

Stealth Search For History

Ken McCall

Published in LV Sun Saturday, July 19, 1997 | 2:04 a.m.

As the full moon rose on an April night, Jerry Freeman picked up his backpack and headed into a desolate and forbidding landscape.

Driven by an obsession about an episode in American pioneer history -- and the stubbornness of the Air Force -- the 55-year-old archaeologist and adventurer began an unauthorized seven-day, hundred-mile trek through the Nevada Test Site, into highly restricted Air Force property, and near, if not in, the top-secret Area 51.

His objective: To find an inscription made in 1849 by a member of a lost and desperate wagon train that eventually gave Death Valley its name. Also, Freeman wanted to see Papoose Dry Lake, the last place where the group of would-be gold-diggers camped together before splintering in search of water.

His problem: The dry lake and the canyon that is thought to contain the inscription are deep within one of the nation's most restricted military bases.

Freeman's subsequent adventure, described in his own words in a five-part serial that begins today in the SUN, took him through a surreal landscape that included eerie installations, ominous warning signs, a large ship stranded in the desert, and seemingly endless miles of rock and scrub brush.



Jerry Freeman took a seven-day, hundred-mile trek through the Nevada Test Site and into highly restricted Air Force property in his search for an inscription made in 1849.

The trek also put him through several heart-stopping close encounters with security, a nerve-wracking moonlight tiptoe across a Test Site "potential crater area," an interview with a surly rattlesnake, and a desperate, dry-mouthed, all-night forced march in search of water.

For his troubles, Freeman got a good sunburn, a good look at Papoose Dry Lake and Nye Canyon, and the discovery of an ox shoe likely left behind by the wagon train.

But he never found the inscription.

By the time Freeman got to Nye Canyon, where the etching is believed to be located, he was almost out of water. He had only a day to search.

Freeman knew before he started that the odds were against success and that he stood a good chance of being arrested, but the lure of finding that inscription and seeing the route was too strong.

"The siren song is deafening," he said in an interview with the SUN on the afternoon before he set out.

"I would be the only individual to see all seven inscriptions. I've seen so much of the trail. I've seen everywhere they went except for that stretch there.

"I am smitten by the forbidden fruit."

* Late last year, Freeman led a group of five on a 32-day, 330-mile trek that followed the route taken by the so-called Lost 49ers. Those impatient pioneers, in November 1849, turned off the well-traveled Spanish Trail near what is now Enterprise, Utah, and headed southwest in hopes of finding a shortcut to the California gold fields.

Instead, their unfortunate decision brought them seven weeks of misery, four deaths and the dubious honor of naming Death Valley.

Freeman's group had the advantage of modern equipment, knowledge of water sources and a supply truck.

But unlike the Lost 49ers, Freeman had to deal with the Air Force.

The proposed trek was well-received by the National Park Service and the Bureau of Land Management. In addition, Freeman got the Department of Energy to agree to supervised visits to areas of the Test Site that could have been on the Lost 49ers route.

The Air Force, however, ignored or sternly rebuffed all efforts by Freeman and his supporters to gain even limited access to the military base.

Freeman, an Antelope Valley, Calif., resident, enlisted the help of his congressman, Buck McKeon, who wrote a letter to the Air Force. To no avail.

The reply, Freeman said, was that the Air Force "will not allow nor will they ever allow anyone access to the area."

There are seven inscriptions mentioned in the journals of the Lost 49ers, and early in last November's trek, Freeman discovered the previously unknown location of one of them. The team also found an encampment containing artifacts that were likely left by the unfortunate pioneers.

Freeman and his group eventually would see all but one of the inscriptions. They had a photograph of the seventh one, taken from a history book. But there is no documentation for the photo, other than it was taken in Nye Canyon near a place called Triple Tanks.

After the group trek ended in December, that last inscription -- and the Air Force's obstinacy -- kept eating at Freeman.

"When you start a project ... you hope to bring it to a conclusion," Freeman said. "If you leave gaps in it, you don't have a sense of fulfillment."

Besides, he said, the Air Force "treated me and my entire crew with disdain."

"This is part of our American heritage. I believe I have a right to see it."

* Freeman came to the SUN because he wanted a neutral party he trusted to know when and why he was going in.

"I'm no Rambo," he said before he began his clandestine journey. "I have no death wish here. I'm a middle-of-the-road American guy. I'm not a guy who protests. I pay my taxes. I've never been arrested."

"I want the Air Force to know there's nothing sinister about what I'm doing. I'm not interested in the military or technology. I'm interested purely in the history and culture of that site and this artifact."

"I'm an archaeologist, that's all I am."

Freeman was apprehensive about tales of people venturing into Area 51 never to be seen again. He would take a cellular telephone with him and call in to leave coded messages of his condition and whereabouts.

And if he saw he was about to be arrested, he would call in immediately to make sure someone on the outside knew.

As he left the office, Freeman still wasn't sure he would attempt the trek.

"My wife is totally against this thing," he said. "Any prudent individual would tell me not to do it."

But, he admitted, his "sense of adventure" was pulling him.

"Nobody's probably been in that canyon and looked around for 50 years."

"I may be able to find that inscription."

* An experienced backwoodsman, Freeman traveled light. He carried no tent or sleeping bag, relying solely on his clothes and an emergency blanket for shelter.

Although he had planned to call every day, Freeman left only two phone messages, one at 3 a.m. April 23 and another at 10:27 p.m. April 25.

There was nothing after that.

