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Go East, Young Man

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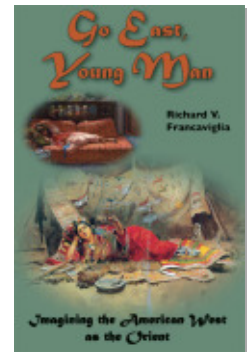
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In Praise of Pyramids

Orientalizing the Western Interior

“Things dread time; time dreads the Pyramids.”

Egyptian proverb

IN 1776, AN EXPLORING EXPEDITION HEADED BY SPANISH FRIARS Francisco Atanasio Domínguez and Francisco Silvestre Escalante reached the canyon-carved country of present-day southern Utah. Here, in the rugged, heavily eroded landscape along the Virgin River, they were intrigued by the towering, fantastically shaped landforms that loomed on every horizon. Like many places that European explorers encountered in this western North American wilderness, the countryside here was both awe-inspiring and confusing. These topographical features were so spectacular that the Spaniards named the river along which they were traveling “Río de las pirámides del sulfuro,” or River of the Pyramids of Sulfur. The “pyramids” that the Spaniards described were apparently the prominent, dark-colored volcanic cones which remain as landmarks to the present day. To make sense of this rugged and chaotic natural topography, consisting of both igneous and sedimentary prominences, the Spaniards turned for inspiration to something more familiar and man-made, namely the pyramids, towers, and temples erected by ancient peoples. Not surprisingly, the Spaniards named some imposing geological formations after prominent castles in their homeland. These soon bore the name “el Castillo,” which persists to the present day in the fairly common toponym “Castle Rock.” The Spaniards knew that these features weren’t real pyramids or castles, but the mysteriously shaped cones and buttes bore such a close resemblance to these man-made structures, it was easy to imagine that they might once have served that purpose in antiquity.

Nature has long played such tricks on people and still does. Pyramidal features are especially likely to enter folklore as the ruins of ancient advanced peoples. For example, large natural features that exhibit symmetry similar to man-made pyramids recently seduced self-proclaimed archaeologist Semir Osmanagic into claiming that the “Giant Pyramids of Bosnia” are authentic. Similarly, the rectangular block jointing in the shallow water off the Biminis is considered to be the foundations of ancient pyramids representing “remnants of Plato’s lost Atlantis.” Even more recently, the controversial Gavin Menzies claimed these same features were remnants of Chinese civilization that had reached the Americas in 1421.¹ This rush to attribute a human cause to the shape of natural features serves as a sobering reminder about humankind’s tendency to anthropomorphize natural features. The physical properties of landscapes are so much grist for the human imagination—especially when people try to make sense out of not only the physical landscape but also the complexities of human history. The point here is that the human mind has a tendency to search for—and find—similarities between natural features (such as clouds) and human faces; so too does it have a tendency to render natural features into human artifacts (such as pyramids).

The Spaniards’ use of the term “pyramids” in southern Utah was natural enough for those rugged prominences of rock that resembled giant pyramids. But which pyramids did they have in mind—the pyramids of Egypt, or the pyramids of Mesoamerica? It could have been either, but given the European fascination with Egypt during the Enlightenment, it was likely that the much more distant location served as a surrogate. After all, as learned men, the Spaniards could have agreed with Herodotus, the Greek historian who set the tone a thousand years earlier when he wrote: “Concerning Egypt itself, I shall extend my remarks to a great length, because there is no country that possesses so many wonders, nor any that has such a number of works that defy description.”² Of these many wonders, as Herodotus called them, none were more massive or more topographically impressive than the Egyptian pyramids. Towering more than six hundred feet above the Nile River plains, they were one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Significantly, their height was not exceeded by another man-made structure for more than four thousand years. Regrettably, because the Spaniards’ report is vague at this point, we will never know if it was Egypt or ancient Mexico that was on their minds when they named the river after pyramids, though the former is likely.

