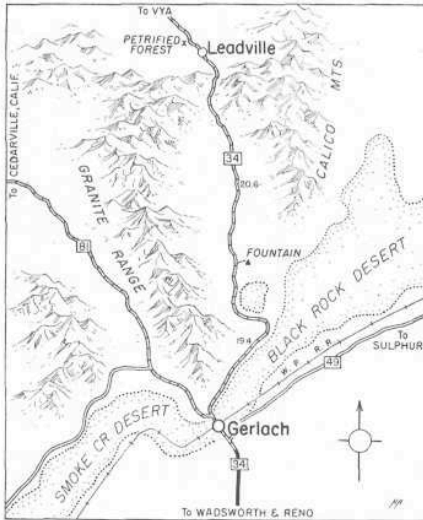


The 40 Wilderness Miles North of Gerlach, Nevada

By PEGGY TREGO
Desert Magazine's Nevada Travel Correspondent



OUT WHERE the mirage begins and the pavement ends is the 40-mile Gerlach-to-Leadville Road. If you can shuck the trappings of ultra-civilized travel, do without noise, hamburger stands and signboards, you'll find this trip a dandy.

Maps won't tell you much about this country, except that Gerlach is 111 miles northerly of Reno, and can be reached by pavement on Nevada's State Route 34 or by a longer unpaved road that winds past Pyramid Lake's west-side and through the Smoke Creek Desert. No map can tell you about the splendid hills, strange mountains, long valleys and wild canyons, streams and swamps north of Gerlach. Most maps don't even show Leadville—a highly photogenic "ghost town"—nor the petrified forest of "dawn redwoods" just beyond there. Maps also don't designate one of the strangest fountains ever evolved from a combination of natural force and human error,

particularly strange in that it is a hop-skip from the great expanse of the Black Rock Desert.

This is old country in the known account of time, first explored by Fremont in 1844 and still much the way he and his tired men saw it. Gerlach is its one town, and Gerlach is very good to those visitors who don't carp for luxuries.

The fast route to Gerlach (Route 34) takes off from U.S. 40, 33 miles northeast of Reno at Wadsworth. It leads past the south-end of Pyramid Lake, through the Paiute community of Nixon, along the long dry Winnemucca Lake shores with their acres of ancient terracing left by long-gone inland seas. Route 34 skirts the industrial town of Empire, where U.S. Gypsum's immense white-powdered mill looms among neat homes and tree-shaded streets, but Empire is there for business and not to cater to passers-by. Gerlach, another six miles up the road, is a fraction of Empire's size but its eight decades of being a frontier village permit it to look on Empire as an industrial suburb.

I prefer the Smoke Creek route, though it is really worth a trip in itself. A few ranches are along here; Garaventa's, with the Garaventa plane usually parked alongside the road, is one of the better known. In this remote country, the family plane is often as important as the family pickup, and the airplanes are uncluttered except by an occasional brown eagle. A few old mines, several side roads, shallow caves that may yield arrowheads or better—all of these make the Smoke Creek Road a happily slow trip.

But, however you get to Gerlach, be prepared to be self-sufficient henceforth. No filling stations, stores, hotels or motels from here on. The necessities are available in Gerlach, dotted along its one street. There is one small motel—Baum's—and one elderly one-story hotel which is usually full by evening with ranchers and "rails"



THE GERLACH-LEADVILLE "FOUNTAIN"

from the nearby Western Pacific mainline. One restaurant, the Stanley Cafe, purveys good plain food. A garage and filling station, several bars, a movie theater and an excellent general store run by Justice of the Peace Charles Carter complete the facilities. There is no telephone line. Emergencies must rely on the lone radio-phone, or on the Western Pacific's private wire to its own stations.

Most Gerlachers are glad to tell you what you need to know about the country hereabouts, and it's particularly wise to ask if you intend to leave the main Gerlach-Leadville stretch of road. Judge Carter has been here 31 years, and what he can't supply in the way of general information, gracious Postmistress Helen Thrasher can, and the postoffice is in the same building as the store. A couple of other obliging people with a great deal of necessary local know-how are Deputy Sheriff Cisco Aschenbrenner and Constable Shorty Taylor, who are the only law in these parts. Cisco and Shorty earn their wages; Gerlach can be rough and tough on a Saturday pay night.

