



EASTERN SIERRA HISTORY

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Like most places, the Eastern Sierra and the Town of Mammoth Lakes are steeped in colorful history that helped shape the present. Following is a brief overview of the American Indians inhabiting the region, later settlers, and the eventual development of the Town of Mammoth Lakes and surrounding regions. For more information, explore *references* at the end of this section.

The First People

While true settlement dates of the Eastern Sierra are unknown, Paiute and Shoshone people have lived in this area for at least a thousand years. They were likely preceded by others, however, as they are related to the American Indians of the Great Basin.

The Shoshone originally inhabited the southern Owens Valley and lands to the east while the Paiutes lived in northern Owens Valley to southern Oregon. The Paiutes called themselves *Numu* meaning “the people,” but were later named *Paiute* by white settlers. Mono Lake Paiutes also called themselves *Kuzedika*, which translates as “kutsavi eaters.” Kutsavi, an important, protein rich food staple and valuable trade commodity, are brine-fly larva collected from the shores of Owens and Mono lakes. Several Paiute groups lived together, migrating to take advantage of other seasonal food, including deer, small game, insects, pine nuts and other seeds, and occasionally a mountain sheep. Pine nuts were especially important to the local Indians and a poor year often meant starvation in the winter. Pandora moth caterpillars, called “Piüga” (pee-ag’-gee), periodically infested Jeffrey pine forests (and still do), providing another important food. The caterpillars were collected in steep trenches dug around the pines, roasted in pits, and then dried.



Pandora moth -- USFS photo

Local Paiutes built round, domed shelters out of bent willow poles covered with grass, small branches, and sagebrush bark. Bows and arrows were made from willow and juniper. Obsidian arrowheads were attached using sinew and a sticky substance from sagebrush. Nets were woven for fishing and rabbit drives, and traps for small animals were made from looped willow stems. Although the Paiutes made local pottery and pipes from clay, they are well-known for beautiful willow baskets used as food containers, cooking baskets, hats, cradles, seed beaters, winnowing trays, and water bottles.

The Paiutes were essentially a peaceful people, with occasional minor disputes over trespassing on pinenut or hunting territories. Their culture emphasized hunting, respecting one’s elders, and modesty over warfare. During the 1860s and 70s, the influx of pioneers and livestock devastated local food sources. Pinyon and Jeffrey pine stands were clear-cut for lumber, while livestock trampled tubers, roots, plants, and seeds in the meadows. Hunting decimated game and waterfowl populations.

Desperate Paiutes occasionally resorted to cattle-rustling, and tensions between the settlers and local Indians escalated to armed conflict in the early 1860s. By the end of the decade, the conflict was resolved and many Paiutes returned to Owens Valley, seeking work as laborers on farms and ranches occupying their ancestral lands.

“Discovery” and Exploration

The earliest explorations of the Eastern Sierra are poorly documented in historical records, leaving much room for speculation. California was officially “discovered” in 1542 by Juan Rodriguez Cabrillo, but the Eastern Sierra was possibly not discovered by outside explorers until 1826 when Jedediah Smith became the first white man to cross the Sierra. Smith, however, may not have ventured far enough south. More likely, the first to explore the Eastern Sierra was a British fur trapper named Peter Skene Ogden of the Hudson’s Bay Company during an 1829-1830 expedition. The records of Ogden’s journey are unclear, however. Instead, Joseph Reddeford Walker is the first documented explorer of the Eastern Sierra. Walker was hunting beaver west of the Great Salt Lake and appears to have passed by Benton Hot Springs and Mono Lake, but his exact route is unknown. Three years later, Walker guided the first expedition of the Eastern Sierra, led by Captain John Frémont. Among this group were Kit Carson, Dick Owens, and Edward Kern.



Mono Lake was first “discovered” in 1852 by a military troop led by Lieutenant Tredwell Moore, who was pursuing a band of Miwok Indians suspected of killing three white men in Yosemite Valley. The Miwoks fled northeast over Mono Pass into Bloody Canyon, and Lt. Moore followed them, discovering Mono Lake. While he never caught the Miwoks, he did find and bring back a gold ore sample, inciting a rush of prospectors to seek their fortunes on the east side.

Mining Days: Boom and Bust (1857-1887)

Shortly after Lt. Moore returned with his gold samples, Leroy Vining led a prospecting party over Mono Pass into the Eastern Sierra. Unable to establish a lucrative strike, Vining eventually set up a lumber mill in the canyon that now bears his name, Lee Vining Canyon. Other miners drifted into the Eastern Sierra, and the first gold was found in 1857 at Brown’s Creek, a tributary of Virginia Creek. Within two years, the camp of Dogtown was established nearby and miners were scooping their way through the creek in search of riches.