On Monday, April 28, Freeman's wife, Donna, said her husband wasn't home yet and his brother, Doyle Freeman, had said Jerry was running a day behind.

I finally made contact with Jerry Freeman again the following day. Freeman related highlights of his trek, many of which he called "heart-stopping."

"It was high adventure," he said. "I'm lucky. I'm just really lucky."

Because he hadn't found the inscription, Freeman wasn't sure he wanted to go public with the story. He wasn't sure it was worth the legal risk. It was agreed to hold any story until he decided he was ready.

Two months later, after consultations with friends, family and lawyers, Freeman was ready.

He wanted to go public, he said, to bring recognition to the Lost 49ers -- particularly the four pioneer women, "the unsung heroines," who were on that wagon train.

Since his group trek last year, Freeman said he has sent story proposals about the Lost 49ers to dozens of magazines and historical journals, but sparked no interest.

"I feel we have shortchanged historically that particular group of pioneers," he said. "They suffered through the Great Basin as no one had before. Now it's occupied by government agencies that don't care. They don't care about that inscription or those pioneers."

Freeman recognized there would be more interest in his story now that it involves the "Area 51-UFO thing."

"If that works," he said, "that's a good thing."

* Whether Freeman crossed into the Air Force's fabled Area 51 is questionable.

Although the Air Force recently acknowledged it has a facility in Groom Dry Lake, it refuses to comment any further on the base, much less define its boundaries. But Area 51 buffs, from studying government maps, have a clear idea where it is located.



Route map sketched by Jerry Freeman

According to Glenn Campbell, the reigning civilian expert on the secret base and related UFO phenomena, Area 51 is a 60-square-mile tract that encompasses most of Groom Dry Lake. The base, he said, is snuggled up against the northeast edge of a mountain, which stands between Groom and Papoose dry lakes.

In his account and in subsequent interviews, Freeman talked of climbing a ridge above Nye Canyon and looking down on Papoose Dry Lake, which is just south of the mountain.

Many UFO buffs -- Freeman is not one of them -- believe a secret hangar containing captured alien spacecraft lies beneath the Papoose lakebed.

"During the day I couldn't see anything," Freeman said of his view of the Papoose area. "But at night, it was a different story."

Freeman saw several lights. One appeared to be a security vehicle that moved around. Another, however, was stationary and appeared to get larger and smaller -- as would a hangar door as it opened and closed.

"But that's purely conjecture on my part," Freeman said. "From that distance, I couldn't tell what it was."

Freeman thought he was looking into Area 51, but Campbell, who has written a book about the base, said the archaeologist was still about 10 to 15 miles south of the base, which was hidden from his line of sight by the mountain.

Freeman, however, counters that Campbell is working from old maps and doesn't necessarily know what the Air Force considers to be the exact boundaries of its super-secret base.

In any case, Freeman said, he wasn't there to see Groom Lake or Area 51.

"The 49ers were never at Groom Lake," he said. "They were at Papoose."

* Freeman still hopes the Air Force will allow some historian -- he realizes he'll likely be blackballed -- to go into Nye Canyon and document the last inscription.

"I don't think the general public should be allowed to go in there when they want to," Freeman said. "But for a legitimate educational purpose, I think we should be allowed to document it. I don't see how it would endanger national security to do that.

"We do live in a time of relative peace. We're not at war. I think the Air Force needs to lighten up."

Freeman also hopes to rekindle interest in pioneer history.

"So much of our history has lost its relevance to our young people," he said. "They have no conception what the pioneers went through.

"Perhaps my going in there will spark their interest."

Jerry Freeman's Daily Trip Diary From LV Sun

Forbidden Journey

Desert diary: Jerry Freeman chronicles his trip through the desert

LV Sun Editor's note: This is the account by archaeologist Jerry Freeman of his seven-day, 100-mile unauthorized trek into highly restricted government territory.

Freeman's objective was to trace the trail of one of the most famous wagon trains in American history: the lost emigrants of 1849, whose odyssey resulted in the naming of Death Valley.

Specifically, he wanted to find and document an inscription made by one of the pioneers thought to be in Nye Canyon above Papoose Lake on the Nellis Air Force Base Bombing and Gunnery Range.

Last year, he and a group of five followed the 147-year-old trail from western Utah to Death Valley. But the Lost 49ers staggered right through what is now the Air Force range, and Freeman was consistently denied access to any part of Air Force property. As a result, on April 22 of this year, Freeman decided to take matters into his own hands.



Jerry Freeman stands dressed for his expedition into the Nevada desert to search for a lost inscription by the '49ers.

Tuesday evening, April 22, 1997

I stood alone beside the rusted metal barricade, marking the end of public land. An hour earlier, I watched my brother's car disappear down a faint desert track, high in Nevada's Specter Range. After a quick handshake, Doyle was gone. Dusk was near and using his lights this close to the border was not wise.

Fidgeting with the straps on my 50-pound pack, I convinced myself I was only waiting for the moon to rise a little higher before setting out, when, in fact, I was afraid. The enormity of what I was about to do eroded my courage. Finally, taking a deep breath, I stepped across the barrier ... and into the "forbidden zone."

Earlier that day, I met with Ken McCall, a reporter for the Las Vegas SUN, to apprise him of my surreptitious intent to find an inscription that was believed to have been carved on a remote canyon wall, high above Nevada's mysterious Papoose Lake, nearly 150 years ago.

The catch was, the lake and the canyon lie deep within the most guarded real estate on Earth: The U.S. Air Force's Nellis Air Force Base Gunnery Range. "Dreamland," as it is known to military pilots, and "Area 51" to legions of UFO buffs.