Gerlach also bounces around in other ways. Every passing train jiggles it like a bowl of tapioca, and the omnipresent mirage frequently greets arriving travelers with the fine spectacle of Gerlach rising gently into the air and floating around the Black Rock's edge.

A half-mile westerly of town are Gerlach's own hot springs at which some experts (Prof. V. P. Gianella of Reno, for one) believe Fremont himself probably camped. The hot springs are still available to anyone, and they come in three temperatures—steam-hot, very warm and cool. The latter two are deep roundish outdoor pools filled with translucent turquoise water. The "steam bath" is in a small hut made of railroad ties, and people with aches and pains say it does wonders for them. No charge, no restrictions, no life-guards—so keep an eye on the kids if they take a dip.

The road to Leadville (actually Route 34 extended) leads almost due north past the hot springs, at the edge of alluvial fans spread out to form rugged Granite Mountain's skirts. A lot of us who are familiar with the country quit the road about three miles from Gerlach and whiz along on the Black Rock Desert's marvelous flatness, enjoying our own wheel-tracks in the biscuit-colored surface, then cut back to the road several miles later. It's a good idea to know what you are doing when you try this cutoff — better check at Gerlach to make sure a recent rain hasn't turned this fast track into a quagmire.

Where the Leadville Road bends away from the Desert, it enters a broad valley dotted with ranches, most of which are holdings of the extensive Holland Land & Livestock Co. The fantastic fountain is





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also on Holland property, but visitors are permitted so long as they close gates behind them and do not scatter trash.

By our speedometer, the fountain's unmarked entry road is 19.4 miles from Gerlach. It takes off to the right of the main road, and you can see from there the fountain's conical form a mile easterly. You can drive to within 30 yards of the fountain, but watch out for the hot-water ditch at road's end. Many prefer to park to one side of the drift-gate across the road and walk the last .4 mile along the causeway. Warm pools and swamps on either side support a surprising number of ducks, curlews and other shorebirds, perfectly at home here in the desert.

There is no name for the fountain, although I've heard it called the Settler's Well (erroneously, it seems.) It all began in the World War I days when the Gerlach Land Co. drilled here for water. They got water all right—a boiling-hot heavily-mineralized flow that has continued to spout ever since, building up its odd shape bit by bit. Judge Carter remembers a six-foot-high cone in 1929; it is closer to 15 feet today and the constant jet of hot water from its tip assures further growth. What that little jet has created is quite beautiful—a rounded fluted cone rising from a flat base, its sides folded and draped to resemble a group of hooded figures. Its colors are rich umbers and oranges, greens shading from emerald to chartreuse, dashes of red and ochre. Rising from the tall grasses of the flat with the muted pastels of the Calico Range in the distance, the fountain is a spectacular phenomenon.

Beyond the fountain turnoff, the Leadville Road lopes along easily for some miles, then begins to climb. All along here are pleasant places to picnic or camp, especially if the streams have stayed alive (they sometimes wilt down to puddles in a dry year). The terrain is rocky, rugged and rolling, with eye-pulling vistas of far hills and canyons. There are side-roads—but here again, know what you're doing when you explore them. Some lead into very rough country.

Some of the rougher parts of that country still carry the marks of emigrant trails. One of these routes winds through massive High Rock Canyon, and in one of the Canyon's shallow caves are names and dates of a century ago, scrawled in axle grease. This side-trip requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle and a guide for comfort and safety.

Leadville is 40 miles from Gerlach, and a small sign indicates the better of two roads to the little cluster of abandoned buildings clinging to the steep hillside. A boom mining community several decades ago, Leadville is peacefully vacant now. The rocky portal of its main tunnel just above the buildings is a cool resting place on a hot day, but going farther in is not recommended. There are usually a few animals (rats, for instance) at home in old tunnels, and deep shafts or weak sidewall can mean serious trouble. The little water-course in the canyon bottom is another attractive stopping place; last time there, my husband and I jumped a magnificent buck on its edge.