To get that kind of textual detail, we need to consult the journals of later explorers who were far more explicit about why they named geographic features as they did. More often than not, those explorers hailed from a northern

European background. In the early nineteenth century, for example, British explorer David Thompson traversed the semiarid interior of the Pacific Northwest, where volcanic buttes rose starkly. Here, Thompson recalled many years later in his unpublished manuscript called *Travels*, “the imagination may have full play to form to itself the ruins of buildings, temples, fortifications, tables, dykes, and many other things in great variety.”³ Thompson mentions those temples and forts abstractly; to him they appeared to be unnamed reminders of the ancient works of civilizations that are likewise unnamed. As befits any writer seeking to popularize his or her account of travel, Thompson here writes very romantically in an increasingly romantic age. Whether or not he originally fancied seeing temples and forts in the landscape he explored in the first decade of the nineteenth century, we do not know. We do know, however, that by the 1840s when Thompson wrote down his recollections, such romantic sentiments were commonplace among the literary elite. Moreover, an increasingly literate population was influenced by what these educated travelers had to say. With that in mind, let us now consider another expedition to the Intermountain West in the 1840s, more than half a century after the Domínguez-Escalante expedition, when Spain’s grip had yielded to Mexican rule; in a few short years that too would change as the United States wrested that region from Mexico.

This expedition was heir to both ancient texts and fairly modern writings that emphasized the age and size of the pyramids. Actual images of the pyramids became increasingly common after Napoleon’s scientific and military expedition to Egypt from 1798 to 1801. By the early 1840s, lithographs such as those provided by Scottish artist David Roberts found their way into the United States, where they helped fuel interest in Egypt. Roberts produced numerous sets of lithographs of the pyramids, some beautifully colored (fig. 2-1). Such artwork and associated narratives had more than aesthetic appeal, for Napoleon’s victories in Egypt suggested that Europe, and the West in general, had a role in exploring and transforming the modern Orient.

In January of 1844, American explorer John Charles Frémont and his party worked their way into the desert country just east of the rugged, snow-packed Sierra Nevada in today’s state of Nevada. Glad to be out of the mountains and at a lower elevation where “the temperature was mild and pleasant,” at least by comparison, Frémont and his party moved through the sagebrush-covered landscape at the western edge of a huge interior region he would soon name the “Great Basin.” In this desolate area, Frémont and his group were about to become the first Anglo-Americans to create a surrogate landscape in the interior American West, or at least the first to do so and leave a record of it.



Author's collection

Fig. 2-1. Sold as part of a set of hand-colored lithographs by Scottish artist David Roberts in the early 1840s, this evocative view of the Egyptian pyramids captures the romance of Victorian exploration and antiquity.

As the explorers traveled in a southeasterly direction across the desert under Frémont's direction, a large inland lake "broke upon our eyes like the ocean." This, however, was no ordinary lake. In it, they spied a "remarkable rock which had attracted our attention for many miles." Rising out of the waters of the lake, this light-colored rock was large—Frémont's party estimated that it rose "600 feet above the water." The rock's size and height were impressive enough, but it was the shape of the rock that drew their attention from afar and continued to impress them as they inspected it close-up. According to Frémont, the rock "presented a pretty exact outline of the Great Pyramid of Cheops." This is specific enough, but Frémont was not content to let things rest there. He was so convinced about the similarity between this rock and the Pyramid of Cheops that he bestowed the name "Pyramid" on not only the rock but also the entire body of water. Since that day in 1844, the name "Pyramid Lake" honors the rock's resemblance to the prototype in Egypt.

In his reports, Frémont explained the rationale behind his naming of Pyramid Lake. He stated: "Though it may be deemed by some a fanciful resemblance, I can undertake to say that the future traveler will find a much more striking resemblance between this rock and the pyramids of Egypt than there is between them and the object from which they take their name."⁴

When read carefully, this sentence is almost as perplexing as the mysterious sphinx that reposes near the real pyramids in Egypt. What could Frémont have meant by it? Clearly, the first part of his statement reaffirms the similarity between the rock in the lake and the pyramids near Giza. The second part of Frémont's sentence—that there is some discrepancy between "*them*" (the pyramids in Egypt) and the "*object*" after which they are named—appears to be both enigmatic and arcane until we understand something about the actual pyramid in Egypt. Frémont appears to be referring to the fact that Egypt's Great Pyramid, or Pyramid of Cheops, was originally sheathed in white limestone that had spalled away except for its distinctive "cap," which still remains. That cap creates a discontinuity in the otherwise perfect outline of this pyramid. That flaw, if one can call it that, compromises the perfection of the original pyramid. Astute explorers in Egypt in Frémont's day had recently concluded that the original pyramid, which stands 481 feet high, had been about thirty feet higher before elements and vandalism had taken their toll. Frémont's comment reveals his knowledge about the Pyramid of Cheops, and his recognition that the prototype in the Egyptian desert varied from its original—which is to say perfect—form. As geologist J. W. Dawson wrote about forty years later in a statement that Frémont would have understood, the pyramid "has endured in all its magnitude to our time; and, but for wanton destruction, its outer surface would have presented to this day all its pristine beauty."⁵ Although there is a ring of conceit about it, not to mention an irony that seems almost postmodern, Frémont believed that his pyramid in the Great Basin was an even better representative of the original than the original. This is noteworthy, for, on a subliminal level, Frémont's emphasis on the pyramid-shaped rock in the Great Basin associates his own enterprising, cannon-toting, semi-scientific mission with the prototype for all such modern incursions, specifically Napoleon's.