Five years of pleading with the Air Force to allow my archaeological team to document the route of a lost wagon train, that passed through this wild and desolate land in 1849, had been met with absolute refusal from the military. An appeal from California Congressman "Buck" McKeon on our behalf was dismissed out of hand. They had no interest in meeting with members of my team to discuss the project's merit. Civilian access, regardless of cause, is never granted.

A phone call by my former partner, Lee Bergthold, to an Air Force spokesman ended quite abruptly: "NO ... NO ... NO ... HELL, NO!"

Naively, I continued to petition them with deference and courtesy, hoping against hope that, at some point in time, the base commander would call me up and say, "Hey, Jerry, we have a little down time on such and such date. Come to the gate and our base archaeologist will run your team in there for a day and see if we can locate that inscription. Your research is commendable, glad we could assist!"

Well, so much for fantasy. Now the choices were truly limited: Forget about this critical phase of the '49ers' odyssey and be content with armchair research? Or contemplate the unimaginable -- unlawful entry?

Never in my life had I knowingly broken the law. But to actually see Papoose Lake -- a place of monumental importance to those struggling emigrants. To behold, with my own eyes, the rumored 1849 inscription in Nye Canyon.

According to pioneer journals, seven inscriptions were carved along their meandering trail, from Utah to Death valley. I personally discovered one and have seen all but this singular etching. The siren call was deafening ... and, ultimately, irresistible.

In December, the SUN's McCall had covered our team's month-long expedition to follow the tragic route of this wagon train and I was impressed with his competent style of journalism.

I felt it was necessary to establish a link with the media, just in case the wild rumors about trespassers disappearing were true. More importantly, I wanted the public to know there was nothing sinister about my intentions. My only firepower was map and compass ... and for those who would question my patriotism, I will say this: I respect my flag, I worship this country and I would give my life in its defense.

A cellular phone was included with my gear. I would use it to keep Doyle, my wife Donna and the Las Vegas SUN informed of my progress. If arrest appeared imminent, I would broadcast my position and circumstances. In no way would I flee or resist detainment.

The base is rumored to be protected by ex-Navy Seals and Delta Force personnel. Should I vanish into thin air, a victim of excessive military exuberance, the government would have to extend a reasonable explanation.

Admittedly, seeking McCall's confidence was risky. I did not know him well and he was only a phone call away from having me arrested. I often trust my instincts when judging people and fortunately, I called this one right.

Leaving the safety of public land, the clarity of the full moon dissipated my feats. Confidence surged with my stride, as it always does when I'm alone in the wilderness.

By dawn, I was nearing a nameless pass, which referencing my calculations, would place me above a waypoint of critical importance for the success of this trip: Cane Spring ... and its life-sustaining pool of fresh water.

Wednesday morning, April 23, 1997



Signs forbid trespassing at the Nevada Test Site.

The steep face of Skull Mountain yields to a series of fractured ridges near its eastern end. I patiently climbed each one, the effort draining my canteens. According to my map, I had one final highland to climb before reaching a small, barren valley. From there, it would be a short, sweet dash to the spring.

Shading my eyes against the morning glare, I elected to aim for a protective stand of Joshua trees near the peak. I would have breakfast there, perhaps sleep a while.

Nearing the summit ridge, I became careless. Ten hours of hiking through rugged and uninhabited land lulled me into a false sense of well being. Scrambling to the top, I foolishly stood upright, my mind in the food bag.

I stopped dead in my tracks. There before me, swallowing up the entire valley, lay an eerie, strange facility, unlike anything I had ever seen before. In awe, I dropped to my knees and slipped into the cactus.

Removing my pack and grabbing the binoculars, I tunneled through the barbed vegetation for a better view. What in heaven's name was I looking at here? Had I misread my map? Crawling back to retrieve my compass, I carefully triangulated my position. No! The only thing that was supposed to be in that valley was barren rock.

I coined the place "The City of the Dead," because it appeared to be abandoned and initially I could see only bizarre-looking structures and portable trailers. The entire valley was filled with them.

Focusing my glasses to my right and directly down the valley, I detected my first signs of life: a guard at his station, his small white pickup parked nearby. Scanning left, I

spotted a moving vehicle. Then another. To the north, I saw two more. Good grief, they were everywhere!

All of these fixtures and the people securing them stood directly astride my path into Cane Spring.

Retreating beneath the protective mantle of my cactus "hideaway," I pulled provisions from my pack and prepared breakfast: Spam and apple slices. Repacking, I smoothed the ground beneath me, arranged my bulky gear as a headrest and turned in. Sleep would come soon, it had been a long night.

I was awakened by the dreaded clatter of helicopter blades. I lay still and listened as the ominous sound reverberated across the summit ridge, only to quickly die away. A check of my watch showed 3 p.m. I had slept nearly five hours.

Crawling to the edge of the shelter, I weighed my options. An immediate run for the spring was out of the question. I must wait for the protective cover of night. Even then, the formidable security below was going to make this crossing extremely difficult.

Perhaps I should backtrack and bypass the "city." Studying the terrain with the binoculars, I realized I would have to scale the height of Skull Mountain itself to do it. This would mean steep ascents, with marginal visibility across unfamiliar ground. Water was a major consideration also, I needed some NOW!

Wednesday night, April 23, 1997

When it was pitch black, I began to move. I didn't wait for the moon, darkness was my friend. Immediately and without warning, a forest of light poles near the valley floor turned blood-red before bursting into brilliant incandescence.

