

MODERN RENAISSANCE



On September 2, 1990, approximately 90 people gathered in the Black Rock Desert to burn an effigy of a man. This event represented a modern resurgence of activity in the Great Basin, revitalizing many long-standing traditions of the region.

Founders and Foundations



Larry Harvey, pictured at left, is generally credited as the founder of the modern Black Rock City. The story begins when he and Jerry James burned an effigy of a man at Baker Beach in San Francisco in 1986. The event immediately sparked interest. One account:

"In the instant that the 8-foot tall figure was ignited, people scattered all across the beach came running. Within moments, a circle of fire-lit faces had formed, strangers who had gathered to witness this image of a man on fire. The first recorded doubling of Burning Man's community had occurred."

From Baker to Black Rock

Between 1986 and 1989 a nascent community developed around the annual event on Baker Beach. In 1990 the event outgrew the San Francisco beach. A participant reported:

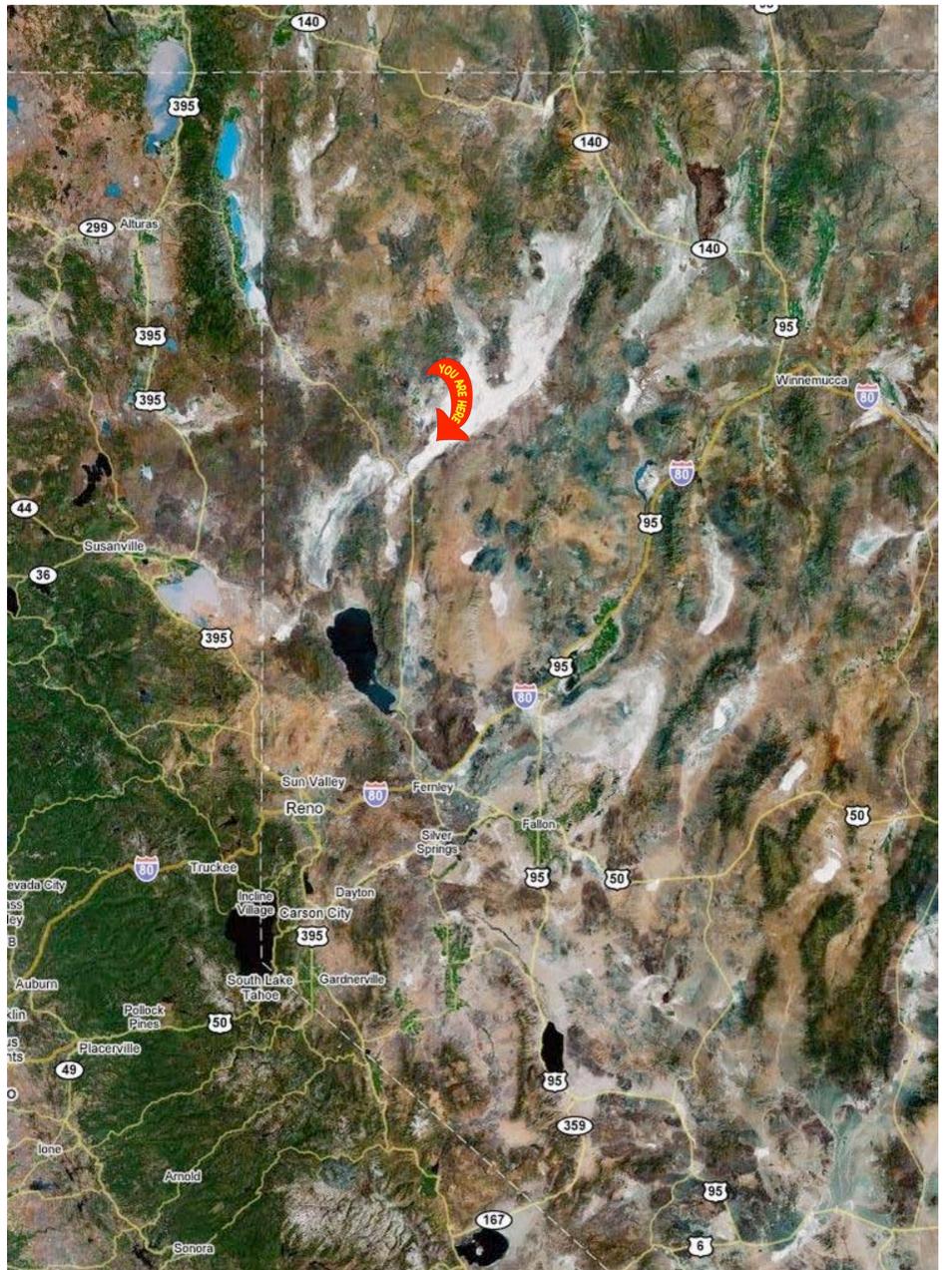
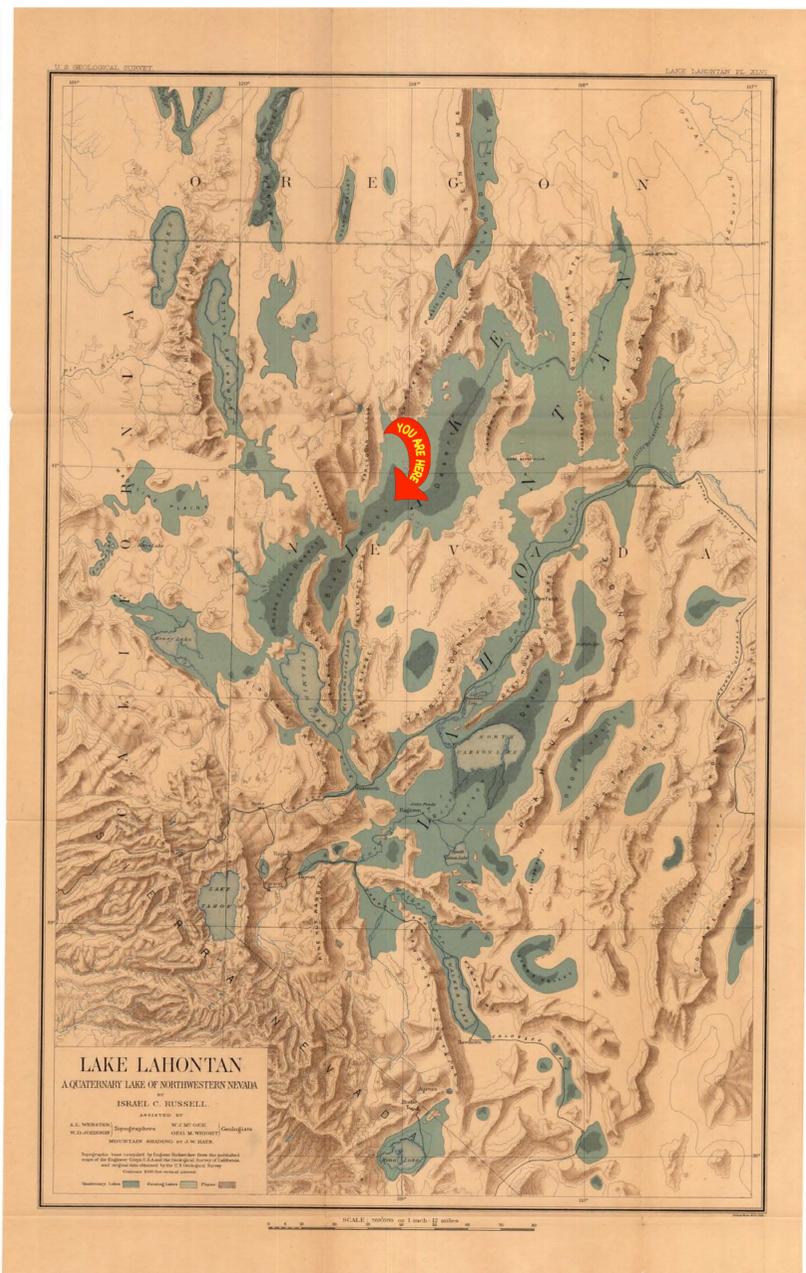
"On the trip down to the beach in 1990, individuals bearing Burning Man's arms and head and the bulky wooden footings that were used to anchor him securely in the sand encountered a uniformed motorcycle policeman.... A deal was struck and cemented with a handshake. Participants might erect the giant statue, he informed the organizers, but it could not be burned."