In 1859, gold was discovered in Mono Gulch, a large wash north of Mono Lake. Miners flocked to the area, establishing the camp of Monoville along the northern shore of Mono Lake. During the same year, Waterman S. Bodey discovered precious minerals in the hills northeast of Monoville where the ghost town of Bodie now rests. Another strike was heralded in the Esmeralda District in 1860 where three prospectors had discovered gold and silver, establishing the mining town of Aurora. Miners flocked to the area, along with merchants, suppliers, and loggers to furnish goods and services, creating a substantial need for a trans-Sierra wagon road. The sudden influx of people to the Eastern Sierra also led to the creation of Mono County in 1861 with Aurora designated as the county seat. A few years later, a reassessment of the Nevada-California state border discovered that Aurora and the Esmeralda Mining District were actually in Nevada, leading to Bridgeport being named the new county seat in 1870.

Construction of the Sonora Pass toll road was completed in 1868; however, by then Aurora was well past its prime. Monoville was also beginning to collapse, and was abandoned by 1870. The Bodie strike was also relatively unsuccessful, but in 1877, an accidental cave-in revealed a very lucrative vein, drawing nearly 10,000 people to the area seemingly overnight (see “Bodie State Historic Park” in *Regional Points of Interest*).

The wealthy Bodie strike also served to reignite the mining frenzy throughout Mono County during the late 1870s and several new claims were discovered. In 1877, four prospectors searching for the Lost Cement Mine (see *Regional Points of Interest*) filed a claim on Red Mountain behind Lake Mary, bringing mining to the Mammoth Lakes area. The strike was named Mammoth Mine to convey an image of fabulous

wealth to attract investors, flooding the Eastern Sierra with another wave of miners. Several mining camps were established in the Lakes Basin by 1878, including Mammoth City, Pine City, Mill City, and Mineral Park. A twenty-stamp mill was built to process ore and a dam was constructed on Twin Lakes to provide hydro-power.

The population increase stimulated the building of a wagon road east to Benton, a toll road along Sherwin Grade to Bishop, and the French Trail that led across the Sierra to Fresno Flats (now known as Oakhurst). Only two years later in 1880, Mammoth Mine closed due to financial problems after a total yield estimated at only \$200,000 (historic dollars). The mine was re-opened in 1895 by Judge Robert Doyle, but remained unprofitable and closed again quickly. The Mammoth Consolidated Mine opened in 1927 near Coldwater Campground in the Lakes Basin, but closed in 1933. These historic buildings remain standing, accessible by a short trail beginning at the Duck Pass trailhead parking area near Lake Mary.

Mammoth Mining Company mill from Mammoth Lakes Sierra, courtesy Genny Smith



Gold was also discovered in Mill Creek Canyon (known today as Lundy Canyon) and on a ridge near Tioga Pass, but both mines closed by 1884. Since Bodie's decline in 1888, only small-scale mining continued in Mono County. Local income instead became dependent upon farming, ranching, and more recently, recreation.

The Town of Mammoth Lakes

When the Mammoth Mines closed, most of the mining camps were quickly abandoned. Some settlers, however, remained in Mineral Park, now known as Old Mammoth, to run a sawmill supplying lumber to the community of Bishop. Businesses began to establish as the outstanding recreation opportunities were recognized and the developing town was named Mammoth, with "Lakes" added to distinguish its Post Office from another town in the United States named Mammoth.



Knight Wheel - ©Wendy Fujikawa

The first resort was the Wildasinn Hotel in Old Mammoth, established in 1905 for summer recreation. The same Knight Wheel used to power the Mammoth and Doyle mills near Twin Lakes was sledded into Mineral Park to produce electricity for the hotel. The popularity of outdoor recreation grew despite long traveling times and limited winter access, eventually attracting Hollywood socialites.

In 1937, the construction of Highway 203 was completed by the state transportation authority, but the road bypassed the center of town. Businesses in Old Mammoth relocated to the current Main Street area to access the road. By this time, several families were living in Mammoth year-round and the popularity of winter sports was growing. A rope tow operated near the base of McGee Mountain, along with a winter resort run by Nan and Max Zischank. A few other lodges along Highway 395 also provided amenities to adventuresome skiers.

Tamarack Lodge and Resort

In 1924, the Foy family, immortalized by Bob Hope in the movie *The Seven Little Foys*, built a rustic lodge overlooking Twin Lakes named Tamarack Lodge. Originally lacking roads and winter transportation, the resort hosted only summer activities. In 1927, the property was developed into a summer fishing resort, complete with cabins for overnight guests. That same year, an adventurer by the name of Tex Cushion began providing winter transportation in the Mammoth area by dogsled for 20 historic dollars per person or 10 cents per pound for freight.