I would adhere to a geometric axiom: The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. The "line" would lead to a castle-shaped edifice near the northern end of the valley. So much for axioms. What should have been a 45-minute stroll became a five-hour ordeal of heart-stopping suspense. I felt like a bad actor in a prison-break movie.

Armed guards were everywhere. Checking gates, circling structures, winding their way along the dirt roads that weaved in and out of my hiding places. I held my breath as powerful lights lit up the surrounding brush, raced for better cover when they faded. Did they suspect my presence? Had McCall picked up that phone?

Near the middle of the valley, I was curiously drawn to one particular building, which seemed to attract an inordinate number of visits from security. It was nondescript really, constructed of block and surrounded with chain link. A single window, too high to peer into, emitted a radiant pulsing glow.

Slipping past the gray-stuccoed "castle," I zeroed in on a narrow saddle, cradling the only paved road through the pass. Scrambling toward the top, I began to feel uneasy. Something was not right. I lay motionless, straining to hear over the night wind, its strength intensifying the higher I climbed. I moved with care, stopping every few minutes to look and listen. Reaching the summit, I found myself at the edge of a clearing.

Most of it was blanketed in shadow, the surrounding cliffs shielding the moon's glow. I raised my field glasses, light enhancement more important to me now than magnification. There, not 30 feet away, was a security vehicle, its lights out, its engine running. The wind has masked its sound as I approached. I staggered backward, nearly smashing the binoculars as I sought cover. Dropping below his level of sight, I circled behind him. A few minutes later, his headlights flooded the clearing and he was gone.

Dragging myself out of the dirt, I sighed with relief to finally be alone. Checking my position, I was less than a half-mile from water. A straight shot down this canyon and I was home free.

It narrowed as I descended, forcing me to stay uncomfortably close to the paved road. Just when I thought the worst was behind me, I came upon an elaborate barricade barring vehicle entrance to the northern end of this weird complex. It was lit up like a Christmas tree and surrounded by a cacophonous din that grew louder the closer I came. Studying it with the binoculars, I realized I could easily walk around the barricade and that the noise was coming from its power source: a generator! A ponderous, gasoline driven behemoth on wheels.

Working clockwise, enormous strobe lights alternately turned points of the compass into day before switching instantly to another location. Who were they expecting?

I proceeded cautiously around the left side, timing the light sequences in order to circumvent them. Moving only when the strobes were pointed away, lying flat beneath scant cover when they explosively illuminated my position.

When finally clear, I yielded to the temptation to read the posted entrance sign:

"NO TRESPASSING, VIOLATORS WILL BE PROSECUTED. CAMERA EXCLUSION AREA, BADGED PERSONNEL ONLY. NO FIREARMS, CAMERAS, PHONES OR BINOCULARS. BY ORDER OF THE L.A.N.L.L. CORPORATION."

A week later, safely ensconced in my study, I would learn what the L.A.N.L.L. Corporation stood for: Los Alamos National Laboratories Limited. They're the people who gave us the mother of all government secrets: the Manhattan Project, which resulted in the development of the atomic bomb. I shuddered to think what these guys were working on now.

Thursday morning, April 24, 1997, 3 a.m.



This an abandoned shack where Freeman spent the night during his trek.

Dead tired, I curled up inside the abandoned, ramshackle miner's cabin near the tree-shaded spring that saved the lives of the Death Valley '49ers so long ago.

I slept soundly for six hours. About mid-morning, still groggy, I cooked up breakfast: chicken with rice. Because Cane Spring was my only source of water, I knew I must return here on the homeward-bound leg of this expedition. I decided to store some of my provisions. Filling my canteens from the cave, I started out, hugging the north side of Mount Salyer, descending remote canyons for cover.

Traveling during the day was not without risk. Originally, the plan was to confine movement to darkness. Only when I reached Papoose Lake and the Nye Canyon region would I dare the daylight hours.

But, after the "City of the Dead" fiasco, I was a day behind. No choice. Daylight it would have to be. If I avoided travel corridors and remained deep within the buffer regions, my chances of going undetected would be good.

Thursday afternoon, April 24, 1997, 3 p.m.

Mid-afternoon found me near the west side of Frenchman Flat, the site of much nuclear testing in bygone days. Brush was becoming scarce and I was fast approaching a building complex at the edge of the lake that certainly would be occupied. A huge blue-and-white hangar dominated the skyline. Fearing another encounter with armed guards, I altered my track westward.

One-tenth of a mile later, my path was blocked by a barbed wire fence. It was in disrepair and appeared very old. Did they graze cattle in pre-nuclear days? Affixed to a single pole was an ominous warning: DANGER: POTENTIAL CRATER AREA, KEEP OUT.



Signs around the Nevada Test site warn of the dangers left by the facility's years of nuclear testing.

I knew about this place. Atomic tests had been conducted underground and their awesome power left gaping, substratum voids that could suddenly subside beneath the unsuspecting. It's always something.

I gazed across the fence, fear beginning to cool my resolve. What were the mechanics of subsidence, anyway? Would it be a seething crescendo of avalanching rock and sand that would catapult me into nothingness? Or would it be a quiet surprise, a sudden drop through an eggshell crust, a moment of weightlessness, a silent rocket ride to plutonium hell?

One fact was certain: There would be no guards inside this perimeter. Cutting a stout limb from a Manzanita for a probe, I scaled the wire.

