



History of Mineral County

Mineral County, Nevada, was created out of the northern portion of Esmeralda County on February 10, 1911. Nevada's earliest maps show the presence of Walker Lake, a prominent feature of Mineral County and a noted landmark to early explorers. Jedediah Smith, first non-native explorer into Nevada, passed near Walker Lake in 1827 during his remarkable trip from west to east across the state. Peter Skene Ogden, another noted earlier explorer of the region now known as The Great Basin, was here in 1829, then Fremont in 1845 with his guides Kit Carson and Joseph Walker, for whom the lake was named.

The town site of Hawthorne was selected in 1880 by H.M. Yerington, president of the Carson and Colorado Railroad Company as a division and distribution point for the new railroad. Yerington named the new town Hawthorne after a lumberman friend in Carson City. On April 14, 1881, the first train arrived at the town's site, loaded with prospective buyers for the new town. Hawthorne's location, at the southern end of Walker Lake, was adjacent to the important Knapp's Station and Ferry Landing on the busy Esmeralda toll road from Wadsworth to Candelaria. Radiating roads ran to all of the surrounding mining areas, adding importance to this area and its development as distribution point. In its early years the county had many well known mining towns such as Aurora, Belleville, Candelaria, Rawhide and others congregated to exchange merchandise and news. In 1883, Hawthorne took the Esmeralda county seat from declining Aurora, but later lost it to booming Goldfield. In 1911, Hawthorne again became a county seat, this time for the newly formed Mineral County.





In 1926, a destructive munitions explosion in the east caused the United States military to explore alternative, relatively remote sites for the storage of explosives. In 1930, the U.S. Navy selected the Hawthorne-Whiskey Flat portion of the lower Walker Lake Valley as the site for its ammunition depot. The storage facilities grew over the years and became the Navy's largest such munitions facility. The town of Babbitt was subsequently built on the northern edge of the facility to house military personnel. The town of Hawthorne underwent significant growth due to this facility. The County's total population expanded from 1,863 persons in 1930 to 5,560 by 1950 and eventually peaked at 7,051 persons by 1970. During the 1980's and 1990's the depot's activities declined.

Presently, Hawthorne is a central point for desert travelers and for the vacation, sporting, and recreational activities on nearby Walker Lake. Walker lake, along with Pyramid Lake located in Washoe County to the north, represents one of two remaining lake remnants of Ice Age Lake Lahontan, which some 12,500 years ago covered approximately 8,600 square miles and a large portion of northwestern Nevada. Due to upstream irrigation diversions and drought, Walker Lake's surface elevation and volume have declined significantly since the early 1900's, increasing the salinity of the lake's waters and jeopardizing its fishery.

Mineral County is also home to the Walker River Paiute Indian Reservation, which occupies over 200,000 acres and is located in the northwestern portion of Mineral County, spilling over to the north into Churchill County and to the west into Lyon County. Although the area around Walker Lake in the Utah Territory was set-aside for "Indian Purposes" in 1859, it was not until 15 years later that President Grant signed the executive order formally establishing the Walker River Indian Reservation on March 19, 1874. In 1906, after many years of pressure from state and federal government officials, and particularly local mining interests, the Walker River Paiute Tribe ceded 268,000 acres of reservation land to the federal government, including all lands surrounding Walker Lake. It was first believed that the ceded lands contained extensive mineral deposits, although later exploration failed to find significant ore bodies. Later, on several occasions the federal government added to the reservation lands, first in 1918 (34,000 acres), then again in 1928 (69,000 acres), and finally in 1936 (171,200 acres), eventually increasing the reservation's total acreage to its current level of 232,902 acres.

Mineral County is located in the west-central portion of Nevada and borders the State of California on the southwest. Mineral County is the sixth smallest county in Nevada, covers approximately 4,019 square miles, (9,938 square kilometers) and accounts for approximately 3.5 percent of Nevada's total surface area of 110,540 square miles (285,298 square kilometers).



Of Mineral County's 2,572,160 acres of surface area, 2,091,422 acres, or just over 81.3 percent of the county's total area are controlled and managed by the federal government. Of these federally managed public lands, approximately 382,499 acres are managed by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). The USFS managed lands include a portion of the Toiyabe National Forest, which covers much of the southernmost portion of Mineral County. Relative to Nevada's seventeen counties, Mineral County ranks as the eighth highest in terms of its percentage of federal land ownership and fifth lowest in terms of the actual area of federal ownership.