The petrified forest is almost a suburb of Leadville, a couple of miles farther along the main road. The great stumps, some of them larger than 20-feet in diameter, are relics of a forest that pre-dates the Sierra Nevada. They are for looking only, as recent legislation provides heavy penalties for souvenir-gathering. Ugly pits show why this was necessary—unscrupulous commercialism dynamited some of the better stumps to get slabs for polishing.

It's up to you where you go from Leadville. Maybe you'll mosey back to Gerlach and see about the long long road across the Black Rock east to Sulphur, Rabbit-hole and Lovelock. Maybe you'll push on north another 48 miles to Vya (and Vya is not a town—just a crossroads) where Route 34 meets Nevada Route 8-A. West on 8-A 25 miles brings you to Cedarville, Calif., a charming town with excellent accommodations. My favorite is Ray Golden's Hotel—possibly because when Ray decides to take an evening off he leaves the room keys on the lobby desk with a note: "Pick your

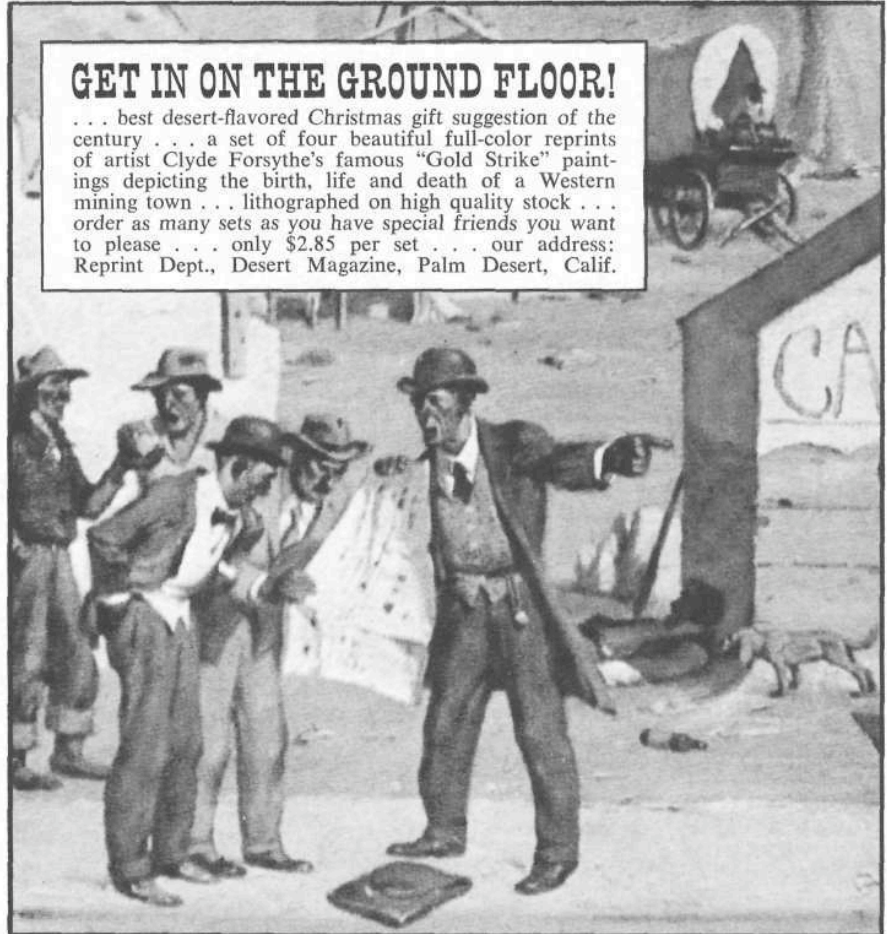
own and pay me in the morning." A topnotch restaurant is next door to the Golden. The nearby Cedar Lodge is another good stopping place.

An easier road (Nevada's Route 81) than the Leadville route leads back to Gerlach from Cedarville; this, too, goes through fine country where the arrowhead hunting and obsidian rock collecting is good.

Lake Mead is the setting for the National Limited Hydroplane Races, November 5-6; and the Gold Cup Races (unlimited hydroplanes), November 11-13. //

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J. Phil Franklin
(My commission expires January 21, 1961.)