

[How Salton Sea Was Caught]

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview [9?]

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER Earl Bowman

ADDRESS 86 West 12th Street, NYC

DATE January 3, 1939

SUBJECT "HOW SALTON SEA WAS CAUGHT" (An Uncle Steve Robertson story)

1. Date and time of interview
2. Place of interview
3. Name and address of informant Narrated by Harry Reece, 63 Washington Sq., So., NYC
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant. See previous interviews
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

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FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

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ADDRESS 86 West 12th St., NYC

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SUBJECT HOW SALTON SEA WAS CAUGHT

“My Uncle Steve Robertson, who was a great pioneer in the Far West in the very early days indeed, and who had many strange experiences and performed some remarkable deeds in his time, told me how 'salton Sea' happens to be where it is and why it...stays there...

“It would be scandalous for me to doubt any of the beautiful stories that my Uncle Steve Robertson told me when we used to go on hunting and fishing trips together, for Uncle Steve was a pioneer of great integrity and often said that...‘there was...one dangd human critter he couldn't endure and that was a cussed ‘xaggerater that stretches th’ truth till she snaps an' flies back an' hits him in his doggone face...’.

“So, Uncle Steve's yarn about how the Salton Sea happens to be where she is and why she stays there is no doubt quite authentic; at least, who am I, a mere 'tenderfoot' with very little experience as a ‘pioneer’ in the early days of the Far West, to doubt it?

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“It was one early September in— I think about 1909— when we had journeyed over to Malheur Lake, in [Eastern Oregon?], to shoot a couple of ducks, that Uncle Steve told me about Salton Sea.

“In camp after supper one evening I had mentioned to Uncle Steve that I once shot a duck or two down in the Mojave Desert, and that it was very hot shooting indeed, and that I had shot them on a very unusual Lake which some people called the ‘salton Sea’....

“Well, I - gosh, now ain't that a cuincident,’ Uncle Steve exclaimed. ‘I - Gawd, so that's what they call it now, 'th' Salton Sea’. Jest think ny own nephew's shot ducks on that lake that I made - yeah, well, that is Bob White an' me made it, or mebbe to be plumb accurate an' truthful I shouldn't ought say we made it, but by gosh we staked th' damn thing down, there ain't no cussed doubt about that!

“It was that time that Bob and me and ‘Mam’, that was Bob's wife, was migratin' from Arizona, that time it got so danged hot and dry all them forests and even th' doggone buzzards petrified...

“Yeah, we was gettin' out of that district and headin' up towards Idaho but when we got out in the middle of that doggone Mojave Desert one of our mules was bit by a gila monster and we had to camp till he got able to travel again...an' that was quite a while for them damned gila monster bites, even on mules, is painful as hell an' it takes them a long time to heal up an' git normal again.

“so, we picked out a grove of Joshua trees an' camped in it...of course we had a pretty good supply of water with us in our 3 kegs and then there was quite a lot of them barrel-cactus an' we'd cut them open to get the water that was in them for the mules while we was campin' there in the desert. We didn't actually suffer for water but it shore was hell to see all them ‘floatin' lakes’ jest sparklin' out there on the desert an' never able to go swimmin' in them! It shore was a torment...

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“Mebbe I didn't mention it before, but that part of the old Mojave Desert where we was campin' was noted for 'floatin' lakes'.... yeah, some people call 'em 'mirridges'...

“You jest look out across the sand under th' blazin' blisterin' dadgummned sun and I - gawd there they are. Purtiest cussed lakes you ever see...You can see trees along their banks an' I-gosh you can even see th' water ripplin' like the wind was stirrin' it— like Malheur Lake was this afternoon when then green-heads come down an' we shot them three. That's the way they looked.

“they jest teased you to go swimmin' in 'em— But they was them damned 'floatin' lakes' like I said, an' I-Gawd when anybody'd start toward 'em they'd jest float away, and keep backin' up an' backin' up and back up clean across the desert into th' mountains...

“Bob and me used to try to catch one so we could go swimmin' in it and we'd walk ourselves darned nigh to death but still couldn't catch it an' finally we'd jest stop an' stand there an' cuss an' cuss an' cuss...

“till finally I jest says to bob, 'I-Gawd, Bob, they ain't no damn use us wastin' our breath cussin' an' cussin' them damn lakes.

