

How China Lake Got Its Name

by
Sewell "Pop" Lofinick

Introduction

For some fifteen years "Pop" Lofinick's job was to guard the north ranges of the U.S. Naval Ordnance Test Station, a region he knew well from having prospected over the area during the Great Depression. His task was to keep trespassers – prospectors, hunters, rock hounds, etc. – from going into the test ranges, or to get them out if any were found within their borders. Pop did this job from 1947 to 1962 when the NOTS Commander, Capt. Charles Blenman, asked him to come down out of the hills and write a weekly column for the *Rocketeer*, called the Desert Philosopher, which he did for over four years. In 1966, the original Maturango Museum published a book of Pop's collected columns, *Mojave Desert Ramblings*. This book has been out of print for some years, but a few copies may be found in the IWV occasionally or in a library. This article is taken from that book, which followed the first publication in the *Rocketeer*.

Some weeks ago I wrote about how China Lake got its name. Checked into it further since then and got new information. Here it is ...

We do know that Chinese labor was brought in to build the railroads of California and the west in the early days. When the railroads were built, the Chinese scattered out – working old mine dumps. Some Chinese got rich reworking dumps that the Whites had been careless about in their eagerness for the fast buck.

Sierra Gordo was booming in the 1870s. There were many Chinese there.

MADE CHARCOAL FOR SMELTERS

Also many Chinese came to Darwin in 1872. They operated charcoal pits in the forested areas of the northwest corner of the Base, making charcoal for the smelters.

They also raised vegetables for Darwin at China Garden Spring four miles south of Darwin. So naturally they also prospected for placer gold in areas not requiring much geological education. So they drifted down into the area now known as China Lake.

BORAX, POTASH YARN REJECTED

They did not gather borax cotton balls or scrape up potash as some stories have it, because it wasn't there. I have it from an authoritative source – an outstanding geologist who made a study of the area – that there is no more than a trace of either. But, he reports, there is a finer placer gold there. The Chinese dry-placered fine gold with a feather. It took much time and perseverance. The Chinese had both. They had a camp on the east side of the lake bed. So, it is quite probable it was referred to as China Lake in 1873. So, that's how China Lake got its name.

Another version – some pioneers looking down on from the top of Wild Horse Mesa at that vast wilderness observed that it looked like a china bowl – so, when there was water in it – it was China Lake. Seems reasonable, -- but no proof.

POP HAS HIS OWN VERSION

Another version – my own – possibly a box of chinaware fell off a freight wagon. They threw the pieces into the lake. – so, it became China Lake. Many places have gotten names just as accidentally.

But delete this last version – somebody might believe it!