



Author's car crossing the playa of Black Rock Desert in northwestern Nevada.

On Black Rock Desert Trails

When Dora Tucker and Nell Murbarger first began exploring the Black Rock country in northwestern Nevada they did not realize what a high, wide and wild country it was. On the Black Rock a hundred miles doesn't mean a thing. In the 10,000 square miles of this desert wasteland there isn't a foot of pavement nor a mile of railroad—neither gasoline station nor postoffice. Antelopes outnumber human beings fifty to one. There's plenty of room here for exploring.

By NELL MURBARGER
Photographs by the author
Map by Norton Allen

AS AN illustration of what the Black Rock country affords in the way of variety and contrast, we made a 150-mile loop trip out of Gerlach last June. Our previous exploring of the region had been mostly in the northern and eastern sections, so we hadn't the slightest idea of what we might find in the southern part. We knew there was a ghost town—Leadville — approximately 50 miles north of Gerlach, and we'd heard rumors of a petrified forest somewhere in the vague beyond. Otherwise, it was anyone's guess.

When I had finished gassing the car and filling our two five-gallon water cans at the Gerlach service station and Dora had replenished the grub box at the little grocery store and postoffice across the street, I asked the station operator if he thought we could make it through to Leadville.

Running a critical eye over our dust-covered car and clothing, the old man nodded. "Reckon so. But I'll be damned if I know why you should

want to! Ain't nothin' there!"

Thanking him, we accepted his report as a favorable omen and headed out into the desert. Almost invariably we find our best prowling in places where folks have told us there "ain't nothin'."

Rising precipitously from the dead white flat where the gypsum-mining town of Gerlach swelters in the summer sun, the Granite range lifts its rocky brown crest to a height of nearly 9000 feet. As our road skirted the eastern base of this gaunt escarpment, we ranged our eyes up one rough canyon and down another, searching for a single green tree, one sign of water or one evidence of human life. None was visible.

To our right lay a land equally austere but arranged on a horizontal plane, rather than vertical. Beyond the narrow tangle of greasewood that fringed our road spread all the sweeping immensity of the Black Rock desert.

While all this northwestern region

is known as "the Black Rock country," the desert from which it derives its name actually is a stark white alkali playa, averaging a dozen miles in width and stretching for 100 miles from Gerlach to Kings River. Merging imperceptibly with the Black Rock on the southwest is the section known as Smoke Creek desert, inclusion of which extends the overall length of unbroken playa by at least one-third.

Sixteen hundred square miles of bare, dead nothingness; a silent void where no flowers bloom and no birds sing; a million flat acres producing scarcely enough vegetation to sustain a jackrabbit. Such is the Black Rock desert—one of Earth's most spectacular monuments to a vanished way of life which had its beginning in the Glacial Age of many thousand years ago.

As changing climatic conditions gradually brought about melting of the ice cap which blanketed most of temperate North America, run-off waters collected to form lakes. In the region



which is now Nevada, the largest of these bodies is that known to geologists as Lake Lahontan. From a point considerably south of present-day Carson City, one arm of Lahontan stretched north along the present line of the Black Rock desert and up Quinn River valley to the Oregon line, or a trifle beyond. Another arm spread west to the vicinity of Susanville, California—giving the lake a total surface area of roughly 8400 square miles.

From what science tells us, Lake Lahontan must have been a pleasant place. Its clear, cold waters teamed with fish of many varieties. Prehistoric Indians camped on its shores, cast their spears at humpless camels, lured ducks with feathered decoys, and implanted their strange picture writings on cliff faces. Giant ground sloths lumbered along the shoreline, browsing on low-growing shrubs and leaving their paw prints in the soft ooze where

delighted paleontologists would discover them eons later.

Naturally, the melting glaciers could not last forever. When their waters no longer cascaded down the mountainsides, Nevada's climate grew arid; and with evaporation exceeding inflow, Lahontan began her long march into oblivion. In the first recession of water from her shallower fringes, the Black Rock desert emerged.

