highest of all highway crossings of the Sierra Nevada. Yet few of today's visitors are aware that a portion of the route was traversed by moccasin-clad feet long before the first white men ventured into the region.

For years, tribes of the western slope's foothills had engaged in trade with the Mono Paiutes east of the Sierra, carrying their barter across the mountains. Their primitive path ascended into the high country, following the divide between the deep gorges of the Merced (Yosemite Valley) and the Tuolumne watersheds. However, near the summit the trail veered to the south to cross the crest at Mono Pass, thus avoiding the precipitous walls of Lee Vining Canyon to which the present highway clings. From the lofty 10,604-foot height of Mono Pass, which is the northernmost of two Sierra passes bearing the same name, the trail descended through Bloody Canyon to the Mono Basin.

That stretch of the old trail from the highway to Mono Pass is still the domain of the hiker. The distance from a roadside parking area to the crest is approximately four miles. The ascent is gradual, making an enjoyable, not too strenuous one-day hike, round trip. Within the pass, directly at the head of Bloody Canyon, stands a picturesque cluster of cabins and a water-filled shaft. This was the Golden Crown mine. Built of white-bark pine, the sturdy cabins have weathered nearly a century of high Sierra winters. These and other historic relics serve as silent reminders of the procession of prospectors who crossed the Sierra via the Mono Trail.



Fallen remains of a once stalwart cabin at the Golden Crown Mine.

However, these now mostly forgotten men, chasing their rainbow, were not the first white men to follow on the heels of the Indian. In the vanguard of the white invasion was an 1852 military expedition trailing a tribe of hostile Indians.

At the time of the gold rush, Yosemite Valley was inhabited by a small band of Indians. The Yosemitees understandably resented the hordes of white men swarming over the foothills below their hidden mountain

sanctuary. They realized it would be only a matter of time before these aliens discovered their deep valley and they would be driven from their sacred home just as the foothill tribes were already being displaced. The Yosemite, under the leadership of their chief, Tenaya, decided not to wait for the inevitable invasion. Instead, they struck the first blow. Early in 1850, a war party of Yosemite attacked a trading post on the South Fork of the Merced River.

Relations between the Indians and whites continued to deteriorate. In December, 1850, Indians led by a chief of the Chowchillas attacked another store. The brief but bloody Mariposa Indian War was on. Within months all the foothill tribes had been subdued. Only the Yosemite refused to make peace. In May, 1851, a company of soldiers under the command of Captain John Boling was given orders to enter Yosemite Valley and bring in the recalcitrant tribe. Chief Tenaya and a few of his followers were captured, but many managed to escape, fleeing toward the east over their ancient trade route. Scouts discovered the Indian trail and the company resumed pursuit of their quarry. The Yosemite were overtaken while camped on the shore of a beautiful mountain lake. The soldiers decided to name the lake Tenaya, to perpetuate the name of the tribe's bold and brave chieftain. However, when told of the honor, the Yosemite chief reportedly replied sullenly, "Lake already has a name, 'Py-we-ack' - Lake of the Shining Rocks."

The tribe was taken to a reservation on the Fresno River. But the Yosemite longed for their old way of life and mountain home. So late in the year, after extracting a solemn promise of good behavior from Tenaya, the authorities allowed the Indians to return to Yosemite Valley.

The peace was short-lived. On May 2, 1852, a party of eight prospectors blundered into the mountain stronghold. Tenaya led his braves in a surprise attack on the hopelessly outnumbered group. Two were killed; miraculously, the others escaped. Warily and painfully, the survivors made their way back to civilization.

The military decided to again go after the troublesome Yosemite. A detachment led by Lt. Tredwell Moore entered the valley in June. Five Indians, each with possessions of the murdered prospectors, were captured. All five were shot on the spot.

Word of the military's swift retribution quickly reached Tenaya. The chief hastily gathered his people, leading them in retreat across the Sierra down Bloody Canyon to Mono Lake where they found refuge with their Paiute allies. Lieutenant Moore's detachment followed the Indians but they had vanished by the time the soldiers reached the Mono Basin, and the men could elicit no information from the Paiutes regarding the whereabouts of the Yosemite. Before returning to their post at Fort Miller, members of the expedition discovered some promising mineral deposits in the vicinity of Bloody Canyon.

Upon seeing the soldiers' ore samples, a prospector named Lee Vining organized a party of miners who set off across the Sierra to prospect the region. The ultimate result of the group's explorations was a new gold rush east of the Sierra to such locations as Dogtown, Monoville, and eventually the big one, Bodie. Lee Vining left his name on a canyon, a creek, and the little town on U.S. 395 overlooking Mono Lake.