Frémont's highly-detailed commentary on pyramids may seem peculiar to readers today, but that is because people nowadays know far less about the pyramids than people did in his time. The Egyptian pyramids today are simply spectacular former wonders of the world that are used as icons in movies and on cigarette packages. True, we popularly recognize the "mystical" powers that went into their design, but we actually know little about the pyramids themselves. For Frémont and his generation, however, the pyramids were an obsession—singular achievements that revealed the greatness of Egyptian culture and held the key to human understanding. Look at any dollar bill and you will see the Pyramid of Cheops, an eye atop it connecting mystically with the heavens. Adopted as a popular icon in the United States by the early

1800s, the pyramid symbolized several things: a greatness to which learned men aspired, a knowledge of construction that was not yet surpassed, and a mysticism that entranced both the American and European publics. Although the pyramids were spectacular ruins by the time Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, that bold, imperialistic act by France triggered a wave of interest in the Near East that ultimately affected Europeans and Americans alike. That interest is at the heart of modern Orientalism, and it was so strong that we find it in the wilderness of the North American West well before Anglo-American explorers like Frémont arrived.

Consider the travels and writings of John Lloyd Stephens. As an educated New Yorker, Stephens traveled to Egypt and the Holy Land in 1836, signing the consular book in Alexandria and writing a lively account of his travels that was widely read after its publication by Harper and Brothers in 1837. That book, *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land*, became required reading for any American visiting, or even thinking about, the Near East. Appropriately enough, Stephens's book begins in Egypt and stimulates the reader's imagination with its tales of discovery from the moment he sets foot on Egyptian soil. Although Stephens could see the pyramids from Cairo upon his arrival there, he had been delayed from actually reaching them for ten days—a situation that only heightened his interest in experiencing them firsthand. As Stephens finally neared the pyramids, he was awed by their size. As he put it, he “saw how very small I was.” When he “looked up their sloping sides to the[ir] lofty summits, they seemed to have grown to the size of mountains.” Ascending the pyramid, Stephens “realized in all their force the huge dimensions of this giant work.” Stephens was personally enthralled by the pyramids and cognizant of the effect that Egyptian history had on modern-day visitors. Speculating about how the pyramids should affect the sensitive traveler, and thus priming all who would subsequently see these wonders, Stephens set up a formula that would be used by the educated traveler. He predicted that “thousands of years roll through his mind, and thought recalls the men who built them, their mysterious uses, the poets, historians, philosophers, and warriors who have gazed upon them with wonder like his own.” Like Frémont, Stephens was an admirer of antiquity. The belief that the pyramids were ageless or represented eons of time was especially attractive to the Victorian mind.

But note here that Stephens was also captivated by what the pyramids suggested about brilliant human minds. He described the Great Pyramid in detail, citing impressive statistics and relating efforts by English gentlemen and others to explore its mysterious interior.⁶ In other words, the best Western

minds were still awed by these accomplishments that stood at the doorstep of the East. To add even more drama to the scene, Stephens also discussed the tragic plight of an Englishman who climbed the pyramid but then carelessly lost his balance and tumbled down its side, shattering every bone in his body by the time he reached the bottom. That fatal accident not only underscored the terrible grandeur of the pyramids and the dangers of travel—it emphasized Stephens's own good fortune, skill, and bravery as he successfully scaled these formidable artifacts.

Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia Petraea, and the Holy Land* was critically acclaimed and widely quoted. Then, as now, a good review could do wonders for both author and publisher. To Stephens's good fortune, his book was praised by Edgar Allan Poe in a twelve-page review that made Stephens's name a household word. Stephens's book sold very well—twenty-one thousand copies in the United States alone within two years. Perhaps even more important, it was not only immediately popular but endured through several generations. *Incidents of Travel in Egypt* remained in print until 1882, a remarkably long publishing run.⁷ Stephens's book also sold abroad as well as in the United States. By 1840, learned people on both sides of the Atlantic, including American explorer John Charles Frémont and British explorer Sir Richard F. Burton, were familiar with the type of book that featured a well-educated traveler in the role of modern-day explorer of ancient wonders and exotic places; naturally, *Incidents of Travel in Egypt* appealed to the public in that it combined adventure and education. There were many such writers by the 1850s, as the public had developed a seemingly insatiable appetite for exploration narratives. Using writing techniques developed in the age of exploration, these writers influenced the literature of Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century. More to the point, the self-conscious explorer was a very different kind of writer than the early explorer in that he (and later she) wrote not for the King but rather for the public.

At this time in the early Victorian era, the self-conscious explorer's aims were varied. The geographical motive was to banish terra incognita and expand the reach of colonial power, but the social motive was far more complex. First, the literature they wrote was meant to entertain, educate, and enlighten. That goal squared with a growing belief in the Victorian period that individuals improve their social standing through pursuits that increase knowledge, broaden horizons, and improve prospects for upward mobility. For the Victorian citizen, being widely read was essential. Books graced their libraries and decorated their parlors. The self-conscious explorer was pivotal in this social and educational endeavor. Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Egypt*

revealed how expansive—and irresistible—the Western gaze was over exotic lands. Such authors provided a confessional, personalized look at exotic culture and landscape, often with a moral message delivered either subliminally or overtly. This, it should be pointed out, occurred well before the United States became a major international political force.

As Stephens's book continued to sell very well into the 1840s, John Charles Frémont was involved in his own adventures in the American West. Exploring a large area that was virtually unknown, to the United States public at least, Frémont was getting a grasp on the geography of the Great Basin. This was a time when the public demanded facts and figures as well as drama and adventure. Of Pyramid Lake, Frémont observed: "The elevation of this lake above the sea is 4,890 feet, being nearly 700 feet higher than the Great Salt Lake from which it lies nearly west, and distant about eight degrees of longitude." Frémont made one other observation about Pyramid Lake and that other much larger lake in the Great Basin. Noting what he considered "an object of geographical interest," he observed that Pyramid Lake "is the nearest lake to the western rim, as the Great Salt Lake is to the eastern rim, of the Great Basin which lies between the base of the Rocky mountains and the Sierra Nevada."⁸ That one sentence was deceptively simple. In point of fact, it introduces two points of fundamental importance. First, it revealed that the Great Basin was a huge area, spanning a full eight degrees of longitude—about 450 miles (725 km)—from east to west.⁹ Second, it suggested that the source of waters for permanent lakes in this region is in the highest mountains, which constitute the eastern and western margins of the Great Basin. With this one sentence, Frémont not only described the new geographic region's hydrology but defined its geographic perimeter for a nation aggressively eyeing the Pacific shore as its western boundary.¹⁰

Fremont had unwittingly discovered yet another connection between the Interior American West and the deserts of the Old World. Portions of both are endorheic, that is, have areas where any precipitation collects in basins (like Pyramid Lake) rather than reaching the sea. Endorheic regions usually lie far from the ocean, and much of their surface is perennially dry. Fremont realized this as he reconnoitered other nearby desert valleys, which featured playas, or dry lake beds. Further scientific exploration would reveal that these endorheic landscapes are a result of desert climate conditions; if instead there were surplus precipitation, it would fill a valley's basin and ultimately cut a river channel to the sea. Of note here is that in the Great Basin Fremont had discovered a place akin to Egypt's fabled Qattara Depression, a vast area of bone-dry desert west of the pyramids that had long intimidated all but the

most intrepid of explorers. Despite its grand name, however, Fremont would have been chagrined to learn that his American Great Basin is small compared to vast endorheic areas of the Sahara, Arabia, and interior Asia (for example, Tibet). In fact, as subsequent exploration would demonstrate, only about five percent of North America is endorheic, while a much larger portion of North Africa and the Middle East is so classified. These are intriguing places indeed, and we still know relatively little about them because they are among the least populated. But that very characteristic—arid desolation—has had considerable appeal.

