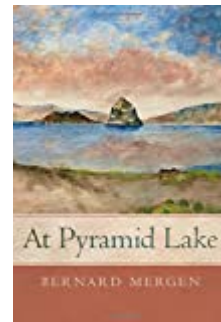




**Bernard Mergen.** *At Pyramid Lake.* Reno: University of Nevada Press, April 8, 2014. xiv + 292 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87417-939-2.



**Reviewed by** Erik Altenbernd

**Published on** H-Environment (December, 2014)

**Commissioned by** David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

There are at least nine different water bodies named Pyramid Lake in the United States today. The Pyramid Lake chronicled by Bernard Mergen in this volume is the Pyramid Lake located in western Nevada roughly forty miles north of the city of Reno. Fed by the Truckee River, the only river to flow out of the more glamorous Lake Tahoe, Pyramid Lake sits not high in the Sierra Nevada Mountains but rather at the bottom of one of the many arid endoheric sinks that characterize the Great Basin. Unlike Pyramid Lake, California, and the hundreds of other false lakes or reservoirs that dot the landscape of the American West, Pyramid Lake, Nevada, actually has an ancient lineage. One of the remnants of Lake Lahontan, the pluvial megalake that covered large parts of western Nevada during the Pleistocene Epoch, the shores of Pyramid Lake date back more than 12,000 years. The lake's English name is far more recent, of course, and dates back to 1844 when the American explorer John Charles Fremont named the lake after the way its largest tufa (or limestone) formation resembles the Great Pyramid of Giza.

Fremont does not figure all that much in *At Pyramid Lake*. While certain parts of the book detail the history of the lake during Fremont's milieu and century, the real focus of the book is on the lake during the twen-

tieth century. Still, Fremont's ghost can still be detected in one form or another in nearly every chapter of the book. For the book is, above all else, an account of the historical as well as ongoing colonization of Pyramid Lake and the resilient, politic, and cunning ways the lake's native people, the Kuyuidokado, or Pyramid Lake Paiute Indians, have resisted and adapted to the colonial processes that began when Fremont designated their homeland Pyramid Lake (the Kuyuidokado name for the lake is Kuyui Pah).

The particulars of the post-Fremont history of Pyramid Lake are likely to be unfamiliar to most readers (as they were for this reviewer). The blame is not entirely our own—Mergen in his preface notes that there is only one other book about the lake in print (p. xi). Still, students of U.S. history—be it environmental, western, cultural, intellectual, political, or Native American history—will find numerous elements of Mergen's story more than a little familiar. Irrigation, railroad tourism, settler trespass and squatting on Indian land, land and water disputes, land and water conservation, landscape photography and art, religion and spirituality, Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe, the Grateful Dead: all of this, Mergen shows, can be found at Pyramid Lake. Whether Mergen makes all this history readily accessible to the uninitiated

is a matter of debate, however.

The potential novelty of its subject matter aside, *At Pyramid Lake* rewards the reader in any number of ways. For one, the book is an interesting hybrid of a number of different literary genres. Part scholarly monograph, part popular nonfiction, and part personal memoir—Mergen lived at the lake and in Reno before and after World War II and includes a number of personal reminiscences—the book also ranges across a wide variety of topics in a sometimes chronological but mostly thematic fashion. The first three chapters of the book examine Kuyuidokado history and culture from the perspective of Kuyuidokado relations with the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Bureau of Reclamation, Kuyuidokado involvement in the establishment of the National Congress of American Indians, and passage of the Truckee-Carson-Pyramid Lake Water Settlement Act of 1990, the landmark federal law that stemmed from Kuyuidokado attempts to preserve Pyramid Lake as a viable ecosystem after establishment of the Newlands Reclamation Project in 1903. The middle chapters focus on the settler side of the frontier by detailing how squatters, commercial fishermen, recreational fishermen, railroads, and modern-day tourists altered the physical and mental landscapes of Pyramid Lake over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The back half of the book is more thematic and addresses the cultural history of the lake and surrounding desert. The chapter “Pyramid Lake Observed,” for instance, offers captivating vignettes regarding the work of (among others) the photographer Timothy O’Sullivan, the geologist Israel Cook Russell, and the Kuyuidokado painter Gilbert Natches, whose watercolor of the lake and its signature tufa pyramid graces the cover of the book. Hollywood, of course, gets its due as well. “Pyramid Lake, Mustangers, and *The Misfits*” details the fascinating story about and behind *The Misfits*, the 1961 film directed by John Huston and written by Arthur Miller—and starring Gable, Monroe, and Montgomery Clift—that was based on the lives of three postwar Nevada ranchers who rounded up wild mustangs for the pet food market.

The topical breadth of *At Pyramid Lake* is quite impressive. Mergen seems to have left no stone unturned. Another impressive feature of the book is the rather seamless way Mergen manages to keep the Kuyuidokado front and center throughout most of the book. Unlike a number of historical monographs that introduce Native Americans in the first chapter of the book only to replace them with settlers thereafter, *At Pyramid Lake* continually reminds the reader that the lake is a colonized landscape by situating Native actors and voices alongside those of settlers, or as Mergen likes to call them, “trespassers” (p. 95). This strategy is particularly evident in “Seekers in the Desert,” the intriguing chapter where Mergen nicely juxtaposes the desert philosophies of anchorite monks of the Late Antique Mediterranean with the writings of the white writer Dan De Quille and the visions of Wovoka, the Northern Paiute founder of the Ghost Dance movement.

The omnibus character of *At Pyramid Lake* does have its drawbacks, however. As mentioned, the book is not structured like a historical monograph. Thus in addition to jettisoning endnotes, the book’s narrative structure is far more open-ended in that most of the book’s topics are presented episodically, or as a series of vignettes. While this makes for an effective literary technique in the book’s thematic chapters, it is far less effective in the historically minded chapters where chronological clarity, historical context, and even simple explication of complex sociopolitical issues like Truckee-Carson-Pyramid Lake Water Settlement Act often get submerged beneath an impressionistic stream of unfamiliar historical actors and events.

Employment of this narrative strategy was no doubt a conscious choice on Mergen’s part. Whatever its limitations, Mergen amply succeeds in capturing the rich, complex, and sometimes paradoxical history of this unusual lacustrine pocket of Nevada. If the reader wants to walk through the history of an unfamiliar place in the West, they should spend some time *At Pyramid Lake*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

**Citation:** Erik Altenbernd. Review of Mergen, Bernard, *At Pyramid Lake*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. December, 2014.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42165>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.