Pausing on the powdery shore of that ancient lakebed, we looked across its somnolent breadth to the blue line of the Kamma Mountains, 20 miles to the east. Black pyramids of volcanic rock—the "black rocks" for which the place is named—here and there broke the stark surface of the dry sea like the dorsal fins of giant sharks, while shimmering heat waves gave to the expanse an illusion of billowing swells. As heat increased with advancing summer, this place

would become a virtual cradle of mirages. Even at this time, in early June, we soon had spotted three. Two appeared as islands surrounded by cool, blue, lapping water; the third involved a row of green trees and a meadow where we knew that no green blade existed.

Fanning out over the lakebed was a network of roads; this million-acre playa in dry weather being one vast race course, so hard and smooth that a car may be driven anywhere on its surface at high speed. Wet weather transforms the same area into a morass as slick as grease and completely impassable. A few small wind twisters, or "sand augurs," as the natives call them—were spiraling lazily over this flat. Otherwise there was no visible motion.

We had been on the road since six o'clock that morning and even when we left Gerlach were already in the mood for lunch. As our road veered away from the lakebed to head north into the desert hills, we spotted a clump of trees a little way off to the right. Except for the mirage, these were the first trees we had seen since leaving Gerlach, and, so far as we knew, might be the last before our return there. It seemed a logical place to eat.

To our surprise they proved to be Russian olives, and apparently were very old. Their gray-leaved boughs were tipped in the gold of a million tiny trumpet flowers whose heady fragrance came to us in the car even before I had stopped the engine. A pair of robins had a nest in one of the upper boughs and in another of the half-dozen trees, a mourning dove was giving voice to his plaintive call.

While no remnant of house or out-buildings remained, it was evident there once had been located here an establishment of considerable size, possibly a ranch or stage station. The charred truck of a burned freight wagon lay a few yards distant and scattered over the hard-packed earth beneath the trees were chips of ancient harness leather, a few square cut iron nails, and enough sun-purpled glass fragments to fill a water bucket. Many of the pieces were tinted so dark they appeared nearly black.

Dora, who has been my desert prowling partner for 25 of her 70 years, is at heart a rockhound—but when eligible rocks are not available, she turns an equally covetous eye toward Indian and pioneer relics—everything from prehistoric pottery to battered bullwhips. The result is an unsurpassed zest for living and an overflowing house, porch and garage full of trophies at her home in Las



Baffled by a chunk of petrified wood too big to carry home, Dora Tucker sits on the fossilized trunk of the fallen giant and contemplates the number of cabochons which might be cut from one section of the three-part trunk.

Vegas. Naturally, the possibilities of this place held tremendous fascination for her.

Even before we had removed the mess box from the car she was stealing calculating glances at our surroundings, and as quickly as she could assemble a Dagwood sandwich she was off prowling the old building site, eating as she searched.

If I remember correctly, the stop netted her a slightly delapidated hash-knife and the major portion of an ox-shoe.

Soon after leaving the old oasis of the olives we saw a strange appearing, cone-shaped formation about a half-mile to the northeast. Similar in form to the brick charcoal ovens occasionally encountered in old mining camps, the cone seemed to be emitting jets of smoke or steam.