Treading lightly, I chuckled out loud at the sudden recollection of my meeting with Ken McCall a few days ago. Spreading the maps out on the table, his fingers traced the proposed route and came to an abrupt halt. "Plutonium Valley?" he said. He looked up with raised eyebrows and deliberately enunciated each syllable. "You're going into Pluton-i-um Valley?"

Well, actually I wasn't, but this little side trip to "crater land" sounded equally ill-advised.

Fortunately, I crossed safely. The surface bulged in places, but the footing was firm. I gave one section a wide berth, because it lacked vegetation. Its center appeared to be pure sand. I chucked a number of baseball-size rocks as far as possible, and they disappeared without a trace.

Thursday night, April 24, 1997

Came upon a ship "stranded" in the desert. I think it was a trawler, slated for atomic destruction and postmortem analysis, but it didn't happen for one reason or another. I spent the night on its decrepit stern. Cruise anyone?

Friday morning, April 25, 1997

Just past the "ship," I crossed out of the Department of Energy's jurisdiction and into the Air Force's sacrosanct Nellis Air Force Base Bombing Gunnery Range. I could feel the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. This was "The Dark Side of the Moon," or as one government archaeologist told me in whispered reverence, the "black hole." I had crossed an invisible line into a "nonexistent" area.

Here was the proving ground of the supersonic Aurora fighter plane and, most mysteriously, the rumored homeland of the Air Force's fabled collection of alien spacecraft, stored in nine hangars beneath Papoose Lake's alkaline shore. A top-secret realm, I'm told, bristling with underground sensors that detect an intruder's presence immediately, and, if the transgressor is so foolish as to continue, he is certain of a passport to oblivion.

Late in the afternoon, I ascended a high, isolated ridge near Nye Canyon and cooked my supper before dark. I wanted no illumination after sunset. Tuna, cheese tortillas and hot chocolate.

I'm down to a quart of water.

Friday, April 25, 1997, dusk

I have discovered my phone link to the outside world has a glitch: It doesn't work. Most of this strange land is without phone signals. Apparently, Pac-Bell is not allowed in here either. Getting through on a cellular phone is possible only from a few places. High ones. Like here. Unfortunately, I needed to be higher still.

The ridge I was on narrowed in a steep ascent toward its precipitous top, about 500 feet above my encampment. Climbing it in daylight would be rigorous, ascending it in

darkness courted disaster. But I needed to communicate, if only to alleviate the fears of those who waited.

A question I've frequently been asked concerns the use of the phone: Couldn't the authorities trace my position when I called? Apparently not. The convoluted nature of the geography and the vagaries of bouncing signals meant that a quick trace was nearly impossible. I'm not suggesting, of course, that a communications command center in the middle of Area 51 could be operated with impunity.

We kept our conversations brief and used a simplified code system. The word "mall," for instance, referred to "test site." Any numbers pertained to percentage of mission accomplished. "OK at 50" meant half the journey was completed.

Friday night, April 25, 9 p.m.

Leaving the bulk of my gear behind, I clipped on my phone, secured my rope and emergency blanket and began climbing by starlight. The moon would not rise until midnight. I reached the summit boulders a little after 10 p.m. Except for a few scrapes and bruises, I was largely intact.

I immediately punched in Doyle's number. Eureka! He picked up on the first ring. I told him I was "OK at 50." We moved the exit day back to Monday night, April 28. The "code red" day was moved to Wednesday night, April 30. If I was not out by midnight on the 30th, I probably wasn't coming out. I was either lost, hurt, captured or dead.

One fact was certain: Doyle would comply with his instructions. In 30 years of check-pointing my expeditions, he had never failed to be where he was supposed to be, when he was supposed to be there. Loyal Doyle.

Called Donna, told her I loved her. Hearing unusual beeping sounds, we cut the call short. Left message on Lee Bergthold's machine: "Yo friend, OK at 50." Phoned McCall at the Las Vegas SUN: "Hi Ken, Jerry at the `mall' looking for jewelry (the 1849 inscription) at 50 percent. Low on water, keep the faith."

At last, I reached out over a thousand miles to a climbing buddy in the northwest, Gary Colvin. He suspected where I was, even though all I said was "Hi, newt. I'm deep in the forest, better go."

I bedded down on a narrow ledge just below the summit. Tied myself off, just in case. The emergency blanket kept me lukewarm, but the sleeping arrangements hardly made for a comfortable night.

Sometime during the climb to the summit, my scabbard broke and my knife is gone.

Saturday morning, April 26, 1997

At first light, I climbed down off my "telecommunications perch" and recovered my gear. Then proceeded to penetrate deeper and higher into "Dreamland," generally following the ridges that paralleled Nye Canyon. I never dropped into it en route, fearing detection, but my obsessive pursuit of high ground consumed precious time and energy.

But WOW! At 10:30 in the morning, I lay beneath downed cactus trees on a windswept ridge overlooking the most restricted place on Earth: Papoose Lake, the very soul of "Dreamland."

The aliens appeared to be in short supply. So were the ex-Navy Seals, who were supposed to be protecting this place. North of my position, I occasionally caught sight of the Black Hawk helicopter, chasing the tourists away from the Air Force's front door near Groom Lake.

That night as I lay awake in the darkness, high above that ancient playa, I half expected a "close encounter of the third kind," but no such luck. Hale-Bopp gleamed in the northwest, the comet's remarkable brilliance strengthened by the clear desert air. Near the mountainous side of Papoose I saw lights. Security vehicles? Hangar doors opening and closing?