This east side excitement led to the first improvements in the Mono Pass-Bloody Canyon trail. It is believed that a Tom McGee of Big Oak Flat near Sonora blazed the Mono Trail in 1857, generally following the old Indian route through Tamarack Flat, past Lake Tenaya, through Tuolumne Meadows, and over Mono Pass.

By this time the problems with the Yosemitees were over. Ironically it was not the U.S. Army, but the Mono Paiutes who finally brought the tribe to its knees. Survivors have given historians varying versions as to what actually happened. Some said that Tenaya had led his people back to their beloved Yosemite Valley late in the summer of 1853. But shortly after returning home, a band of ungrateful young braves stealthily crossed back over the mountains and stole the Monos' horses. However, many years later, another survivor insisted that the dispute had erupted on the shore of Mono Lake during a game of skill between the two tribes. Whatever the cause or place, all agreed that Tenaya and a number of Yosemitees were stoned to death by the angry Mono Paiutes.

For the first few years following the blazing of the Mono Trail, a significant number of gold seekers used the route to reach the Mono country strikes. But after the initial deposits were exhausted, traffic dwindled to a trickle. Then in 1874, a chance discovery attracted a new surge of prospectors and mining men to the very summit region that many had passed through enroute to the east side diggings.

Just north of Tioga Pass, a young man, William Brusky, Jr., was tending his father's flock of sheep when he found a rusty shovel and pick lying near an abandoned prospect hole. Most of a faded claim notice was illegible with the exception of the date, 1860. At first the ore didn't look promising enough to develop, but the following summer Brusky sunk another hole on Tioga Hill and obtained some richer ore. Still, it was 1878 before the potential value of the discovery was realized and the Tioga Mining District was formed. The district extended some eight miles along the summit and to the base of the Sierra on the eastern side. Eventually, 350 locations were made in the district, including, in 1879, a ledge of antimonial silver within Mono Pass. This property was developed as the Golden Crown and Ella Bloss mines. Mining camp newspapers were ever optimistic about each new discovery. The Mammoth City Herald was no exception. Its September 3, 1879 issue extravagantly predicted that thousands of men would be working at the head of Bloody Canyon within a year.

Both the Tioga Hill and Mono Pass claims were purchased by the Great Sierra Consolidated Silver Company which provided the capital for the major amount of work done in the district. The company's headquarters were at Bennettville, the little village located near the original Brusky "Shepherd" discovery.

At first supplies were brought in via the other route then in existence, from the east side up Bloody Canyon. The trains of pack mules rubbed their sides, raw on the sharp rocks protruding beside the narrow ledge of the trail. Thus was born the name, Bloody Canyon.

With the need for heavy equipment to develop the Great Sierra's properties a new trail was built over rugged terrain from the bustling camp of Lundy. During the winter of 1882, over eight tons of drills, pipe, a boiler, even kitchen utensils were laboriously coaxed up nearly perpendicular mountainsides to Bennettville.

A better route had to be developed if the company planned to continue its mining activities. The decision was made to construct a wagon road up the more gentle ascent from the west side. Work began in April, 1883, and the road was completed in November - 56 miles from Big Oak Flat to Bennettville, via Lake Tenaya and Tuolumne Meadows, in general, the route followed by generations of Indian traders.

However, not one load of ore was ever hauled out over the Great Sierra Wagon Road. By 1884, the mining company found itself one quarter million dollars in debt. When new capital could not be obtained, the board of directors had little choice - but to cease operations.

The wagon road, which became known as the Tioga Road, was operated for awhile as a toll road, but eventually, because of neglect and lack of maintenance, declined to pack trail status. The Tioga Pass route did not become a through trans-Sierra thoroughfare until 1911 when the State of California completed the last spectacular stretch which scrambles up the glacier-scoured wall of Lee Vining Canyon.

For a number of summers, park naturalists have conducted hikes, usually once weekly, to Mono Pass. For current details check at park headquarters in Yosemite Valley or write to the Superintendent, Yosemite National Park, California 95189.

The parking area is approximately two miles west of the Tioga Pass entrance station. The trail is well marked and can be followed easily without a guide. Nature photographers will want to linger along the way to photograph the many delicate alpine wildflowers, and fishermen might even want to take along their poles and try their luck in Upper or Lower Sardine lakes, which are less than a mile below Mono Pass in Bloody Canyon.