©Brad Peatross

In the 1960s, Tamarack Resort began staying open year-round, leading to the development of commercial skiing in the Lakes Basin. Tamarack continued gaining reknown as a center for Nordic skiing, a relatively new sport at the time in America and more commonly known now as cross-country skiing, and eventually became one of the west's premiere outdoor vacation destinations. At the same time, Lakefront Restaurant secured a spot in the upper echelon of California's best restaurants.

Tamarack Lodge and Resort, including the Lakefront Restaurant and Cross-Country Ski Center, was purchased by Mammoth Mountain in 1998. The lodge and adjacent cabins are currently undergoing restoration and modernization while preserving their unique mountain ambience. The Ski Center has also grown dramatically pushed by a surge in the popularity of cross-country skiing as a healthy and fun alternative to downhill skiing. It now offers 42 kilometers of groomed trails winding through the spectacular Lakes Basin.

Mammoth Mountain Ski Area

The popularity of skiing was on the rise, especially in cities like Los Angeles, when Dave McCoy arrived in the Eastern Sierra in 1935 as an energetic, adventuresome 20-year old. He and two friends built the first rope tow in the Eastern Sierra at Gray's Meadow above Independence, powered by a Ford Model A truck engine. Other rope tows followed, with established skiing areas at the base of McGee Mountain and near



Rope Tow

Tom's Place. During the late 1930s, McCoy began hauling a portable rope tow onto Mammoth Mountain's north face until snow cut off the access road, then he would move back down to McGee. In 1941, Dave McCoy established a rope tow on Mammoth Mountain with a six-foot toboggan, creating the first ski lift located where the St. Anton run exists today.

McCoy's main competition for a ski area during the 1940s was Hans Georg, a feisty Swiss ski instructor running a rope tow near the current location of Eagle Express. Although Georg's east-side operation was easier to reach, he was plagued by lower snowfall, mechanical troubles, and less interesting terrain. George, however, continued to talk about building an aerial tram to the top

of Mammoth Mountain and tried to drum up support for the site as a possible location for the Los Angeles Winter Olympics. Although he passionately petitioned the USFS to allow him to expand, they never gave him permission.

McCoy eventually abandoned McGee Mountain and moved all his rope tows to Mammoth Mountain, with one tow starting from the base of the current Broadway Express chair (Chair 1) followed by a second that took skiers to the base of Gravy Chute. Although McCoy opened his tow to the public, accessibility to the area was a major problem. Unable to keep a road cleared for vehicles, McCoy bought a few Studebaker Weasels, a prototype "go-anywhere" vehicle developed by the U.S. military. Driving the Weasels over the snowpack, McCoy hauled people up the mountain inside the vehicles or towed them on attached ropes. He pulled people three miles up the hill from Lake Mary Road or sometimes from Mammoth Tavern at the edge of town, putting up to 500 miles on the vehicles.

In 1945, the U.S. Forest Service became interested in developing the north side of Mammoth Mountain and proposed building a road and a first-class ski resort and hotel. After the road was completed in 1952, the Forest Service advertised for a developer who could fund \$250,000 to build the resort. With barely enough income to support his own family, McCoy was unable to offer a bid.

Six months later, not a single bid had been received and the Forest Service came to McCoy with the offer of a 25-year lease. McCoy lost no time in enlisting his friends to help build Main Lodge, a two story wooden warming hut. In 1955, McCoy installed Chair 1, a 3,500-foot long, diesel driven double chair with 1,000 feet of vertical rise and a capacity of 900 people an hour. Chair 2 was installed in 1957, and St. Moritz, Blue Ox, Powder Bowl, and Fascination were opened for skiing. The Mammoth Mountain Inn was

opened for business in December 1958, and Chair 3 was built in 1959. Three new chairlifts, a T-bar, and Mid-Chalet (now known as McCoy Station) were added to the resort between 1962 and 1965. Over the next two years, McCoy spent \$1 million developing a two-stage gondola that provided access to the summit of Mammoth Mountain. By the 1980s, over 25 lifts were in operation on Mammoth Mountain, servicing over one million skiers a year.

In addition to his impressive development skills, McCoy is also legendary in the industry as a leader in the development of hill grooming and chairlift innovations. Many of the current standards and techniques were developed at Mammoth Mountain.



In the early 1990s, Mammoth Mountain began installing an extensive snowmaking system, digging a new on-mountain lake to supply water and guarantee a Thanksgiving opening. However, a combination of drought, the lack of a developed snowmaking system, earthquakes, and better amenities at other resorts led to a significant decrease in business and profits.