The 40-foot man was dismantled and stored. The San Francisco Cacophony Society had been holding small events in the Black Rock Desert, and it was decided that the dry lake bed's wide-open expanse would be an ideal location to burn the man.

Black Rock City

The encampment in the Black Rock desert grew quickly. A coherent culture developed around self-expression and creativity. The use of money in the city is prohibited, apart from the notable exceptions of coffee and ice sales. Residents are encouraged to take part in a gift economy, where goods and services are offered freely without expectation of remuneration or explicit exchange. Display of corporate brands is also discouraged. During the 1990s the Department of Public Works and the Department of Mutant Vehicles emerged, as well as newspapers, an airport, and a full complement of emergency services.

STONE AGE BEGINNINGS



Twelve thousand years ago, during the late Paleolithic era, the region that is now the Black Rock Desert was partially covered by Lake Lahontan, with lush vegetation at its shores. The first evidence of a temporary annual human presence in the region comes from a yearly hunt of the pheaux, a large herbivore that is now extinct.

The Annual Hunt



The migratory patterns of the Shasta pheaux (*Nothrotheriops shastensis*) resulted in the presence of vast herds near Lake Lahontan at the end of the summer, which was the time of their short mating season. Archaeological evidence suggests that by the late Paleolithic period, human hunters gathered on these shores during that season, slaughtering pheaux for their fur and meat. Large fires were built to smoke the meat for the lean winter season. The warm, durable, and brilliantly multi-colored pheaux fur was used for clothing, blankets, and even shelter.

