

My Travels Amongst the Natives, or Nativists, in Central Nevada

Having nothing better to do with my time, the Census Bureau having suspended its operations in view of the ongoing health crisis and so its need, perceived or real, for the use of my services, I recently betook myself to the empty precincts of Central Nevada, there the better to avoid contact with my fellow man, the moreso women, and thus the diminish chance of contracting dread the contagion. Over the course of my eighteen year banishment to the High Plains I traveled with alarming regularity, generally at least twice a year, by car first from Northern Montana for four years and then from Western South Dakota for another fourteen to Southern California, the Bay Area, the Willamette Valley of Oregon and, very occasionally, Seattle. On my trips to California, I almost always avoided Interstate 15 with its torment-by-Las-Vegas traffic and chose to cross the Silver State on some combination of US 93, US 50, US 6 and US 95, depending on the part of California I was aiming for. As time wore on and the trips mounted, I branched out to drive almost all of the paved sections of highway in Nevada and a considerable number of unpaved ones as well. As of my most recent excursions, I have incorporated into my 'body of work', a very large number of trips across desolate sections of incredibly bad roads through remarkably beautiful landscapes - in which it would be a very poor idea to get stuck without water.



Desert Sunset

(Click to Enlarge)

One of the places I have stayed frequently over the years in my to-ing and fro-ing is the BLM Hickison Petroglyphs Campground, about a mile East of Hickison Summit on US 50. I first encountered that interesting, and completely arid, stay-over on a trip to Southern California which I made with my daughter Nell in May, 1996. (Of that trip, the most vivid, and poignant, memories are the fervid attachments which Nell formed with any and all dogs which crossed her path - including one such in the ancient bar of the Jackson House Hotel in Eureka, Nevada - and the wailing and sobbing that accompanied her parting from said dogs). There is a short trail there, at most three-quarters of a mile, which leads indeed to some interesting petroglyphs. What I did not know until the first of my more recent stays, is that that trail continues on to the top of a small ridge-like Butte and affords from there a sweeping view of the desert valley to the South and slightly West of Hickison and, in the same

direction, the Toiyabe Range.

Hickison Campground has, alas, been discovered by the RVers, including the man-bunned, quilted-down-jacket-wearing, Sprinter-van-driving hipster variety, who increasingly traverse US 50 (which, by the way, is not even remotely close to being 'The Loneliest Road in America'). This first of my most recent stays was marred by one specimen of the distinctly non-hipster RVers, an imbecile towing a 50' trailer, who kept his bleeding generator running from the time of my arrival, about 3p, until long after I drifted off into the arms of Murphy, 10p at the earliest. When I got up to pee at God-knows-when, it was still running. Consequently, after a short jaunt up the petroglyphs trail the next morning, on which I discovered its extension to the top of the butte, I decamped in search of more solitude.



Hickison View

I had noticed in some earlier exploring a sign about a mile West of Austin, Nevada indicating a certain 'Big Creek Campground' to the South of US 50. I drove there and found a pleasant, not-too-trashy campground next to a water course which only in the desert would be characterized as 'big'. It was empty (nice!) but, like Hickison, without potable water, a circumstance less than ideal but one with which I am, meanwhile, fully able to contend. Having thus secured my night's stay, I decided to explore the road further up the canyon of 'Big Creek'.

The road further up was, say, sketchy, crossing and recrossing Big Creek six or seven times until, arriving at the canyon's boxed end, switching back twice to reach a small pass, obviously marking the divide between the valleys East and West of the Toiyabe Range. There were two motorcycles parked there, dirt bikes, and looking up the frighteningly steep jeep road off the already alarming main road to the East Northeast, I descried their owners who waved a polite 'hello'. When they had descended the hill to the pass we fell into friendly conversation - about where we came from, what we were doing out there in the middle of nowhere, &. It turned out that they too had been at Hickison the night before but, unable to reconcile themselves to Mr. Generator's racket, had gone off on a road near the campground entrance to a trailhead about a mile away where, in peace and quiet, they had spent the night. I had noticed the trailhead sign before but had never been down that road. A thought formed.



Bella Luna

We said our goodbyes and I returned to the Big Creek Campground. A young couple with a little boy arrived shortly after I got back and set up camp at the opposite end of the campground (very quietly) and I spent a tranquil, cold night, watched over by a spectacular full moon, listening to the gurgling of Big Creek a few feet from where I slept.

The next day I returned up the tortuous Big Creek road to the pass. I had noticed up the jeep road just above the bikers a small, or seemingly small, white cross on a little nob of a hill. I thought I'd visit it. This, as it turned out was the beginning of rather long, slightly adventurous outing.