I don't profess to know. My purpose for intruding here was not to document UFO sightings. Nor was I here to compromise national security.

Still, some of my closest friends voiced serious reservations about this expedition. One characterized my intrusion as "evil" and hinted darkly of grave consequences for my heavenly salvation should I not alter the coordinates on my moral compass.

Bruce Larrick, who check-pointed the unrestricted portions of the '49er expedition, pulled me aside one day and told me: "Hey, pal, what part of NO don't you understand?"

My wife believed, in the event of my arrest, the '49er team's credibility would be lessened and our previous accomplishments jeopardized. She also felt I was selfishly undertaking a risk that could, conceivably, have fatal consequences. Guards here carry automatic weapons.

Well, I must admit, my reasoning is probably a bit muddled, but my conscience remains clear.

Secretary of Defense William Cohen, in a commencement address to the Air Force Academy's graduating class of 1997, proclaimed: "We must learn from the past by extending the 'lighthouse' of history."

My only purpose for being in this forbidden land is to pay homage to our past. To hold aloft that "lighthouse" for those brave men and women who forged this great nation's

heritage. How ironic that, 150 years after they passed, I'm desperately dodging my own country's militia, just to see the places where they labored so valiantly. These were not military people. These were not mountain men. They were just people, like you and me, dreaming of a better life for their husbands, wives and babies.

That innocuous lake bed below me was of pivotal importance to their survival. After journeying nearly 2,000 miles since leaving the verdant corn fields of the Midwest, 100 men, women and children gathered together here for the last time. Following contentious debate, their remarkable cohesion shattered, never to be mended. On the morning of Dec. 2, 1849, nearly half the wagon train, led by the Jayhawkers and Briers, broke away to the west in a desperate attempt to escape the wilderness. Topography would soon force them south into the deepest driest valley in the western hemisphere, a land the Indians fearfully called "Tomesha," land of ground afire.

A geographical wonder, now known throughout the world as Death Valley, and whose name can be directly attributed to those lost emigrants of long ago.

The remaining '49ers stayed four more days beside Papoose Lake's sterile shoreline, while scouting for an escape route. On Dec. 6, they loaded their meager possessions and drove their oxen south toward what is now known as Nye Canyon. One of them carved the date in the canyon wall, marking their passage.

In my pocket, I carried a weathered photograph, taken more than 50 years ago, of that inscription. Would I find it?

Saturday, April 26, noon

A long, last look at Papoose and I began my descent into Nye Canyon to search for the inscription. I was to be crushingly disappointed. There were so many canyon walls, I was just not able to locate it, despite my photograph. If only I had two more quarts of water, to allow me one more day to search.

I did find something, which partially soothed my chagrin and could possibly be of equal significance: an oxen shoe. I have never seen one outside the confines of a museum. Only the '49ers, to my knowledge, ever drove a yoke of oxen through this wild and hostile canyon.

Climbing out of Nye Canyon, I had a close call with a rattlesnake. Fortunately, I saw it first. Usually, when I encounter a rattler in the back country, we're both eager to avoid each other. This one, however, was not intimidated by my presence in the least. To be bitten here, so deep in the wilds, could prove lethal. I gave him a wide berth.

By nightfall, my situation was becoming dangerous. I was completely out of water, with 22 miles between me and Cane Spring. I attempted to call Doyle at 10 to advise him of my predicament; but phone was useless, the batteries dead.

I decided to leave all but the essentials, which meant leaving my \$200 binoculars as well as my phone, extra canteen, sleeping and cooking gear, extra clothes and provisions. I would travel light and fast as soon as the moon cleared the horizon.

Lying in darkness above Papoose Lake, I waited anxiously for the moon to light my way. I can honestly say, without guilt or hesitation, that, for the first time in a long time, I was genuinely afraid. Not of losing my way or injuring myself, but from a latent dread of not reaching water.

By 1 a.m., I was homeward bound, aiming for a light far in the distance that marked a Department of Energy structure near Frenchman Flat.

Before I had traveled two hours, my mouth had dried shut. No spit, complete cotton mouth. Ten miles further, at dawn, I entered the Department of Energy's Atomic Waste Storage Yard. With the rising sun at my back, I evaded security and located a hose on the side of a building. It was live. I drank deeply, replenished my canteens and slipped beneath a mobile trailer. I drained both containers, crawled back out, refilled and disappeared into the desert.

Sunday morning, April 27, 1997, 8 a.m.

I shook my head in amazement at my good fortune as I stole away from the atomic disposal yard. God, that water tasted great. It would not have mattered if the guard had been "locking and loading" as I approached. I would have walked right up to him, hands over my head. Thirst is such a frightening and insidious need.

Today, writing in the comfort of my study, my craving for water seems so remote. Yet this powerful need, above all else, weaves itself like a single thread throughout my narrative.

On shorter trips in the desert, or longer ones in the Sierras, water rarely concerned me. It was just a convenience, flowing in a stream nearby or stored in the jeep back at the trailhead, to be used with little regard to its abundance or scarcity. It was always secondary to the exploration of secluded terrain, to viewing of fresh vistas, to the thrill of reaching the summit of an isolated, seldom-climbed peak.

Not on this trip. The craving for water or, more precisely, the fear of not finding it threatened at times to consume me, banishing thoughts of anything else.

And I was only in the wilderness for a week! The poor '49ers agonized here for nearly a month, struggling across a wasteland as barren and desolate as any on the North American continent.

My daughters Jennifer and Holly, along with filmmakers Clay Campbell and Allan Smith, who helped me track the emigrants on all but this forbidden segment of the trail, marveled at their tenacity and perseverance.