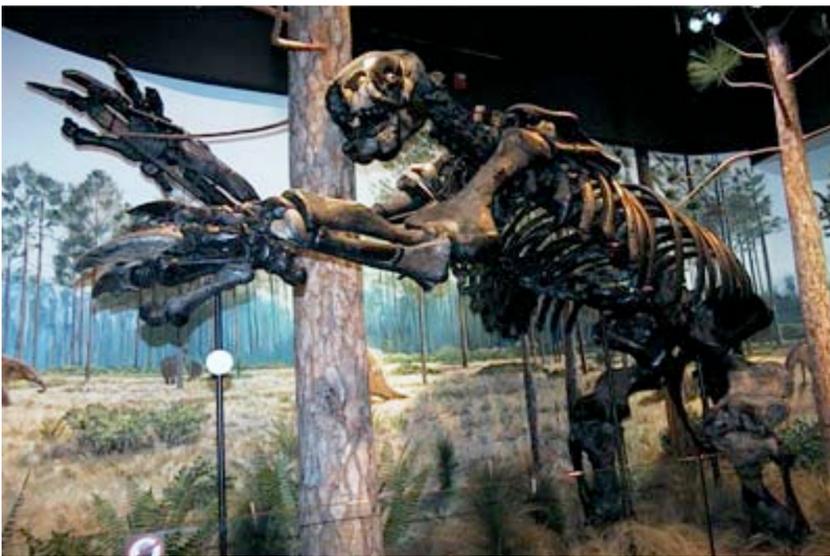
Pheaux Morphology



The most distinctive feature of the pheaux is the bright and varied coloration of their dense fur. The skeletal structure of pheaux indicates that the animals were massive herbivores, spanning nearly nine feet in length. The pheaux had enormous claws used for defense against predators and digging roots. The large tail helped them balance on their hind legs while they pulled down tree-top branches. The young were carried on their heavily furred backs. Pheaux had an unusual gait, walking on the sides of their hind feet and the backs of their forefeet, reflecting their ancestral roots as tree dwellers.

The Extinction

Significant evidence suggests that the mass extinction of the North American megafauna, including the pheaux, woolly mammoth, and sabertooth tiger, resulted from human activity. The fossil record shows that 80% of the animal population disappeared within one thousand years of the arrival of humans in North America in the late Pleistocene. Spear points with a carbon-dated age of 13,600 years ago have been found alongside the bone remains of pheaux and other large game animals. However, a competing theory is that the extinction was caused by climate change.

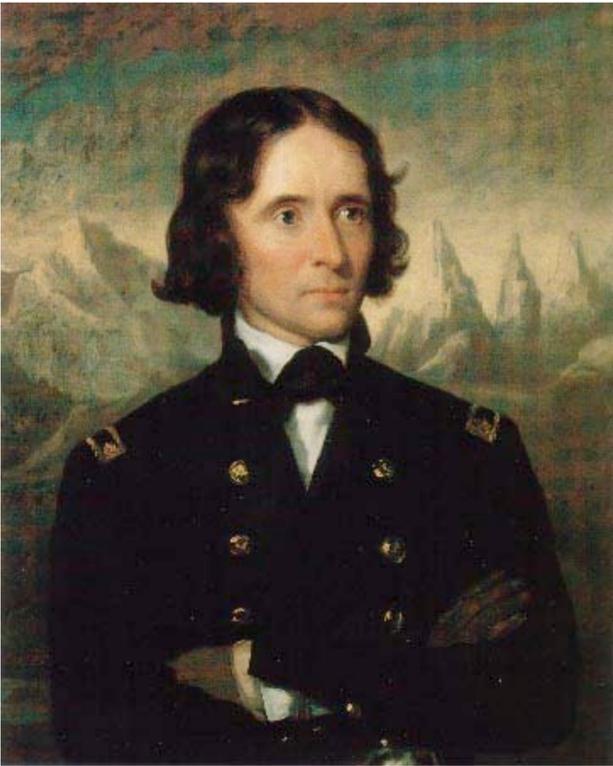


This Laurillard's Pheaux (*Eremotherium*) skeleton was excavated in 1997

The last of the Shasta pheaux (*Nothrotheriops*) in North America died so recently that complete pheaux skeletons with hair, skin, claws, and tendons still attached to the bones have been found in caves, which mummify and preserve these soft tissues. Several sites in the Lake Lahontan region contained human remains wearing clothing made from pheaux fur and wear necklaces of pheaux claws.

Some cryptozoologists question the conventional wisdom that the pheaux are extinct. Cryptozoology is the search for known animals which are believed to be extinct, or for animals hypothesized to exist. One 19th century explorer in Patagonia noted a very large hairy beast resembling a "giant armadillo" in the undergrowth. Two contemporary Californian researchers report anecdotal evidence suggesting that these solitary creatures may yet survive. They describe tracks allegedly similar to the distinctive tread of the prehistoric pheaux. The hypothesis is generally dismissed by mainstream zoology.