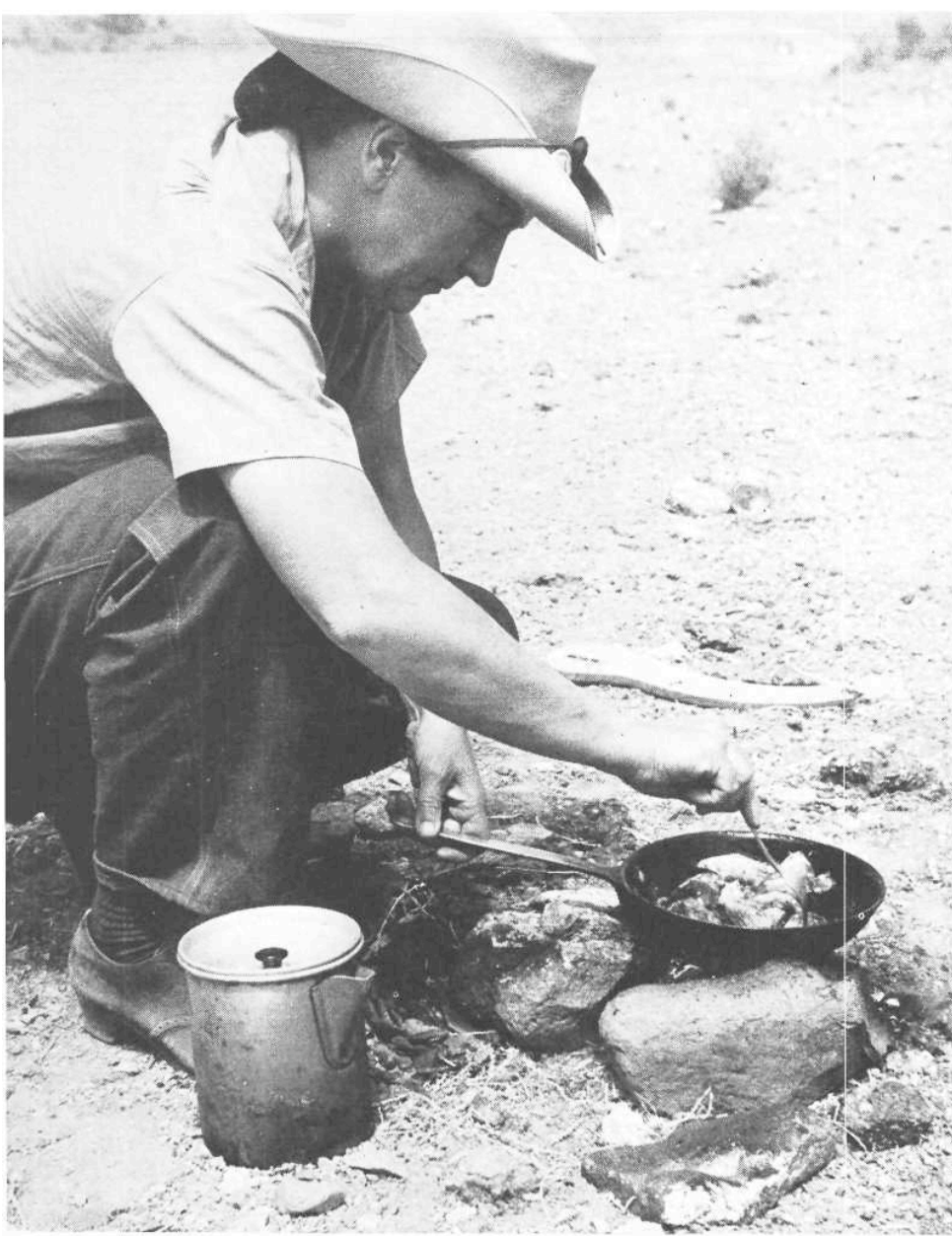
We could see that the formation was of thermal nature, but not until we had waded through the marshy area to its base could we realize the magnitude of it, or the magnificence of its coloring. Composed of layers of lime and silica deposited by the hot, mineral-impregnated waters which coursed down its sides, the cone had the soft, rippled texture of rich velvet and ranged through all the shades from deepest maroon and brilliant orange to dappled fawn and pale ivory.

Spouting from invisible fissures in the apex of the cone, five streams of hot water played constantly in the air. Shooting fountain-like above the rock a height of five or six feet, their boiling spray cascaded over the rock and its terrace according to the vagaries of the wind.

While the place had every aspect of

a natural formation thousands of years old, we learned later that this is Nevada's youngest geologic wonder. When a local stockman drilled a well in 1919, he brought in this untamable hot geyser instead of the cold water he had anticipated. Useless for stock purposes because of the high mineral content of the water, the outlaw well was left to flow and in 30 years has built up this amazing landmark!

We were enjoying a lazy sort of discussion on the unfailing democracy of the desert waterhole, where a man and his horse and the little creatures of the wild will drink fearlessly, side by side, when two buck antelopes, which had been drinking at the far end of the dam, bounded off through the sage, their white rump flags flashing against the sombre landscape. Gaining the summit of a low ridge



The author cooking a supper snack over a sagebrush fire in a land where there is no other firewood.

they came to a halt and abruptly backfaced for a last look at us, then moved on over the ridge and out of sight.

The road was surprisingly good. Occasional stretches were a little corrugated and in certain sections it was somewhat dusty. These, however, are minor faults compared to wracking chucks, jagged rocks and high centers. Of these evils it was completely free.