Being mothers themselves, Holly and Jennifer found the plight of the pioneer women almost too difficult to imagine: "How could they have possibly provided enough nourishment and warmth for their babies?" they asked.

One of those brave women, Juliet Brier, reminisced years later about her efforts to save her three small boys:

"Many times I felt that I should faint and, as my strength departed, I would sink on my knees. The boys would ask for water, but there was not a drop. ... Night came, and we lost all track of those ahead. I would get down on my knees and look in the starlight for the ox tracks, and then we would stumble on."

Sadly, this remarkable woman lies in an unmarked grave in Lodi, Calif., her exploits largely unknown by the American public.

Sunday morning, April 27, 11 a.m.

Nearing the Mercury highway, I had an extremely close call with security. Approaching through sparse brush, I had not seen a single vehicle. As it was Sunday, I felt my chances of traversing in daylight were good.

Preparing to cross, I could see down the road to the left for miles, so I was not too concerned about traffic surprising me from that direction. But to the right, the road topped a hill hardly a quarter of a mile away. Crouching and half running, I kept my eyes right of center and mentally picked out a small Manzanita bush, near the berm on my side of the road, that might provide some cover just in case. Nearing the road, I broke into a full run. When I was within 10 feet of the pavement, a security pickup topped the hill.

Exhaling an "expletive deleted," I dove at a right angle beneath the slim branches of the Manzanita. I threw my pack off and shoved it forward, fell flat on my belly and waited. Not more than 10 seconds elapsed before he roared by, none the wiser. As soon as he disappeared, I grabbed my pack and sprinted across the road.

Trekking with dogged determination, I made Cane Spring two hours before dusk. Despite my thirst, I circled above the cave and lay concealed in heavy brush till dark, to be certain I was alone. As I lay undercover, Mount Salyer at my back and the spring before me, I was struck by a strange coincidence:

Forty-niner scout Lewis Manly, describing his finding of this precious spring in his century-old account, "Death Valley in '49," stated:

*"Fearing ambush (from Indians), we approached carefully and cautiously, making a circuit around, so as to get between the hut and the hill."
Nearly 150 years later, there I lay, "fearing ambush."*

After drinking my fill, I recovered the food I had cached on Thursday. Canned chicken for dinner (opening can was accomplished tediously, with a nail and a rock), crackers and chocolate milk, no fire.

Inside the shredded cabin, I wrapped my emergency blanket around me and waited for the cover of night and the navigational aid of a full moon.

Monday morning, April 28, 1997, 2 a.m.

Just as soon as the moon rose, I began my "run for the border." The first obstacle was "The City of the Dead." I decided to avoid it. I stole quietly past the elaborate front gate and entered a rocky, brushy canyon, leading into the northeast end of Skull Mountain. Hours later, I could see the "City" gleaming far below. Focusing my glasses, I could just make out my earlier path to the spring.

If I live to be 100, I will never forget that pulse-pounding night of playing hide-and-seek with shadowy men carrying weapons of war.

Daybreak found me on the broad, craggy top of Skull Mountain. In the distance, I could see the notch in the Specter Range what marked my entrance into this remote land a week earlier.

My spirits and confidence soared, and I had to remind myself I was hardly out of the woods. I could not afford to relax on this trip ... EVER! No lazy hiker's ambling, head down, eyes focused on the immediate terrain.

Repeatedly, I told myself to stay alert. Don't clear a ridge without stealth, even under the cover of night. Turn around frequently. Stop, listen, look for reflections, stay away from man-made objects and anything that did not appear natural.

I had a deathly fear of helicopters and small places. Twice during the journey, I hit the deck, only to sheepishly regain my footing, after I spotted on the horizon an approaching hawk and mistook it for a helicopter, whose distinctive clatter I had not heard.

I have no military training. My clothing blended well with the terrain I was in, but I wore no camouflage fatigues, and no black makeup adorned my countenance. I am too old for that "Rambo" shit: 55 now and afflicted with prostate cancer (currently in remission).

God blessed me with a sturdy frame and the ability to feel as comfortable in the back country as I am in my living room. Otherwise, I'm a pretty ordinary guy.

Knowing the distant notch would soon disappear from my sight as I descended Skull Mountain, I locked my position in on the fly and thought of Donna as I tracked rapidly through the brush. I whispered a silent promise to the woman I love so much that, if the good Lord sees me safely through this one, my "cloak and dagger" days are over. I intend to be the consummate gardener, perhaps teach a bit and spend my remaining days watching over my precious grandchildren.

Broke for lunch, same meal as breakfast: pistachio nuts, raisins and water. By 1 o'clock in the afternoon, I was nearing the last obstacle before the border: the paved road that serves as the principal artery connecting substations to the northwest and Mercury to the east.

The road was busy, and I belly-crawled most of the last half mile in a sandy wash, which gave me some cover. At 500 yards, I considered waiting until dark. Having trekked more than 100 arduous miles, across some of the most rugged and desolate land I had ever encountered, I didn't want to get careless now, less than three miles from the perimeter.

But dusk was nearly seven hours away and water was again growing short, although certainly not dangerously short. Hell, I just wanted out. I wanted to shake hands with someone who wouldn't shoot me first.

Two hundred yards to go. I crawled and crawled, stopping only when cars could see directly down the wash as they passed. At 100 feet, I took off, with no vehicles in sight. Reaching the road's other side, I found myself running up a slight incline, which led to a jagged ridge. I stopped and turned about half way to the top and realized that, due to the paucity of brush, my exposure was severe. Before I could ponder further, a black truck exploded into view.