FIRST CONTACT



In late 1843, an expedition led by John C. Frémont and guided by noted explorer Kit Carson explored the Great Basin, including the Black Rock Desert, Pyramid Lake and the area that came to be known as Gerlach. This group of twenty-seven men were the first European Americans to see the playa and to encounter what would become known as Black Rock City.

The Paiute Gathering

As the party came back down into the Great Basin from the northwest they found a gathering of roughly 200 people, a great surprise in such a desolate place:



"We came out of this singular place, freeing ourselves from the earth. We came out of the chasm and into the void. Where we encamped on the bleak sandy plain, the Indians had made huts or circular enclosures about four feet high and twelve feet broad, of artemisia bushes. Whether these had been forts or houses, or what they had been doing in such a desert place, we could not ascertain. Where we had halted, appeared to be a favorite camping place for Indians."

The Exploring Expedition to the Rocky Mountains, Oregon and California
To Which Is Added a Description of the Physical Geography of California,
with Recent Notices of the Gold Region from the Latest and Most
Authentic Sources.
Brevet Col. J.C. Fremont. 1852

The explorers were told that if they had come at another time of the year, nobody would be there, and that the tradition of a yearly gathering at this place stretched "beyond memory". Most of the celebrants were Paiutes of the Snake tribe, while others were from the Washoe and Shoshoni. All arrived either on foot or horseback, and dispersed after the gathering ended.

The Dust

During the expedition's stay on the playa they experienced a common Black Rock Desert event:



"The wind... increased to a heavy gale, and I shall never forget its withering effect.... Everything both animate and inanimate gave way before it; the horses stood with their backs to the wind and their noses to the ground, without the muscular strength to raise their heads. At noon I took a thermometer graded to 127 deg., out of my box, and observed that the mercury was up to 125.

After the effects of a shower of rain have passed away the surface of the ground crumbles into a thick layer of dust, and occasionally, when the wind is in a particular quarter, it is lifted bodily from the ground in one long opaque cloud. In the midst of such a storm nothing can be seen a few yards ahead, and the unlucky person who happens to be out at the time is compelled to seek the nearest retreat at hand."

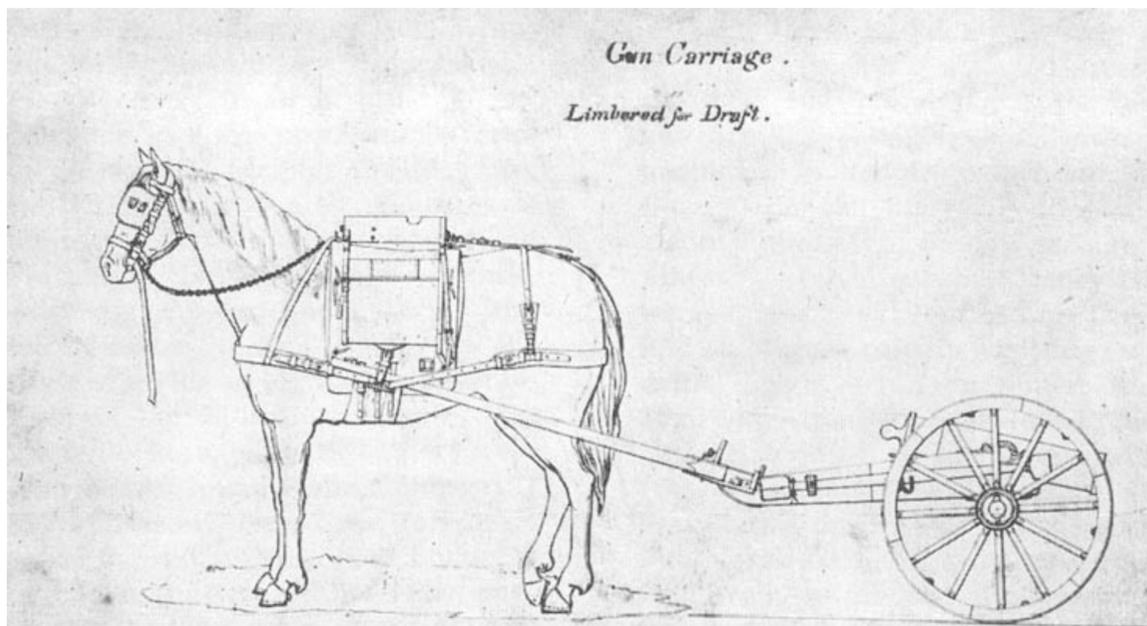
Fire and Gifting

Expedition members observed that fire was used for celebration and ritual during the gathering, at a much larger scale than the usual cooking fires expected at any encampment. The explorers were particularly amazed by one dance where the dancer was clad in a burning costume, yet emerged unsinged afterwards. Towards the end of the week, an enormous bonfire was the central focus of ritual dancing for most of an entire night.