On his ostensibly military mission into the interior American West, then Frémont did far more than provide geographic information to his superiors; he also provided it to the scientific community, who avidly read his reports. In 1867, as part of the US Geological Survey exploration of the fortieth parallel, seventeen-year-old ornithologist Robert Ridgway studied Pyramid Lake. Ridgway had read Frémont's report and was about to improve upon it in places. In his official report, Ridgway noted that "'The Pyramid' is close to the eastern shore, and appears as a huge rock of a very regular pyramidal shape, rising about three hundred feet above the surface of the lake." Like Frémont, Ridgway noted something else about the pyramid that made it even more perfect than the Egyptian pyramid. As Ridgway noted, "Its base is a nearly perfect triangle, each side being a sheer precipice from the water to the height of a hundred and fifty feet, while only one of the three corners was found to be easily accessible from the boat."¹¹ Ridgway is here referring to an abstract ideal—the shape of a perfect pyramid, whose bottom as well as sides is triangular-shaped as opposed to square.

Frémont's report also resonated with the American public. Most of the information in it was ostensibly factual—for example, the positions and elevations of geographic features. Some of it, however, transcended facts and engaged mythology. The pyramidal rock in Pyramid Lake again provides a good example. Frémont and his cartographer and illustrator Charles Preuss recorded this feature in several ways. First, they objectified it by revealing its location and its height, which they speculated was six hundred feet. This ambitious quantification they achieved using maps and words. Next, they subjectified the rock not only by associating it with the Pyramid of Cheops in words but by actually illustrating it to substantiate that comparison (fig. 2-2). Frémont believed that Preuss's sketch of the rock was quite accurate, but he longed for something even more convincing. Part scientist as well as romanticist, Frémont tried, but failed, to capture scenes using the newly invented daguerreotype process of photography. The cantankerous Preuss ridiculed



Author's collection

Fig. 2-2. In the section of his 1845 report dealing with Pyramid Lake, John Charles Frémont noted a “striking resemblance” between this rock and the pyramids of Egypt.

Frémont for botching the photography, but the drawing certainly worked well enough to convey a sense of what the expedition members saw and what the public should envision. The image of Pyramid Lake in Frémont’s report does more than confirm that geographic feature’s presence. It also venerates the feature by associating it with one of the world’s great landmarks. Frémont effectively renders a natural feature into a cultural object. In the 1850s and 1860s, expeditions searching for railroad routes would do much the same, as would popular imagery resulting from those reports. These illustrations of the pyramid in Pyramid Lake effectively Orientalized a western landscape feature—that is, associated it with the Near East.¹²

Frémont’s Orientalist impulse was closely allied with a broadening engagement of the East in everyday American life. No longer restricted to the intellectual elite, Orientalism had begun to reach into popular culture at exactly the time that Stephens, Frémont, and others wrote for a growing audience. Although Frémont was ostensibly a military man dutifully writing and illustrating a report for the government, he personified the bold self-promotion that would later position him as the first Republican candidate for president of the United States and ultimately compromise his career and sully his reputation.

When the enterprising explorer Frémont coined the name Pyramid Lake in 1844, he also tapped into yet another aspect of American culture that was intimately associated with storytelling and writing—religion. The word *Egypt*

today may convey something exotic and erotic; and if religion is thought of at all, it is Islam. However, in the 1830s and 1840s, mention of the word *Egypt* would just as likely be associated with the Jews' slavery there: more to the point, Egypt was associated with deliverance from slavery there by Moses, who led his people to freedom by fleeing into the desert and parting the Red Sea in the process to avoid capture and destruction. It is this religious association with Egypt that resonated so strongly in the popular culture of the nineteenth century. As a place, Egypt embodied two identities at that time. It was on the one hand associated with the ancient Egyptians, but on the other with Judeo-Christian religion. Egypt, then, represented not only pharaonic riches and enslavement but also deliverance by Divine Providence. Egypt thus exemplified many of the classic attributes of the Orient—namely, richness in history, despotism, majesty, poverty, mystery, and spirituality. The Bible mentions Egypt more than six hundred times, and the name was never far from the tongue about twenty centuries later when the American West was being explored. Reaffirming connections to Egypt by configuring natural places in the New World simply reinforced the power of the real place in constructing a new—but actually old—American identity.