We had been keeping sharp watch for a side trail which might take us to the old mining camp of Leadville, situated high on the east flank of Mt. Fox, in the Granite range. When Dora spotted the yellow splash of mine dumps and a few unpainted buildings at the head of a steep ravine, a mile or so to the left of our road, we felt certain this was the place we sought.

Turning the car into the first side road leading in that direction, we headed up a rough canyon which grew

rockier and steeper as it climbed the range. Few stretches of the trail, if any, were wide enough to permit passing but this wasn't too important since no one else appeared to be using it. In many places the wheel tracks were badly guttered by winter storms and some careful maneuvering was necessary to avoid high centers.

As the garageman in Gerlach had forewarned us, there was virtually nothing left of the old camp. Several large mine dumps, a few prospecting holes, half a dozen tar-papered shacks, a tunnel, some old mine buckets—that was about all.

Unlike most of Nevada's historic mining camps, little glamour is attached to Leadville's name, her youthful days having been marked by more hard work than hard liquor. Original development work was carried out here in 1909 with production begin-

ning the following year. While the ore showed good values in lead and silver, with minor content of zinc and gold, production costs were high and the effort failed to pay out financially.

In 1927, after more or less regular production for 17 years, all operations ceased and the camp folded. There are those who believe that plenty of good silver ore still remains in the mine, which, they declare, "was getting better with depth."

Assisted by low gear and four-wheel brakes we eased back down the ravine and again took up our northward course.

Another seven miles and we arrived in a forest of petrified stumps! The first we glimpsed—a handsome specimen which stood close to the road on the left—was nearly six feet in diameter and broken into three neat cross sections, stacked one atop the other. A well-preserved length of the main trunk lay where it had fallen at the stump's base. Soft buff to golden brown in color, the wood was beautifully grained with black concentric lines and appeared to be of fine gem quality.

Dora, the relic hunter and botanist, speedily reverted to Dora, the rockhound. By the time I had my camera and equipment out of the car, she and her rock sack and pick were disappearing over a ridge 200 yards distant.

Browsing along the slope, up one gully and down another, we found the remains of many trees, some of them rather badly disintegrated, others splendidly preserved. Well up on the steep hillside, where it could overlook its lesser contemporaries as well as a wide desert valley beyond, we found a gigantic stump—"The Monarch" of the Black Rock.

It was a magnificent specimen. In height it ranged from 15 feet on the lower side (where the hill dipped down sharply) to six feet on the upper side. Its diameter still is open to question. Using a steel tape I measured the stump as accurately as possible under the difficult circumstances of its growth. I felt I was being conservative in figuring its circumference at 45 feet—an average diameter of roughly 15 feet.

Since returning home, however, I have read that the world's largest known petrified tree is in Big Bend National Park in Texas, and that it measures 14 feet at its greatest diameter.

Whether our Monarch of the Black Rock sets a new world's record, or whether my measurement was in error, is something we eventually hope to learn.

After a night's sleep under the stars and a good breakfast cooked on a campfire of sagebrush—the largest

living growth in this strange land where 15-foot trees once flourished—we sorted our rock specimens, obliterated all evidence of our camp, and headed back down the wash.

For half a dozen miles north of the forest, our way led through a dense stand of sage, climbing and descending a series of rolling hills and gullies. Some of the draws were alive with jackrabbits and once a fat sagehen stalked across the road in front of us. There were no fences, no houses, no sign of man's presence. Somehow, one knew instinctively that this wild desert land surrounding us had not changed in the slightest degree since John Charles Fremont dragged his little howitzer through here more than a century ago.

