

THE VALLEY OF DEATH.

DR. MERRIAM TELLS WHAT GOVERNMENT SURVEYORS SAW.

Death Valley, the Terror of Wandering Immigrants in Eastern California and Southwestern Nevada, Described by One Who Has Traveled There.

Dr. C. Hart Merriam, chief of a government biological survey which has been working for months in Death valley, is in the city. Dr. Merriam has studied closely the strange region of which so much has been said, and he is the first in the city qualified to speak of the valley. He has camped within the glare of its salt beds, has felt its intolerable heat and viewed its splendid desolation, and has faced its scorching blasts of wind and red hot sand that rage between the towering black mountains which wall the silent chasm.

He has been in the midst of its death dealing elements, has tasted of its poisoned wells, and has forced his way over its treacherous sands, and over ground that crumbled beneath the weight of man or horse. He told the story of his adventures to a reporter last night.

"The valley and its lowering black walls of barren rock," he said, "are weird and strangely sublime in their desolation. For miles and miles the curious mountains may be seen outlined against the clear sky. From the top of Telescope peak, the highest of the Panamint or western range which shuts the valley in, one may look down a dizzy black precipice 12,000 feet to the level of the valley, as white as snow.

Stretching from the mountain's foot are the glistening fields of salt. Here and there are running streams of salt and mineral waters. To drink of them is to die. The view is closed in by the gloomy cliffs of the Funeral mountains, which form an impenetrable barrier at the east of the canyon. The scene is one of violent contrasts of glaring whites and dead blacks.

WHERE NATURE IS AWFUL.

"The valley is the most barren and the lowest of a series in eastern California and southwestern Nevada. At a rough estimate it is about 150 feet below the level of the sea. It runs generally north and south, although its worst region turns to the northwest. This portion has been named Mesquite valley.

"It is a region far worse than Death valley proper. The valley may be compared to the Grand canyon of the Colorado. It is rather an immense chasm than a valley. It is about 140 miles long, and at its broadest part is only eighteen miles wide. In some parts it is no more than fifteen miles in width.

"In this frightful place, baked and blistered by the intolerable heat, holding within itself innumerable elements of death, revealing strange aspects of natural desolation, our party has been at work for months.

"On either side of the valley, stretching almost its entire length, is a range of mountains, absolutely barren of animal and vegetable life. The western range is the Panamint, averaging in height about 9,000 feet. The eastern range is the Funeral, a suggestive and not unfit name. The Funeral mountains rise fully 7,000 feet above the level of the sea.

"These mountains are black, with the exception of curious patches of red rock. Away to the north is Mount Magruder. Beyond in the distance rise the heights of the Sierras. Almost at the southern limit of the valley is Mount Ivanwatch. Behind it is the 'Devil's Playground,' a region of absolute barrenness.

"Down the valley a hot, suffocating wind blows with terrific velocity. In its course through the stricken region it gathers a black cloud of hot, shifting sand that has blinded many an unwary horse and rider. Under the glistening beds of crystallized salt in places are running streams of salt water. Beneath these is still another bed of salt.

"In other parts of the valley are wastes of hot sand drawn in some places into high mounds by the whirling blasts that sweep down the canyon. There, too, is the most curious earth I have seen—self raising earth it has been called. As far as the eye can see it appears in curving outline, up and down, as if puffed by a natural yeast. The unfortunate animal that steps upon the little hills will crush through, for they are not much more than fragile crusts.

"Still stranger is that section of the valley which for want of a better name is called salt earth. Innumerable pinnacles, tapering to points as fine as needles and over a foot long, rise in close array from the ground. They are as hard as stone and as dangerous as sharpened steel. Beneath and hidden by them are pitfalls, a tumble into which means a broken leg or arm. Then, too, are the rich fields of borax, which have lured many a man to death.

"Dreadful as is Death valley, its northwestern arm, Mesquite valley, is worse. All of the water upon its surface is poison. The wind has thrown the sand into immense mounds, one of which is three miles long and 500 feet high. It was in this valley that the immigrants lost their lives. Water may be obtained only by digging deep wells, and then it is none too pure.

PLANTS AND ANIMALS FOUND.

"Our party, the biological survey of the United States government, has been in the valley for months. The general purpose of the department of agriculture, under which we work, is to collect facts relating to the distribution of species with variations of temperature and humidity throughout the United States, and particularly in the western part. The results obtained will be of the utmost value to agriculture, for they will save millions of dollars spent in experiment by farmers who wish to test the capacity and character of their land.

"We have found that in certain zones certain flora and fauna flourish. Each zone has its peculiar species which will not flourish in others. These zones are both horizontal and vertical.

"The party chose the desolate region of Death valley for its labors, for from it and not far distant can be traced the seven zones we have established. The valley, notwithstanding its barren elements, has many phases of life.

"It has thirty or forty species of animals and fully as many of vegetable growth. Nothing, of course, will live on the salt or borax bottoms, but on the edges of these districts various hardy plants thrive. In the sand wastes are gophers, mice, bats and many other animals and not a few reptiles.

"Many theories have been advanced to account for the formation of Death valley. I think it quite probable that it was once the sink of the Mojave river.

"Our trip has been an interesting one. One of my rides in tracing the course of the subsonoran zone, a region similar to the Mexican state of Sonora, was 1,700 miles in length."—San Francisco Chronicle.