Several of the visitors noted how often food, drink, furs, and other items were given away at this gathering, without any apparent bargaining. Westerners of this era often recorded surprise when confronted with a potlatch/gift culture, in which status accrues to the giver of a desirable gift, rather than to somebody who has accumulated unspent wealth.

First Explosives

Despite the outrage of some civilian members of the party, Frémont had insisted on bringing a howitzer, a horse-drawn artillery piece, for shooting buffalo and dissuading raiders.



After Frémont observed the enthusiasm of the celebrants for fire-related displays, he added to the spectacle with a peaceable discharge of gunpowder:

"...I directed the howitzer to be fired. It was the first time that many of the natives camped on the dusty plain had seen it discharged; and the bursting of the shell at a distance, which was something like the second fire of the gun, amazed and bewildered them with delight. It inspired them with triumphant feelings..."

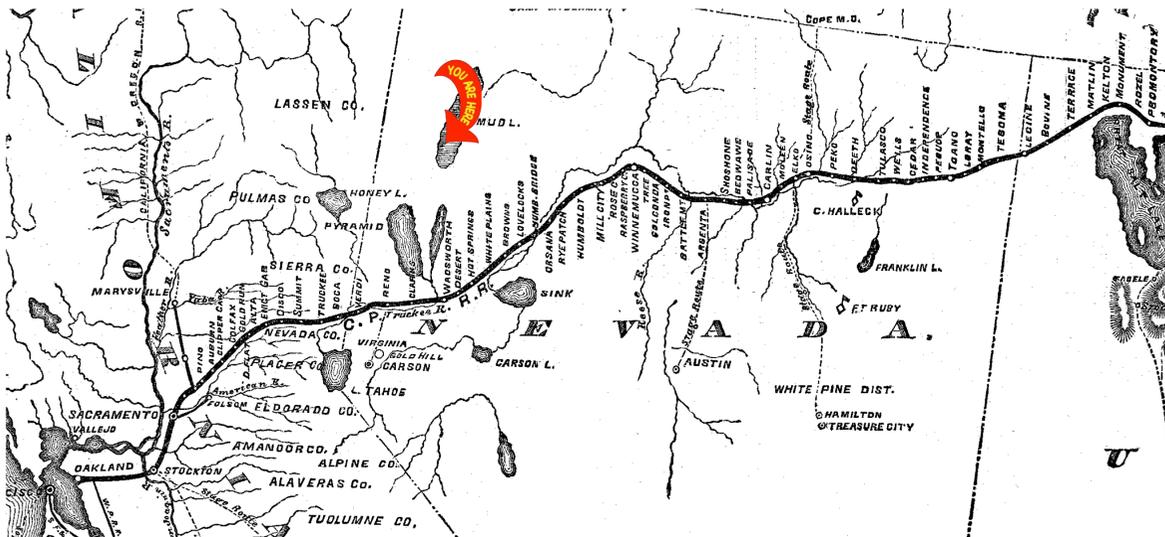
FEAST OF THE KINDLE-MAN



At the close of the 1870s, following the military expulsion of the Paiutes and increasing tourism via the new transcontinental railroad, Americans of European descent began to dominate the annual gatherings in the Black Rock Desert. Initially drawn by the spectacle of the Paiute festival, the new arrivals drastically changed the character of the event.

Transcontinental Railroad

The 1872 advent of the transcontinental railroad drastically changed the accessibility of the Great Basin desert to people from urban centers. The journey that required a major expedition just thirty years before became a short jaunt from the West Coast cities, and was within the reach of motivated travellers from as far as the East Coast.



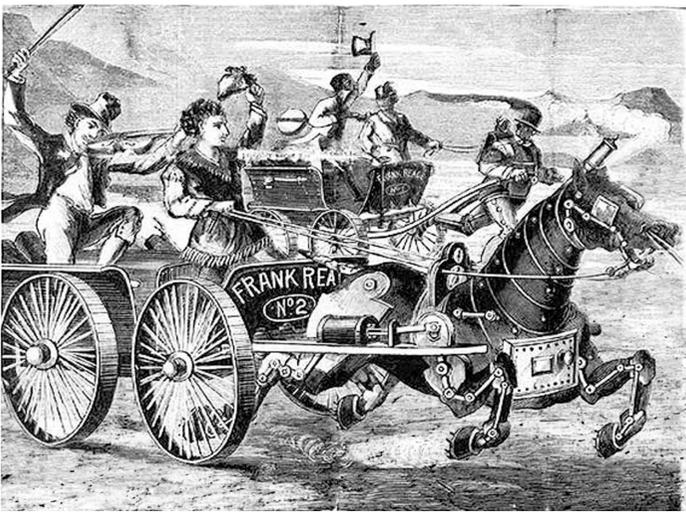
Many travelled by rail to Wadsworth, then hired horses and wagons for the remainder of the journey

Publicity

This travel poster was created in 1872 by "Lying Jim" Townsend, a prominent publisher in the Great Basin, well known for his tendency to exaggerate in the service of his pocketbook. It was inspired by a Paiute gathering about which he had heard only the vaguest of rumors. His real goal was to spur travel through and investment in Olinghouse, then a tiny mining town on the route between Wadsworth and the Black Rock Desert. His lurid publicity led many of the new arrivals to the expectation that they could indulge in behavior frowned upon in the more constrained environments of their homes.