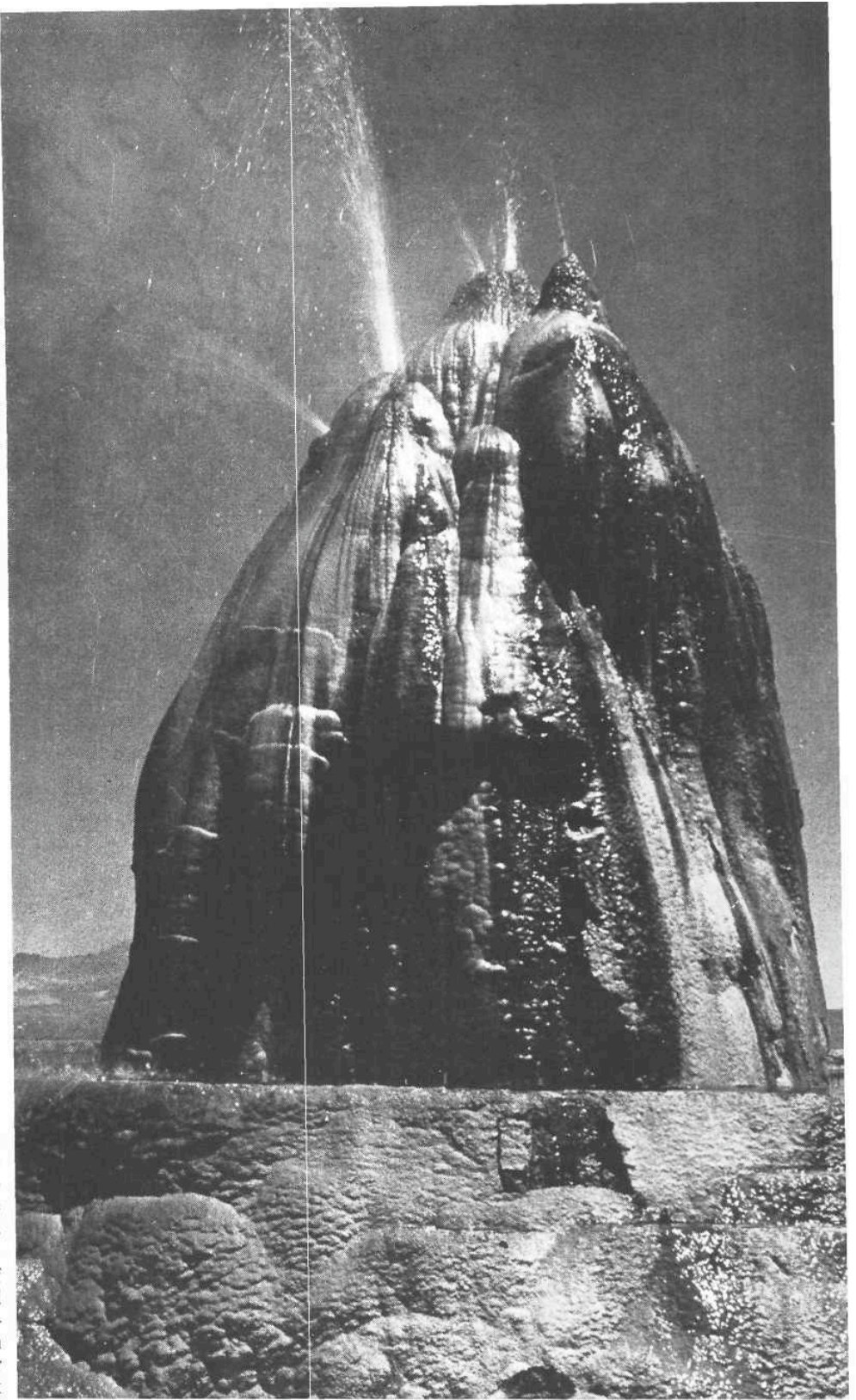
Riding over these same hills in 1846—possibly down the very defile through which we were traveling—Capt. Jesse Applegate and two companions had pioneered the famous Applegate Cutoff to Oregon, a route which was to be followed by scores of bearded emigrants toiling Westward in pursuit of a dream.

One of Applegate's men—a scout named Garrison—had been slain by Indians in High Rock Canyon, only a short distance to the east of our road; and Levi Scott, third man of the party, had been seriously wounded in the attack. This was no isolated instance. For 50 years Black Rock had been known as bad Indian country.

While on a prospecting trip to the western edge of the Black Rock desert in 1850, the veteran frontiersman, Peter Lassen, and a companion, likewise were slain by Indians in this same vicinity. As we angled through the rimrock gash of Little High Rock, a tributary of the main canyon, we gained a vicarious thrill from the knowledge that near its mouth—possibly five miles from our road—the last Indian massacre in the United States had occurred in January, 1911.

Three sheepmen and a cattleman of Surprise Valley, in California, had been attacked and murdered by renegade Indians as they rode through Little High Rock en route to their stock camps on the edge of the Black Rock. Spurred by the natural lust for vengeance, plus huge rewards offered by the men's families, sheriff's possemen and aroused citizens had pursued the offending tribesmen until every member of the band, with exception of a young squaw and her baby, had been overtaken and slain.