The relatively positive view of the Middle East in nineteenth-century America is noteworthy. It explains why Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Egypt* is so effusive in its praise of the landscape and religious traditions of the Holy Land. Quoting biblical passages from time to time, Stephens thrilled his readers with his travel accounts of places like Petra, of which he wrote: "Nothing can be finer than the immense rocky rampart which encloses the city. Strong, firm, and immovable as Nature itself, it seems to deride the walls of cities and the puny fortifications of skillful engineers." Petra was no ordinary city but was carved out of rose-colored native rock. Although constructed in about the sixth century BCE, Petra remained unknown to westerners until rediscovered by Swiss explorer John William Burgon in 1812. As Stephens observed in a statement about both credibility and faith, "I would that the skeptic could stand as I did among the ruins of this city among the rocks, and there open the sacred book and read the words of the inspired penman written when this desolate place was one of the greatest cities in the world." Stephens then notes that this ruined city could convince even that skeptic: "Though he would not believe Moses and the prophets, he believes the handwriting of God himself in the desolation and eternal ruin around him."¹³ Tellingly, travelers half a world away would often use these or similar terms about desolation and ruin to describe the landscapes they traversed on the North American continent.

Many of these observers described ruins in a dramatic, even laudatory, manner. To Europeans and many European Americans, ruins anywhere resonated as romantic and haunted reminders of a past that constantly resurfaced in the Victorian mind. The specter of such a past represented an important aspect of Orientalism. In other words, the Orient was not simply a place (or places) but also a time (or times). Consider, for example, Stephens's and Frémont's encounters with Egypt—the former real, the latter imaginary. Implicit in their prose was the concept of immense time periods that were represented archaeologically. Egypt, like the Holy Land itself, thus had two personalities, or rather two sides, that were irreconcilable. The nostalgia felt for the East represented experience that was palpable, as evident in ruins, but was evanescent in that it could never be recaptured. As the “cradle of civilization,” Mesopotamia, and especially Egypt, represented a benchmark that might hopefully be matched through modern technology, but it would never again be repeated.

In the nineteenth century, as a subset of Orientalism in the United States, Egyptomania involved a subconscious desire to imitate the most successful and sometimes arcane aspects of Egypt's past culture. This appreciation is what made Egypt so fashionable among those, like the Rosicrucians, who mysticized the Egyptian past. Founded in sixteenth-century Europe, the Rosicrucians emphasized the mystical teachings of the ancient Near East. By the nineteenth century, Rosicrucians like the black American spiritualist Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825–1875) proposed elaborate “theories of cyclic history, recurring cataclysms, and pre-Adamite races.” These theories involved radical shifts in the earth's axis that melted the polar ice caps as well as violent earthquakes that reshaped the stage upon which history was acted out. Such cataclysms, Randolph contended, had caused the sinking of Atlantis, rendering it a “lost” civilization. However, those same forces also yielded fragments of Atlantis, for they “upheaved it again, with a few of its pyramids yet intact, but transforming the happy land into the deserts of the Zahara.”¹⁴ More to the point, though, the pyramids represented a glimpse of perfection, the likes of which would never be seen again. Scholars may deride such concepts today, but in the nineteenth century, when intellectuals regularly sought explanations to riddles using combinations of scientific, religious, and spiritual knowledge, they sometimes reached breathtaking conclusions that riveted the public's interest.

To nineteenth-century travelers in the American West, the open desert landscape could also evoke plenty of Orientalist-inspired images. In 1860, for example, as explorer Richard Burton continued his journey across the

continent, he left a vivid record of landscape comparisons in what would soon become Nevada. Of a particularly forlorn area here, Burton authoritatively wrote that “the scenery was that of the Takhashshua near Zayla, or the delicious land behind Aden, the Arabian sea-board.” The Middle Eastern countryside that Burton compared with Nevada was desolate indeed. Burton continued by observing that this part of Nevada consisted of challenge after challenge for the traveler. Here, as he put it, “Sand-heaps—the only dry spots after rain—fixed by tufts of metallic green salsolae, and guarded from the desert wind by rusty cane-grass, emerged from the wet and oozy plain, in which the mules often sank to the fetlock.” In this nightmarish country “the unique and snowy floor of thin nitre [salts], blueish where deliquescent, was here as solid as a sheet of ice.” This country could be slippery and slushy after rain and “is blinding by day” and “bitterly cold” at night, attributable to what Burton called, with seemingly scientific authority, “the refrigerating properties of the salt.”¹⁵

