

Service with a Smile, Sierra Club Service Trip to Pyramid Lake, Sept. 20-26, 2015

by Elaine Gorman

While driving to Fernley Nevada, via backroads off highway 395, I realized that this upcoming trip would be in a land without much familiarity. I passed a large hay stack with a 30 ft. banner proclaiming simply “The Donald”. Not long after, there appeared a 2-story Jesus Saves cross, complete with ornate crown and sparkly decorations. I was in the ancestral territory of Wovoka, Paiute legend who resurrected the Ghost Dance. But as soon as I checked into the hotel and met the two leaders and my fellow service trippers, I began to feel at home.

What attracted me to this trip was the location — Pyramid Lake, the largest lake in Nevada, surrounded by the Pyramid Lake Paiute Indian Reservation. I haven’t spent much time in that part of Nevada, and I was interested in learning more about its cultural and natural history. Our homebase, Fernley, is about 30 miles east of Reno and is my usual jumping off point when traveling to Utah. Fernley, seemingly a drab town, earned a special place in my heart with its two enormous sculptures on Main Street — a 2-story flower tower made of bottle caps, and a large tiled tortoise. And Fernley has some surprisingly good restaurants.

Our first cultural initiation was a visit to the PL Tribal Museum. Ralph Burns told us the history of the Northern Paiute people, how the diversion of much of the Truckee River from Pyramid Lake has affected the lake and the tribe, the importance of the Lahontan cutthroat trout and the endemic Cui-ui fish, and current efforts to reintroduce their native language. Ralph was later joined by Ben Aleck, an artist and former director of the museum. Our group enjoyed the stories that Ralph and Ben told — water babies



of Pyramid Lake, fishing trip of skunk and raccoon — some told in the Paiute language.

Each day of service we drove to the town of Nixon, the administrative center for the reservation. The volunteers split into two teams — one group painted some tribal buildings, and the other group worked in the greenhouse and orchard. I chose to work in the greenhouse and orchard, and after four days, was glad to see the weeds disappear. Barbara brought a selection of native plants, which will hopefully be transplanted. The days were quite warm, but I enjoyed being outside, being close to nature. Geese, vultures, ravens and other birds captured my attention. A few Western toads made the greenhouse their home, it was fun to observe them. Both groups worked very diligently, and we think that we made some progress on the projects.

Leaders Barbara Balen and Claudia Hilligoss made sure that we had a variety of excursions to help us learn about the area. One afternoon we visited the BLM National Wild Horse and Burro Adoption Center in Palomino Valley. Arising from the Wild Burro and Horse Act, this



facility can house over 1800 animals. We learned from the assistant facility manager Jeb Beck, how the staff feeds and cares for these animals as they await adoption or are sent to live on ranches in the mid-west.

Another afternoon we visited the Dunn Fish Hatchery, and were given a tour by the enthusiastic manager, Desmond Mitchell. He showed us the water system, the trays where the Lahontan cutthroat eggs are hatched, and the tanks where the fish are raised. He explained the artificial spawning channel, where the fish arrive each year. Historically, trout were caught that weighed 30-40 pounds. The original strain of Lahontan cutthroats were fished out, but they are being revived, and each year 24,000 fish are released from the hatchery. These fish are big business for the tribe, as PL is considered a world class fishery, and permits bring in over \$1 million each year.

The most exciting part of the trip for me was the hike to the Lagomarsino Canyon Petroglyphs on our free day. Rick Ramos, SC outings leader (and super nice guy) from Grass Valley, took me, Sandy, and Barbara on a wonderful adventure. We passed by an old rock homestead, with twisted iron bed frame and a wooden washing machine. We saw about a dozen wild horses,

which eyed us cautiously. Sadly, we also saw several dead horses, possibly due to harsh winters, little food, and overpopulation. But the prize at the end of our 5.5 mile hike was the 1/4 mile panel of petroglyphs which were scattered over the basalt cliffs. We were in awe over this amazing display of figures and designs, speculating about their meaning. This may be the oldest rock art in Nevada. We had to leave after only a 45-min. inspection (I could have stayed for hours) but we wanted to make it back to the vehicles before dark. Go to http://www.nvrockart.org/aan_pages/lc.html if you would like to learn about this amazing site.

On our last day of service, Stephanie and I spent a couple of hours bagging up garbage along the main road. As that road is the primary route into Burning Man, I wondered what all of the Burners thought about this spartan and vast landscape. The Pyramid, and other tufa formations surrounding the shore, are sacred to the Paiutes. As a fitting end to our work week, we enjoyed a delicious potluck lunch put on by the PL tribe, in honor of Native American Day. We tried Lahontan trout cooked several ways, elk, venison, pine nuts, and other native foods. Across the street at the elementary school, we watched children and adults dancing, singing, and drumming at their local pow wow. Their outfits were beautiful and colorful, and their performances were memorable.

One of the main reasons that I enjoy these service trips is because of all of the dedicated people that I get an opportunity to meet. We came from all across the US, and each has an interesting story. For instance — I had recently heard on NPR about the original writer of the song “Baby I’m Gonna Leave You” by Led Zeppelin. It was Anne! Sandy lives near Anne in North Fork, Sandy’s home town. Ed and Luba are from Las Vegas, and like me, they have helped to clear the Escalante River of dreaded Russian Olive. Stephanie is a working gal in DC, and likes to travel to the West. Gene and Nancy are from So. Cal., and lead local SC hikes. Sandra told us a story-book tale of how she moved from Hawaii to SF, and how she met her husband. The Philomenes, Sr. & Jr., were energetic and enthusiastic, and thanks for hosting the balcony happy hour! Theron, recently retired, lives near Sacramento and is an avid outdoorswoman. My roomie Susan has worked and lived all over the world, including Russia and Australia.

While heading west back to California, I had one last adventure. Claudia led Stephanie and I on a short hike on The Nature Conservancy McCarran Ranch restoration area along the Truckee River. The interpretive panels showed the efforts to naturalize the channel and to add native vegetation. I loved walking through the ancient cottonwoods, seeing more wild horses, passing people who were birding, biking, fishing, and hiking. What a hopeful and beautiful place to enjoy my last hours in Nevada.



Special thanks to leaders Claudia and Barbara — their knowledge of the area, efficient organizing, willingness to adapt to changes, and efforts to make

us all feel comfortable, well fed, and happy, are appreciated.

