

OUT ON THE RANGE

Quinn River Crossing

The edge of the map. Words by Carolyn Dufurrena. Photos by Larry Angier.





In the 1800s, the great land surveys marched across the West, defining the land for sale. The Salt Lake Survey grew from the corner of Temple Square in Brigham Young's capital city; the Willamette Survey marched south from Washington and Oregon. Multiple surveys dithered in halting progress from California toward Nevada. There was no consensus as to the location of California's northeast corner. Marching east across desert was very much like marching into a mirage, but by law, no public land could be disposed of until it had been officially surveyed. A string of private contractors attempted to survey the desert. The trackless expanse offered few materials to serve as markers.

Charred redwood hauled from California made section corners for a while; when there was no more redwood, the crews burned piles of sagebrush to charcoal, burying them with piles of rocks to mark the section corners. Efforts to mark beyond these tenuous borders were mostly unsuccessful. If the charcoal corners eluded them, surveyors would halt or simply draw sections on the map, projected from their last position. They quit when the money ran out or the snows grew too deep.

Today in the desert there are still holes in the map where the mark of man halts, as though at the edge of an inland sea. Sections, ideally a grid of thirty-six in each township, a mile square, are no such thing in this corner of the world, where the great land surveys meet. Almost. Townships are elongated or cut off,



some with sections that look more like narrow rectangles than anything approaching a square, as though an earthquake had torn the net of man's ownership loose, and it had come to rest not quite matching its former self. One local surveyor says, "It's just a mess. But the corners set are the ones we use, whether they're right or not." Those buried charcoal pits mark the boundary on the west side of this ranch, the faintest trace

of man's ownership before the vast blue of the playa absorbs all. This is where it ends, the map seems to say. You're on your own from here. ■

Excerpted from "Quiet Except for the Wind" by Carolyn Dufurrena, Quinn River Press, 2017. See page 62.



Historic brush fence corral from the Miller-Lux era at the end of the 19th century, Quinn River Crossing, Nevada.