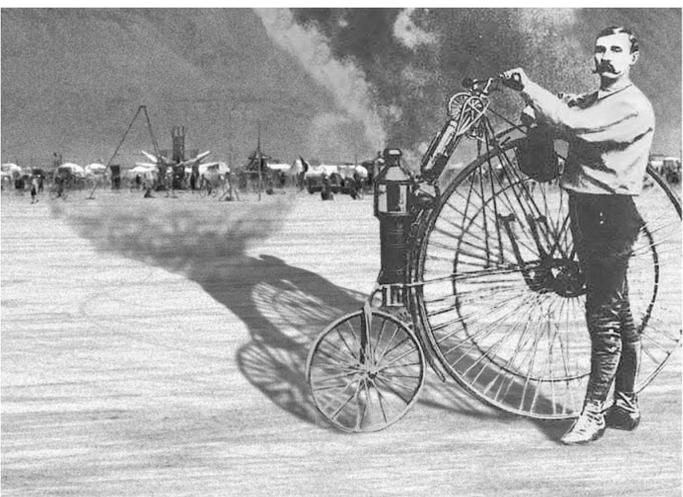
Mechanical Marvels

An astonishing variety of mechanical and steam-driven contrivances were brought to the playa. Frank Reade created steam-powered machines in the shape of both a horse (shown below in front) and a human (shown below behind), which moved on articulated legs. Each of them pulled a wheeled cart behind it, and a race between the two contraptions was one of the highlights of the 1882 Feast. The horse won!



"The figure was about twelve feet high from the bottom of the huge feet to the top of the plug hat which adorned the steam man's head. An enormous belly was required to accommodate the boiler and steam chest, and this corpulency agreed well with the height of the metallic steam chap. To give full working room to the very delicate machinery in his interior, the giant was made to convey a sort of knapsack upon his shoulders. The machine held its arms in the position taken by a man when he is drawing a carriage."

Journalist Harry Enton regarding the Steam Man Mark II



In 1884, Arizona engineer Lucius Day Copeland combined a highwheeled bicycle driven by levers with a small steam engine. The machine would attain about 15 mph, and carried enough fuel and water for an hour of operation. He brought it to the playa in 1885, and later patented a steam-driven tricycle in 1887.

Bicycles

Bicycles began appearing in the Black Rock Desert in the early 1870s and steadily grew in popularity. By 1888, high wheeler bicycles overtook horses as the favorite mode of personal travel within the city, but in 1892 were themselves outnumbered by modern safety bicycles. The Capital Bicycle Club, based in Washington D.C., had a strong presence on the playa throughout the 1880s, organizing group rides, repairing bicycles, demonstrating proper falling techniques, and performing their costume-oriented "Procession of the Sacred Cat".

Intoxicants

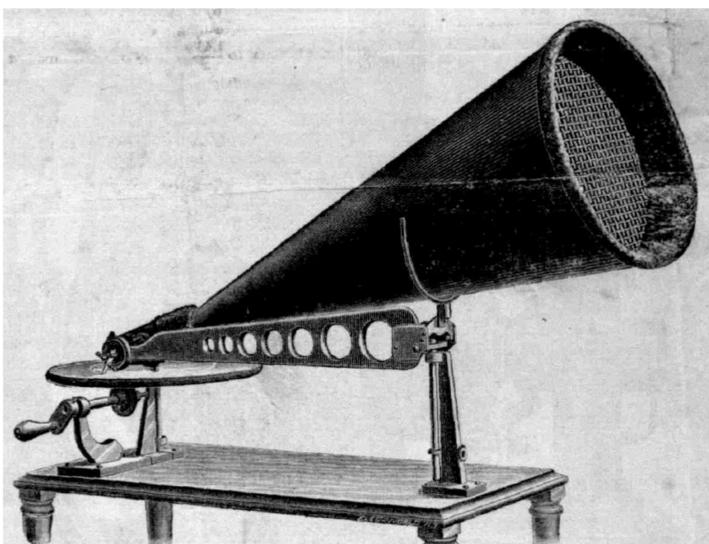
Despite the best efforts of the growing Prohibition movement, alcohol flowed freely in the Great Basin throughout the 1880s. Morphine, laudanum, opium and various patent medicines were also popular. The newest miracle elixir was Coca-Cola, with three glasses containing as much cocaine as one "line" of the now-illegal drug.