I dropped like a stone, but I knew, if the driver was looking my way, he must have seen me ... I was less than 200 feet away. I saw no brake lights, and his vehicle raced on, shimmering as it slowly faded in the bright desert sheen.

I ran up the hill, not looking back, and threw myself over the crest. I lay in sweat-drenched fatigue, sipping the remnants of my canteen.

I didn't think he was a guard -- most drove small white pickups -- but that didn't mean he would not soon notify authorities. Double-timing it till I neared the perimeter, I cautiously climbed what I knew would be the last ridge. Was security waiting for me at the pick-up point? I peeked over the top and caught sight of a white vehicle. I hid my gear and looked again. It was Doyle.

As I strode down the hill, safely on public land, my brother met me with extended hand, and I was almost too overcome to speak. We walked back to his car in silence.

Neither of us knew what to say. I leaned against his car in exhaustion. "Was this a mistake, Doyle?"

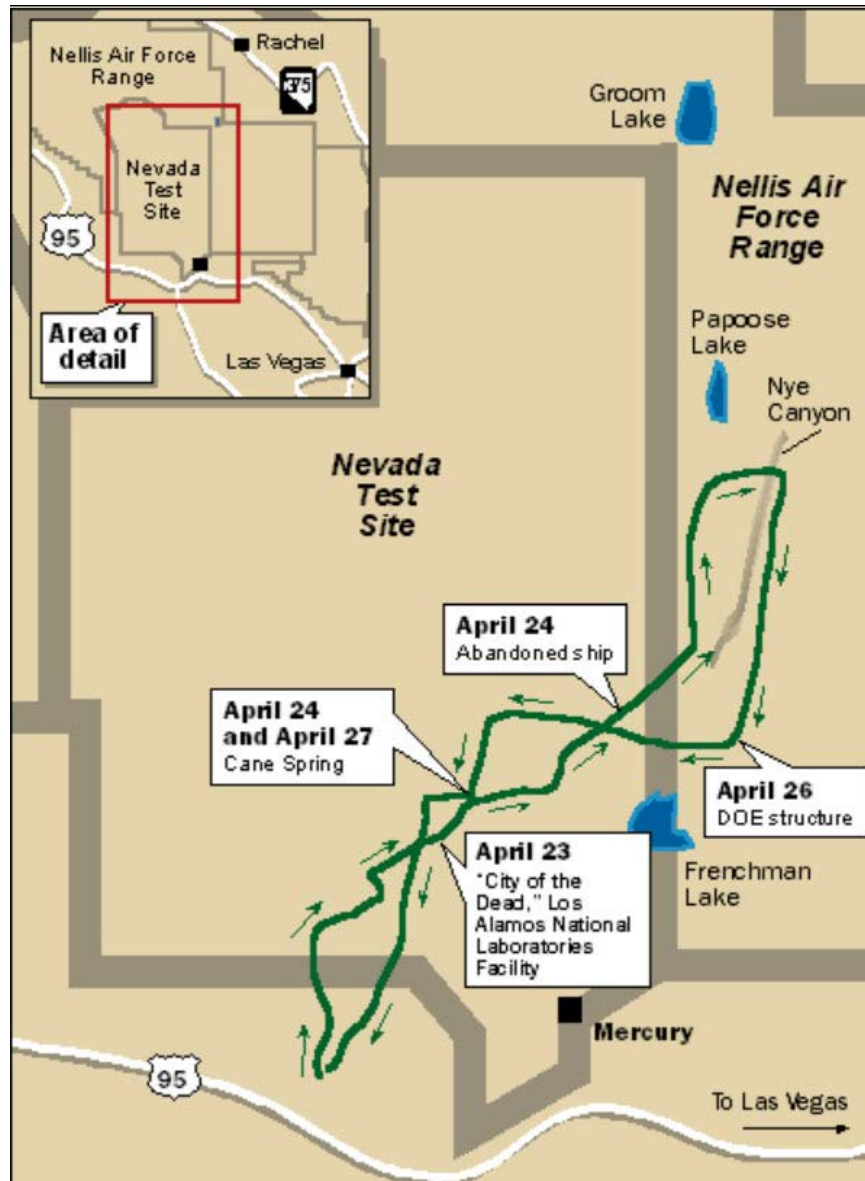
He didn't reply. Instead, he reached over and carefully pulled one of my canteens from its canvas sheath and raised it aloft.

"This wasn't a mistake, Jerry, this was your 'mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore' statement."

We agreed we would dedicate this expedition to a forgotten segment of American society: the quiet people who foot the bill for those \$500 toilet seats. People who never break the law, rarely protest anything, pay their taxes faithfully and only ask in exchange honesty and accountability from the leaders that serve them.

Our government, and especially the Air Force, too often treats us individually with disdain, dismisses us with form letters and has the audacity to deny access to our heritage by just smugly saying, "HELL, NO!" Not for any other reason except the absolute power to do so.

Well, for all those "quiet Americans" out there, this expedition was for you ... YES, YES, YES ... HELL, YES!



This is the route taken by archaeologist Jerry Freeman on his seven-day, 100-mile unauthorized trek into highly restricted government territory.

-- Jerry Freeman's account is copyrighted and used with his permission. This account, published in the Las Vegas Sun, was retrieved from the Internet Archive on September 17, 2022, reassembled and converted to a single PDF file.