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Nobody ever gits nothin' by jest cussin', what anybody's gotta do is figger th' double-damned thing out and scheme to git ahead of it an' do somethin' about it— 'Besides', I told Bob, 'we ought to be ashamed of ourselves cussin' so damned much, you know damned well that 'Mam' don't like for us to cuss all th' damned time, I-gawd.'

“that's what I told Bob we'd have to do about them 'floatin' lakes' if we ever was goin' to catch one and go swimmin' in it an' git a bath which all of us even th' cussed mules, includin' the one that was bit by the gila monster (he was Old Yaller...th' one with a black stripe down his back) needed damn bad...

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“Well, Bob, he couldn't figger out how to ketch that cussed ‘floatin' lake’ but I always could figger anything out, if I jest set my head to it an' figgered long enough and hard enough — An' that's the way I figger a man's got to be, especially the way us pioneers of the Far West in th' early days, if a man gits anywhere.

“Nobody else ain't goin' to figger nothin' out for a man, he's gotta figger it out for hisself. So, I-Gawd, that night after supper I jest set there in that grove of Joshua Trees where we was camped an' figgered ‘how in hell, now, can anybody git a damned ‘floatin' lake’ to hold still long enough for a man to go swimmin' in it? I-Gawd, how can it be done?’ I figgered to myself, jest settin' there in that grove of Joshua Trees while th' moon was shinin' out there on th' desert and ever' once in a while a coyote would howl out there somewere and once in a while that poor cussed mule that had been bit by th' damned gila monster would kind of groan—although th' bite on his leg was [gradually?] gittin' better by then...

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“But I figgered an' figgered an' finally, settin' there after supper that night I got a ‘insp'ration! I'd got her!

“there was a hell of a lot of nice straight, young Joshua Tree poles in that grove we camped in and them damned poles was my insp'ration...

“so, I called Bob an' said: ‘Bob, I'gosh, git your axe—we're goin' to do some choppin'— Th' moon's light enough for us to see by, an' I-Gawd, I want to get a lot of these damned young Joshua tree poles cut down an' sharpened an' have ‘em ready for tomorrow!’

“Bob says, ‘What th' hell do you want to do that for? Anyhow, it's th' first time I've been cool today— after chasin' that damned ‘floatin' lake’ like we did, an' if we do a lot of choppin' we'll git hot as hell again...’

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“But I told Bob to never mind what we was choppin' th' Joshua Tree poles down and sharpenin' 'em for, I jest told him to wait till th' next day an' he'd find out 'cause I'd figgered somethin' out and when I figgered anything out, I-Gawd, I had her figgered out.

“so, we chopped down and sharpened about twentyfive of them damned Joshua Tree poles, then we carried 'em out an' strung 'em along about twenty feet apart, about a hundred yards from camp...

“then we went to bed.

“Next day when we looked out an' saw that damn 'floatin' lake' flickerin' out there in the sun, I says to Bob—

“Now Bob, we're goin' to fool that damn thing... You sneak around on th' other side of that damn floatin' lake— be shore an' 6 don't let her see you comin' till you're plumb around her, then when you're right square on th' other side of her, start creepin' up on her like you was goin' to go swimmin' in her— An' 'course when she sees you comin' she'll start to slippin' an' floatin' back this way towards camp.

“I'Gawd, I'll be waitin' an' when she gits up to where we got them damn Joshua Tree poles strung along I'll grab 'em an' drive 'em down in her an' stake her down...

“I'gosh it worked! When Bob had driv' th' damn lake right up to th' poles I grabbed one an' socked it down in her an' drove it down before she realized what I was doin' an' there she was? Then I yelled at Bob an' he come around an' we drove th' rest of th' poles down in her and staked her down good— So, that's the way it was.

“We all went swimmin' in her...even 'Mam', that was Bob's wife, an' th' mules went swimmin' in that 'floatin' lake' we'd staked down out there on th' old Mojave Desert!

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“After we'd all had a good bath in her we felt so darned good we hitched up and migrated on up here to th' Snake River country, where lakes don't have to be staked down...Yeah, that's th' way it was, an' as far as I know that's the only lake anybody ever staked down...specially in th' Mojave Desert, an' as far as I know also, she's still staked there an' always will be be...”

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(“There have been other legends as to how 'salton Sea' came into being down there in the extremely warm Mojave Desert, but my Uncle Steve Robertson seemed to be quite certain his version of the strange body of water that so intrigues duck hunters during some seasons of the year is the real explanation...and my Uncle Steve Robertson 'despised anybody who would stretch the truth till she'd snap an' fly back an' hit him in his cussed face!’”)