Going up the indeed very steep jeep road I noticed off to the South and slightly East a tall, snow-capped peak which had been obscured from view at the level of the pass. I thought, realizing that it was a long way off and that distances in the mountains and deserts are generally greater than they seem, that I'd head off towards it and see how far I might get. On the way up I had passed a white GMC pickup with Nevada plates whose intrepid owner, the bikers had told me the day before, had propelled it up the jeep road to a little flat spot below the cross, out of site from the pass. The jeep road petered out at a little col just past the nob with the cross and, seeing no other way forward, I went more or less straight uphill, through sage and short cheat grass, following an old, long since abandoned barbwire fence carried by improvised branches, towards a rocky outcropping. Just after the rocky outcropping, running along a contour of the hillside, I came across, to my greater amazement, a trail the surface of which was freshly turned dirt with likewise fresh bootprints. Since it went more or less in the direction of the peak and was blessedly level, I followed it. As the trail contoured around the mountainside, I saw something goldish-brown bobbing in and out of view not far ahead. A bighorn sheep! Sadly not. It turned out to be a straw hat adorning the melon of the guy whose spade work accounted for the trail I was walking on. He hadn't seen me so I made a little gratuitous, but gentle, noise to herald my presence so I wouldn't scare him by walking up to within a few feet without forwarning. We exchanged pleasantries. He was, in fact, out from Reno, building this mountainside trail from nowhere in particular (it didn't go to the jeep road or the main road) vaguely in the direction of the peak which I had seen earlier (the name of which he



**No Name Peak
from Below**

didn't know) and now was in our plain view. I didn't ask him why. People in the desert do all sorts of strange things and I find it generally best not to ask for reasons. From where we were standing the trail headed off in the direction of three or four longish, moderately steep snowfields which it appeared to cross. Mr. Strawhat said that, when the snow was fully out, the trail *would* cross that way once he had built it out that far. I thanked him for the info, bid him a good day and he me likewise, and I headed off towards the snowfields with the intention of crossing them *en route* to unknown peak.

When I got to the first of the snowfields, I donned my mir-cospikes (I have more serious mountaineering footwear but didn't have it with me). The snowfield appeared to extend about 500-600 below me, perhaps 250 feet above, inclined at something slightly in excess of 45°. I gingerly ventured out onto the snow which, as it turned out, was sheathed in roughly one inch of ice, the result of repeated meltings and refreezings of the surface. Peering down the slope, about four feet out, I was suddenly and forcefully gripped with the awareness that I was woefully under-equipped to make the seventy-five foot walk across the snowfield safely and that a not-at-all unlikely slip would result in an unpleasantly rapid descent with an unhappy ending.

I turned to retreat to safety and had almost made it back to dry land when, probably owing to thoughtless foot placement, my legs shot out from underneath me and I begin slipping down the slope. Fortunately at that point, just fifteen or twenty feet below me, was a slight incursion of scree into the snowfield which arrested my descent, no further harm done, save a little ice burn on my legs and palms. I gathered myself and, if I recall correctly, swore. I considered my options: up over the top of the snowfields or back to the car, definitely not straight across. I am not, nor ever was, a particularly graceful or gifted climber or outdoorsman but I am doggedly persistent. I didn't make it to the peak but to the crest of the ridge above me, the top of the Toiyabe Range with dramatic vistas in every direction. It was worth the effort, including or perhaps especially the swearing, though I likely wouldn't have said so at any number of points during the afternoon when I was ankle deep in steep scree.



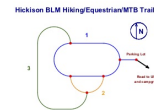
**No Name Peak
from Crest**



**Toiyabe Crest
View**

After returning to the car I headed down the East side of the Toiyabe Range, along another, slightly bigger creek, past a few mining ruins, tailings, abandoned head-frames, ore car trolleys, &c., through the ghost-ish ‘town’ of Kingston, Nevada, back to Austin to re-supply, and then back to Hickison. I camped there, the next day to explore the trails to which my biker friends had directed my attention. Overnight my water bottle froze to slush.

Accordingly, the next day I drove out to the trailhead and, after a few false starts occasioned by a forgotten this and that, set out. There are three trail loops, although not really distinct loops (see diagram), to the BLM ‘Hickison Summit Trail System’. Since I certainly had no particular place to be and absolutely nothing of consequence to do, I chose to travel across the longest, outside loop which, if I understood the map correctly, should have been about 13.5 miles. It took not quite six hours, including a couple of water stops which seemed a bit long - but, sadly, I don’t hike the way I once did. An extra credit question referring to the trail diagram: Obviously there is no route beginning at the parking lot which covers the entire trail system and traverses no section of trail more than once. Is there such a path beginning at some other trail junction if one disregards the short ‘tail’ section from the parking lot to the rest of the system? If not, is there a path covering every section of trail (again, disregarding the short ‘tail’ section from the parking lot) beginning and ending at two different trail junctions? Submit your solutions in writing to apclam@protonmail.com. Best solution will receive a no expenses paid guided tour of Central Nevada.