In 1996, Intrawest Corporation bought a 59% stake in Mammoth Mountain, although McCoy retained the majority of voting stock. Intrawest is one of three major ski resort developers in North America and owns Whistler Blackcomb in British Columbia. Today, in partnership with Mammoth Mountain, Intrawest has completed development of new amenities in Mammoth, including several lodging complexes, The Village at Mammoth, and a world-class golf course. Many new high speed detachable lifts have also been built by Mammoth Mountain, most replacing older, fixed-grip lifts, and two new gondolas. As a result of these efforts to modernize and rebuild, skier numbers have now returned to where they were in Dave McCoy's and Mammoth's heyday of the 1980s.



Today, Mammoth Lakes hosts over a million guests in the winter and up to 1.5 million in the summer. Most winter visitors come to experience the 3,500 acres of world-class skiing on Mammoth Mountain, while summer visitors enjoy fishing, hiking, mountain biking, golfing, rock climbing, motocross riding, and outdoor festivals. The town continues to grow. The newest addition, Intrawest's Village at Mammoth, is a pedestrian-friendly village encompassing several acres at the top end of the town, physically tied to Mammoth Mountain Ski Area by a new gondola and 'ski back' trail. Consisting of numerous retail shops, art galleries,

restaurants, night clubs, a conference center, lodging facilities, parking areas, and public transportation hubs, the Village is expected to serve over one million visitors per year. Three main lodges – Grand Sierra, Lincoln House, and White Mountain Lodge – house a total of 266 condominium-style units, sold to private owners and investors.

Town of June Lake and June Mountain Ski Area

During the Pleistocene Epoch (two million to 10,000 years before present), the Rush Creek glacier slowly ground its way along the Eastern Sierra, creating a crescent-shaped canyon now called the June Lake Loop. Previously known as Horseshoe Canyon, the June Lake Loop is home to four lakes, the small, unincorporated town of June Lake, and June Mountain Ski Area. The Rush Creek glacier created Silver, Gull, and June lakes, and left the "Balanced Rock" precariously perched near the town's entrance. The boulder weighs about 706 tons and has been balanced on its current spot since the Rush Creek glacier receded. Grant Lake, the fourth lake in the loop, is a reservoir built by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) for Southern California's water needs.

The June Lake area was first visited by avid fishermen and hunters in the early 1900s and soon became well-known for its large “trophy fish.” The unrivaled fishing and beautiful outdoor recreation opportunities drew people from hundreds of miles, despite the long, dusty dirt roads frequently sloppy with mud after storms. To accommodate the growing number of tourists, Roy and Nancy Carson, for whom Carson Peak (10,909 feet) is named, opened the area’s first resort in the 1920s named Carson Camp, now known as Silver Lake Resort.



Balanced Rock -- © Wendy Fujikawa

In 1924, the U.S. Forest Service constructed a dirt road through the canyon, creating the June Lake Loop and providing better access for recreation enthusiasts. To maintain fish populations, the Forest Service built a fish hatchery on Fern Creek in 1926, but the waters were too cold and the hatchery was eventually moved to its current site at Hot Creek.

The 1930s witnessed a flurry of activity and development led by LADWP with the construction of the Mono Craters Tunnel for the Los Angeles aqueduct and the completion of the dam on Grant Lake. Most of the workers lived in the town of June Lake, with water and power service provided by LADWP.

Rope tows were established on Oh! Ridge in the late 1930s. In 1940, the June Lake Winter Sports Association purchased a used ski lift from Susanville and installed it near the Fern Creek Hatchery. The growing interest in skiing led to the formation of the Carson Peak race, a heart-stopping contest starting at almost 11,000 feet with a total vertical drop of 4,000 feet.

Many colorful characters inhabited the area in the early days of June Lake, but one of the best known is Joseph Everett, a.k.a. Stew Pot Slim. He earned the name Stew Pot because he was exceptionally clean, washing his work clothes every day in an old brass-bottomed wash tub (or stew pot). He was an infamous handy man and pack rat, well known for innovative construction techniques using any material he found at hand. Stew Pot eventually moved to Alaska because he heard a ski resort was to be developed in the June Lake area and he preferred a more secluded lifestyle. He is now immortalized by a small food shack at the base of Chair 7 on June Mountain called Stew Pot Slim’s.



June Lake from Oh! Ridge -- ©Wendy Fujikawa

In 1961, Bud Hayward opened June Mountain Ski Area with Chair 1, a T-bar, and a poma lift on the wall of Chalet Bowl. The new ski area brought year-round recreation to June Lake and the economy grew as skiers flocked to the area. Two more lifts were added by 1970. In 1986, Mammoth Mountain purchased June Mountain and upgraded the resort, maintaining June Mountain’s popularity as a family-friendly ski resort, and more recently, a world-class snowboard park. McCoy originally intended to link the June and Mammoth ski areas with a series of 12 to 15 lifts, comparable to multi-mountain ski areas in Europe. The plan ran into opposition from the U.S. Forest Service and many local environmentalists, however, and was shelved in favor of upgrading Mammoth and June as separate ski areas.

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