Fire



One aspect of the Paiute Gathering that was heartily embraced by the new arrivals was the emphasis on fire, and the tradition of an enormous bonfire at the end of the gathering continued. The conflagration became even larger over the years, and became one of the most-documented aspects of the event. James Abbott McNeill Whistler's rendition of the 1883 burn became a very well-known painting.

Music



Music on the playa changed forever in 1888, when Harold Johnson brought an early gramophone. Pre-recorded music was considered by some to be a travesty, and controversy raged when event organizers banned sound reproduction devices from 1889 to 1901.

Although the earliest pre-recorded music heard on the playa has been lost, two later pieces have been remastered from the original phonograph cylinders. Put on the headphones to hear them!

MILITARY OCCUPATION



The Black Rock Desert was under military control from 1942 to 1945 during World War II, and again in the postwar period from 1949 to 1963. The land was used as a bombing and gunnery range, so the annual gathering of civilians could not occur.

First Occupation: 1942-1945

In 1942, a withdrawal order granted the Army Air Corps 623,000 acres in Pershing and Humboldt counties for use in bombing and gunnery exercises, including most of the Black Rock Desert.



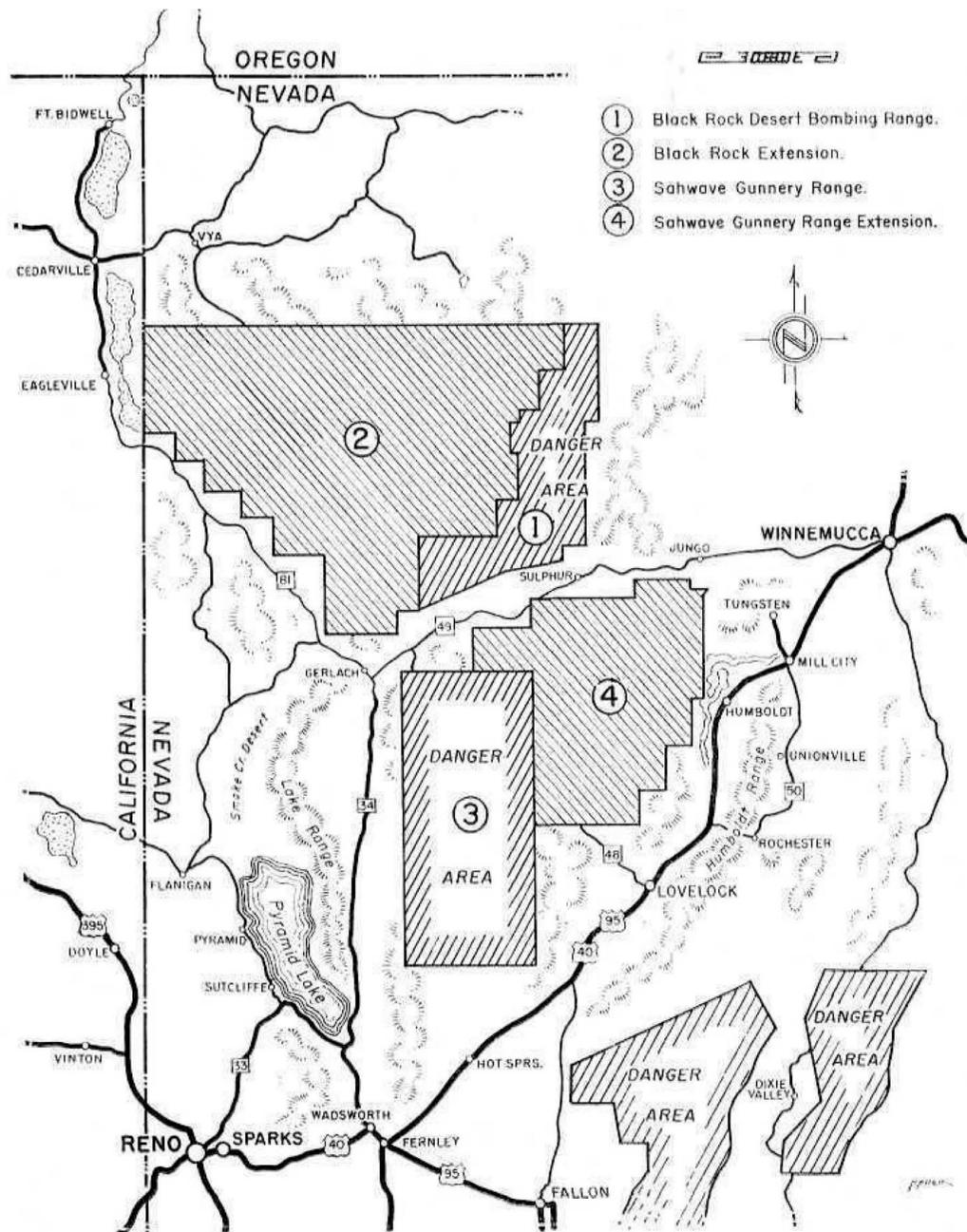
In 1942, the Army Air Corps established a temporary tent city in support of operations in the Black Rock Desert

The withdrawal orders specified that mining, grazing and other land uses were now prohibited and the lands were closed to public access. The residents of the nearby towns of Gerlach, Sulphur, and Jungo were allowed to remain in their homes, but anybody caught on the restricted areas of the Black Rock Desert would face prosecution. In 1944, over one million acres of land in the area moved into the purview of the US Navy, including 700,000 acres of the Black Rock Desert. When the war ended in 1945, the lands reverted back to public use.