Hickison Trails

The trails meander (a life theme for me, meandering), through a collection of canyons and intervening ridges and mesas. The ‘3 loop’ apparently sees very few visitors on foot although there was a great deal of ‘horse sign’, including long sections of trail which had been fairly badly ripped up by horse traffic when the ground was wet with recently melted snow.



Bad Oats, Mr. Ed?

I got duly exercised about the miscreant cowboys who had ridden their nags over the trail when it was wet and left it in such miserable walking condition. In fact, when I returned to the trails a week and a half or so later for a few more hikes and some extracurricular activities, I read the trail register more closely to discover that the place is fairly lousy with wild horses. And, a little further inspection revealed that the hoofprints were shoeless, a sad commentary on the economic

prospects of wild horses in Nevada. Later, I would occasionally hear the horses whinnying at night very close to the camp ground. Shoeless *and homeless*.

In any case, the trail system is worth the expenditure of time, with the only caveat/-suggestion that it is doubtless unbearably hot from June through September, possibly October, unless you hike in the dark. Throughout there is the sort of interesting geology which makes me wish I had taken at least one course to help me understand the forces that shaped, and continue to shape, the Western landscape in which I have spent so much of my life. And the flora and fauna is interesting as well. The vegetation is generally that found throughout Central Nevada: sage, creosote bush, and ground-hugging cactuses in drier, lower spots, giving way to juniper, piñon pine, and Mormon tea where it's higher and a bit wetter ('wetter' here is obviously a relative distinction).

Across the years that I have traveled Central Nevada, occasionally in May I have come across periods and places, often around Hickison, of infestations of what I have heard called Mormon Crickets, hordes of them, sometimes so thick that they almost cover the surface of the highway, crossing from, it appears, Northeast to Southwest (headed to LA, perhaps). They don't seem to come out every year and their presence, presumably because of voracious herbivory of grasses which Flossie or Bessie might otherwise nosh on, is a distinctly unwelcomed one by the locals.

I remember in 2003, after asking a woman in a gas station in Austin or Eureka about the critters, being told that 'the BLM should do something about them bugs'. She didn't specify what the BLM was supposed to do. Anyway, the generic Mormon Cricket is about the length of a grasshopper, although substantially thicker in girth (beer drinker?), and flightless. Like other potential prey items (bunnies, chipmunks, squirrels), they sit very still when first they seem to recognize that they might've been spotted and then take off in zig-zagging hops of about 2 feet when they take flight. They give off a powerful, acrid stench when numbers of them have been crushed by cars on the tarmac which, perhaps, explains why I've not seen any birds eating them. To the casual, non-avian observer, they seem a very likely, substantial meal for the odd raven or jay.



Weird Hollow Rock



Mormon Cricket

I made my first, most recent visit to Hickison, including my excursion to the Toiyabe Range and my hiking of the Hickison ‘3 loop’ on my way back to California, there to see my brother and sister-out-of-law and see to a little administration that required my attention. After two days in San Francisco, I headed back to Central Nevada to continue to wait out the health crisis in as socially distanced a place as I could imagine and to hike the rest of the Hickison trails. When I came back, in mid-to-late May, winter was still doggedly clinging on for its full season, plus another two months. All things taken

together, I mind cold much less than heat because, as my grandmother was found of saying, ‘you can always put on another sweater but there’s only so many clothes you can take off’.



May 20th, near Austin

After a diversionary side trip to Southeastern Nevada to Pioche, including an ill-advised trip across some of the worst roads I’ve ever driven through the Basin and Range National Monument, a swing through Southwestern Utah past the site of the Mountain Meadow Massacre (Mormons aren’t necessarily always so peaceful as they’d have you believe), and a rendezvous with my friends Shane and Shauna (and Reba - ‘arf’) from Bend in Tonopah, I was back at Hickison for five days. On my first hike across the ‘3 loop’ at the Hickison trails, I had come across a few (5-6) downed piñon pines blocking the trail which, in the desert, is at worst a petty annoyance because, well, the vegetation is so sparse you walk

almost anywhere.



Tree #1, Before



Tree #1, After

Still, I went back with my trusty Sven Saw (a marvelous piece of technology - thank you, John Hicks) and hand axe to do a little light-duty trail maintenance as a very

minor gesture of thanks for the fact that I had the time and health (yet) to enjoy that place.



Tree #2, Before



Tree #2, After

Off and on, when I wasn't hiking, I ventured further and nearer around Central Nevada to, in no particular order, the Toquima Caves and Toquima Range and nearby hot springs East Southeast of Austin, the Monitor Valley just to their East which contains a few thermal pools and vents, and the mostly forsaken little towns of Belmont and Manhattan, Nevada at the Southern end of the Toquima Range, always circling back to the Hickison Hideaway.

