



*Teamsters round the bend below cave rock at Lake Tahoe, Nevada 1860s..*

## Chapter 8: LAKE TAHOE & THE HIGH SIERRAS

The scenery of the thus enclosed part of the State of California is classified among the most magnificent in the world; everywhere there is something worth seeing, whether it be the quietly pastoral or grandly picturesque. Fountain and lake, forest and meadow, peak and valley make up this section of the western slope of the Sierra Nevada. On this range are found such prominent and noble points as Park Peak, Mount Tallac, Crystal Peak, Thompson's Peak and Pyramid Peak; besides innumerable lakelets of beauty, such as Fallen Leaf Lake, Look Lake, Silver Lake, Clear Lake, Lake Tallac and valley Lake.

All along the northern shore there are springs of boiling hot water coming to the surface, containing lime, magnesia, sulphur. The hot baths are delightful, the water possessing just the requisite properties for cleansing both the cuticle and all kinds of clothing. One comes from the bath as white and pure as a new kid glove.

Caroline M. Churchill, 1881





We tramped a long time on level ground, and then toiled laboriously up a mountain about a thousand miles high and looked over. No lake there. We descended on the other side, crossed the valley and toiled up another mountain three or four thousand miles high, apparently, and looked over again. No lake yet. We sat down tired and perspiring, and hired a couple of Chinamen to curse those people who had beguiled us. Thus refreshed, we presently resumed the march with renewed vigor and determination. We plodded on, two or three hours longer, and at last the Lake burst upon us—a noble sheet of blue water lifted six thousand three hundred feet above the level of the sea, and walled in by a rim of snow-clad mountain peaks that towered aloft full three thousand feet higher still!

Mark Twain, 1872



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*Tallac Mountain, Fallen Leaf Lake, 1860s.*

El Dorado lays claim to a portion of that unequalled sheet of water, Lake Bigler, the principal inlet of the lake—Emerald Bay—being in the county [El Dorado, California].

It is located on the eastern side of the central ridge of the Sierra Nevada. According to the observations of the United States geographical surveying corps, under command of Lieut. George M. Wheeler, the altitude of the lake is 6,202 feet above the level of the sea; that of Tahoe City, 6,251, and of Hot Springs, 6,237 feet. The water of the lake being shed from the solid granite and volcanic mountains that compose its boundaries by more than thirty streams, is extremely pure and clear, and when in a state of quietness, one can observe fish and other objects most distinct and perfect to the depth of from thirty to forty feet; it is of blue color and very cold, but never freezes in the winter. The temperature 800 feet below the surface always remains at 39.2°, the point of maximum density of fresh pure water; at the surface in the hottest weather, the temperature rises to 68°, and in the coldest sinks to 38° only. The deepest soundings ever made were 2,800 feet. The greatest length of the lake is 21.6 miles; the greatest breadth 12 miles; and the area of the whole sheet of water is about 195 square miles; El Dorado county is entitled to claim nearly one-third of this area

as located within her lines. The water is as buoyant as any other pure water, and it is as safe for sailing crafts as any. No more danger than what is common to other places need be feared, either from wind or waves; though no Indian would dare to cross the lake, affirming their belief that an evil spirit would draw them to the bottom, if they would make an attempt.

The bed of Lake Tahoe, by some is supposed to be the crater of an extinct volcano, and to be unfathomable. There are some indications of undoubtable volcanic origin: the masses of scorious or calcereous rock, mentioned already in Fremont's narrative, scattered all about the lake shore and along the banks of the Truckee river; a small conical mound, evidently created by solfataras, may be seen near by, a little to the northwest of Tahoe City; and the occasional occurrence of hot springs on the lake shore as well as in the lake, are evidence enough for this theory. Proof of the later assertion is an incident that was witnessed in September, 1866, from Saxton's saw-mill, by a

*Webster's Station, Sugar Loaf Mountain, Webster's Station appears on the 1861 mail contract, as a Pony Express station. The station, which stood on the Placerville Carson Road, began as an original C.O.C. & P.P. Express Co. station in April 1860. It also served as a stop for teamsters and the stage lines until the late 1860s. Travelers also knew Webster's as Sugar Loaf House, from a nearby rocky mountain of the same name. Photo 1866.*



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The air up there in the clouds is very pure and fine, bracing and delicious. And why shouldn't it be? — it is the same the angels breathe. I think that hardly any amount of fatigue can be gathered together that a man cannot sleep off in one night on the sand by its side. Not under a roof, but under the sky; it seldom or never rains there in the summer time. I know a man who went there to die. But he made a failure of it. He was a skeleton when he came, and could barely stand. He had no appetite, and did nothing but read tracts and reflect on the future. Three months later he was sleeping out of doors regularly, eating all he could hold, three times a day, and chasing game over mountains three thousand feet high for recreation. And he was a skeleton no longer, but weighed part of a ton. This is no fancy sketch, but the truth. His disease was consumption. I confidently commend his experience to other skeletons.

Mark Twain, 1872