Second Occupation: 1949-1963

In 1949, the US Navy applied to the newly-formed Bureau of Land Management (BLM) for permission to re-activate the Black Rock Range as a region of 272,000 acres. They proposed both air-to-air (gunnery) and air-to-ground (bombing) operations, in support of activities based at the Fallon Naval Air Station. After control returned to the Navy, they secured the playa against all public access. The Navy re-established their base in the Black Rock Desert, manning it only during the late summer but with increasing numbers of troops each year. Although no bombing or gunnery appeared to be taking place at that time, intensive activity in the area was noted by the locals.

Expansion Attempts



Acreeages: (1) Black Rock Desert Bombing range 272,000; (2) Black Rock extension 1,372,160; (3) Sahwave Gunnery range 547,906; (4) Sahwave extension 654,720. Total 2,846,786 acres.

In 1953, with increasing levels of activity in the desert, the Navy applied to re-activate the Sahwave Range, a 541,000 acre region south of the Black Rock Desert. In 1955, the Navy applied for over 2 million additional acres next to these ranges in order to provide readiness, capacity, and safety.

The Navy claimed that the requirements of new high-performance aircraft and undisclosed experimental activities required greatly expanded range size. The new aircraft operated at much higher speeds and thus had much larger turning radii. Moreover, new ordinance posed a much greater risk to life and property in the vicinity. In a new form of air-to-air gunnery, pilots would perform low-level, high-speed passes to fire on targets moving 200 miles per hour, towed by cables.

Residents reported intensive activity during the late summer of both 1957 and 1958 with the appearance of odd vehicles, lights and fires out in the desert, and regular flights of aircraft over both ranges. Public access was firmly restricted with both miners and cattlemen forced to either find other routes through the area or to simply leave the area.

In 1958, the Navy's expanded requests were denied. The permits for the use for the existing ranges ran out in 1963, and both the Black Rock Range and the Sahwave Range were closed. The period of military occupation of Black Rock City and the surrounding area was concluded.

Unexplained Observations

The official explanations of the military activities does not account for all that was observed in the Black Rock Desert during this time. Rumors of unusual aircraft and ground vehicles regularly circulated. Local residents claimed to have been told about odd discoveries by off-duty military personnel. Strange lights and explosions were occasionally seen far from any known military encampments, and at times when there were no scheduled exercises. Only one known document, apparently misfiled, addresses this topic.

Memorandum for Mr. Ladd, liaison to the Adjutant General, Black Rock Range

also discussed this matter with [redacted] of [redacted] indicated that it was his attitude that inasmuch as it has been established that the flying disks are not the result of any Army or Navy experiments, the matter is of interest to the FBI. He stated that he was of the opinion that the Bureau, if at all possible, should accede to General Schulgen's request. 67c

SWR:AJB

ADDENDUM

I would recommend that we advise the Army that the Bureau does not believe it should go into these investigations, it being noted that a great bulk of those alleged discs reported found have been pranks. It is not believed that the Bureau would accomplish anything by going into these investigations.

DKL

I think we should do this
7-15

I would do it but before agreeing to it we must insist upon full access to discs recovered. For instance in the case the Army grabbed it & would not let us have it for cursory examination - 2 -

Document accidentally discovered in unclassified supply requisition files

Investigations conducted by state authorities during the Navy occupation uncovered only minor inconsistencies and irregularities. However, once independent civilian investigators gained direct access to the Black Rock Desert in 1963, they claimed to discover contradictions to the official reports of military land usage. Surprisingly little ammunition, and few marks and surface disturbances typical of bombing, were found. Although a few determined enthusiasts continue to investigate, most people today attribute these reports to the overactive imagination of an era at the dawn of space race.

TRACING HISTORY

Much of the oral tradition of the Paiute and other native people has been lost as a result of the European conquest. As a result, the trail from the first temporary annual presence in the Stone Age to the yearly festival observed by the Europeans in the 19th century remains murky.

Two themes that clearly continue through the current Burning Man event - fur and fire - may indeed have their roots in prehistory. The modern renaissance of replica pheaux fur garments is built on technological advances that allow inexpensive mass production.

Fire is still used for cooking, warmth, ritual, and entertainment. It underlies the technological innovation of the steam-powered mechanisms, and of the explosives used to create the first pyrotechnic spectacle. For twenty years, explosives were the sole use of the region, but now human presence in the late summer has returned to the Black Rock Desert.