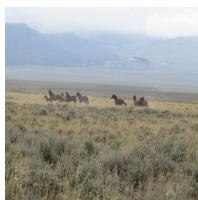


Hickison Hooch



A Nice Neighbor - No Generator

Along the way, I saw wild burros (the wild asses all live in town, on ranches, or at mines in Nevada) near Belmont, wild horses just South of Battle Mountain, and pronghorn antelope off and on everywhere.



Wild Horses



Pronghorn

I provisioned at the Raines Supermarket just West of Eureka, about a 35 mile drive each way from the Hickison campground. When I first made its acquaintance, 24 years ago, Raines had not yet been promoted to a ‘super’ market and occupied a one-plus story brick structure of dubious integrity in the heart of ‘downtown’ Eureka. Now the Raines empire is housed in a just-finished barn-like structure about three miles West, near the Eureka County Road Department, and encompasses groceries, hardware, guns and ammo - all in one handy location. I think their coy little sign about sidearms is as much a cultural and political provocation intended for the tourists as it is meant as a genuine point of information. I never once saw anyone carrying and can’t imagine the circumstances in Eureka under which it would be necessary or even marginally useful to do so in town. We closed that chapter in 1890.



Welcome to Eureka!

In Eureka I discovered that there is a water pump freely available to any and all in front of the Eureka County Public Library, behind (South) and a hair East of the Eureka County Courthouse (1879), over a block from the Jackson House Hotel (1877) and the Eureka Opera House (1881). I also made a tour of the four, yes four, cemetaries. The two cemetaries in Austin (Masons, Others - read Catholics) are hard to miss, lying just West of town immediately adjacent to US 50 on opposite sides. But in Eureka the dead are not in plain sight, lurking, so to speak, above town on or near the lowers slopes of Ruby Hill where, according to legend, the first silver strike was made in 1864. I found my way first to the Masonic Cemetary

(Welsh, Cornish, Scottish, Nova Scotians, Midwesterners and New Englanders) and then made my way just uphill to the East to the clearly Catholic Cemetary where the tenants, from oldest to newest and from bottom of the hill to top, were predominantly Irish (1860’s-1920’s), Italians (1880’s-1930’s), and Basques (1920’s-present), with the odd Frenchman, Bavarian, Hungarian, Serb, or Croat tossed into the earthy

mix. Just as I was leaving, a man in an older blue Ford pickup pulled up and got out and we greeted and began to talk. He was there to visit and say a prayer at his wife's grave, perhaps fifty feet off, at which he made a nodding gesture. Mr. Ithurralde, whose parents had come to Nevada from the French Basque Country, circa 1930, Dad Jim, dates unrecorded, as it said on his half of the marker below which his wife is buried. He was a pleasant and gentle man who reminded me a little in his unassuming friendliness of another Jim I once knew although he looked nothing like him.

Mr. Ithurralde directed my attention to the two remaining cemeteries, Cedar Hill, once the Oddfellows Cemetery, on a small, juniper-covered knoll about 500 yards to the West of where we stood, and the Eureka County Cemetery down, out of direct sight, in a depressingly barren little depression off to the Southwest, next to a road maintenance facility. I walked over to and strolled through each. Generally speaking, the departed there included those whose religious or fraternal affiliations did not allow or require inclusion elsewhere or, in the case of the County Cemetery, who were clearly indigent. A few Scandinavians, some more Nova Scotians, the odd Cornishman, but, really, no pattern. There in the county plot, off a distance from the very many dilapidated wooden markers and encompassing wooden balustrades, was a bronze plaque commemorating four Italian 'charcoal burners' who were, it said, 'massacred by a sheriffs posse' in 1871 at Fish Creek. *Tres courant*. Times change, and they don't.

I found no Chinese markers in any of the four cemeteries though there were doubtless hundreds, quite possibly thousands, of Chinese living, and dying, in Eureka throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And only one Jewish marker, in the Oddfellows lot, two sisters who never knew one another, Minnie (1873-4) and Theresa (1874-5) Berg, Mrs. Berg (we assume, Mrs. Berg) having been pregnant with Theresa at the time of Minnie's death. Their names in Hebrew written out above the English inscriptions. Below Minnie's name, 'Dress me pretty, mama' and below Theresa's, 'Gone to her sister in heaven'. The excruciating pain that people bear.

A day or two later, the weather having gone in short order from freezing cold and snow to 90^o F, I left Central Nevada for more temperate parts West, following my customary bumpy, circuitous path. Not sure when, if ever, I'll get back.