We were approaching the broad swale of Long Valley and were undecided whether to go on to Vya or turn back to Gerlach. The problem was neatly solved when we came suddenly



Boiling mineral waters, charged with lime, silica and other elements, have in 30 years built this huge geyser cone. Its colors range from deep maroon to vivid green and jet.

upon an unexpected trail branching to our left. Pointing down it was a small faded sign which read "Lost Creek Canyon."

The road was narrow and crooked and so seldom used that desert weeds had grown up between the wheel

tracks and sagebrush raked our car on either side. It was a friendly little road, however; one that bounded over hills and hummocks like a roller coaster and eventually led us to the top of a broad, flat tableland.

Throughout the morning we had



Only waste dumps, an abandoned tunnel, a few miner's shacks and old iron buckets mark the site of Leadville, Nevada ghost town.

been noting scattered pieces of obsidian, but upon gaining this high mesa top, we found the surface of the ground literally paved with cobbles of jet black volcanic glass. Roundish in shape and unusually pure in composition, the globules were oddly uniform in size, averaging perhaps a pound each in weight. For mile after mile this strange black paving flanked our road on either side, the sun glinting from broken shards of the glass as from a million faceted diamonds.

As we topped a low rise, Dora pointed to a small, natural clearing along the road where half a dozen pronghorns were taking their ease in the morning sun. For a single, startled instant, every head was turned our way; and then they had whirled and were gone, bounding lightly over the sage like giant jackrabbits. In the next five miles we encountered other

antelopes; a pair here, a lone buck there, or a solitary doe. While not inclined to stand idly by until they might be photographed, they seldom ran far before turning back to regard us curiously.

We had been traversing the mesa for perhaps an hour when we came to a ravine and eventually were surprised to find a tiny, clear stream bubbling over the rocks alongside our road. We knew then that this must be Lost Creek Canyon.

Half a mile farther and rounding a bend, we caught our breath in incredulous wonder. The sloping sides of the ravine suddenly had narrowed to red rock cliffs which rose sheer on either side. Filling the canyon's bottom, from wall to wall, was a grove of tall quaking aspen, as beautiful as any we had ever seen in the high mountains.

In the broken rubble at the base of the cliffs, choke-cherry bushes were hanging white with their fragrant blooms, and great thickets of wild pink roses were just beginning to break into flower.

Stopping beneath the giant trees we replenished our water tanks from the cold little stream, and on sudden impulse decided to lay over here for a couple of hours so that we might cook and eat lunch in this pleasant and wholly unexpected oasis.

We still didn't know where our little lost road might lead, but if it continued in the direction we had been traveling for the last 20 miles, we knew that it must eventually intersect Nevada 81, the graded road between Gerlach and Eagleville, California. On that chance we voted to continue for another ten miles. If, in that distance, the road reached an unforeseen end or otherwise became impassable, we still would have adequate gasoline to take us back the way we had come.

It was this decision which added to the trip's other experiences—a jasper bed and an Indian campsite.

Dora, who has an eye like a predatory eagle, first spotted the jasper from the moving car, but not until we began ranging over the field did we find that Indians, too, had known of this deposit and extensively used it.

Everywhere on the ground there were flakings of flint, jasper, chalcedony and obsidian, and in less than an hour we had gathered our pockets full of chipping stones, crude scrapers, and a few pieces which might conceivably have served as spear heads. All the work was poor and most of it appeared unfinished, causing us to believe that these might have been pieces of stone which failed to chip satisfactorily and were discarded before completion. A portion of broken arrowhead found at the same place showed fine workmanship.

Some of the jasper was of good quality with nice coloring and before we left, Dora had cached several pounds of it in various nooks about the car.

About a mile beyond this point, our adventurous little trail unexpectedly merged with Nevada 81, and with a tug of regret we turned left toward Gerlach, 50 miles to the southeast. As we entered the fringes of town, I asked Dora if she realized that in two days of exploring and 150 miles of travel we had not seen a single automobile or one human being.

She nodded. "I was thinking the same thing," she said. "I was thinking what a wonderful thing it is that there are a few places on earth where that is still possible."