Prone to see the Middle East everywhere in the American West—that is, create surrogate landscapes at will—Burton described another scene the next day that also reminded him of Arabia. Traversing the loose sand of an area “scattered over with carcass and skeleton,” he came to a place where “broken clay and dwarf vegetation assumed in the dim shades fantastic and mysterious forms.” This made Burton think he was “once more amongst the ruins of that Arab village concerning which Lebid sang—‘Ay me! ay me! All alone and drear the dwelling place, the home—On Mina, o’er Rijam and Ghool, wild beasts unheeded roam.’” This is Burton the writer referring to both his own earlier experiences and a literary precedent. Significantly, after the ancient writer Lebid that Burton mentions converted to Islam, he no longer wrote such poetry. Instead, Lebid devoted himself to a literary interpretation of the only words he claimed anyone needed to read—the Koran. Burton, however, faced no self-imposed Islamist restrictions on prose.

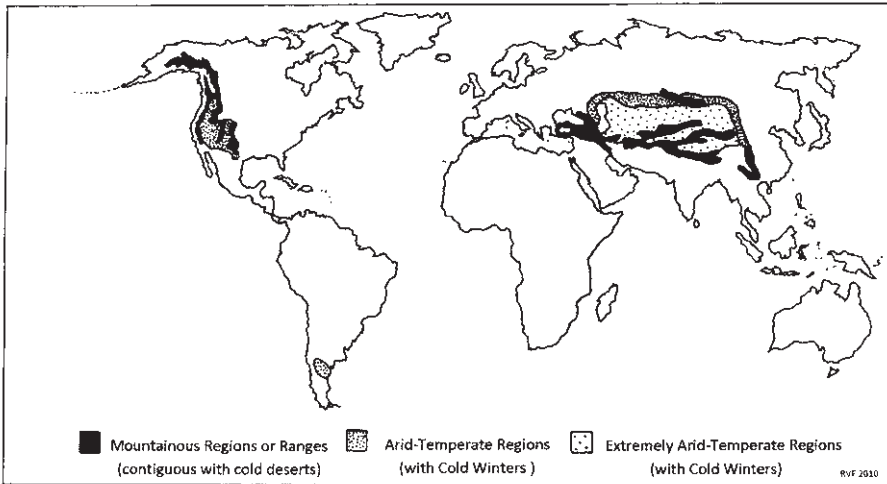
As he traveled, Burton called upon the words of East and West with near abandon; this is another trademark of the self-conscious explorer. In further describing an Arabian-like scene in Nevada, for example, Burton notes that he and his fellow travelers “were torpid with what the Bedouin calls *El Raki*—*la Ragle du Désert*, when part of the brain sleeps whilst the rest is wide awake.” This reference to split consciousness is significant, and perhaps metaphorical for what Burton himself was doing in a literary sense—relying on his own imagination and also the reality of a world already described elsewhere. In this dreamlike scene dusted with blowing sand and obscured by a light haze, Burton described the torturous trek to the salt-rimmed basin of Carson Lake, leaving the reader to wonder just how American, or how

Middle Eastern, the countryside was. The answer, of course, was that it was both, or rather one and the same.¹⁶

To early travelers, especially those who crossed it on foot or in wagons, the interior West between the Wasatch and Sierra Nevada was so overwhelming and so unusual that it required superlatives. These descriptions often stressed the barren nature of the land, and this land seemed to have only one counterpart. As a writer noted in the *Sacramento Daily Union* in 1867, travelers reported that the region “rivals the Desert of Sahara” in its bleakness, while another noted that “the deserts of Africa or Asia present no more forbidding aspect.”¹⁷ Word for word, no part of the American West was more equated with the Near East than the Great Basin. This region made the mind work overtime for several reasons. First, travelers visually considered its barrenness threatening. The use of dramatic prose called attention to the commentator as a person who could brave the wilderness. Equally important, perhaps, was the fact that barrenness, like a blank sheet of paper, stimulated the imagination.¹⁸

How similar was the interior American West to its Old World counterparts? Mike Davis notes that “Nevada and Utah, for instance, were variously compared to Arabia, Turkestan, the Taklo Makan, Timbuktu, Australia, and so on, but in reality, Victorian minds were traveling through an essentially extraterrestrial terrain, far outside their cultural experience.” As Davis puts it, the Victorian explorers “eventually cast aside a trunkfull of Victorian preconceptions in order to recognize novel forms and processes in nature.” Geologists in effect “created a new landscape language—also largely architectural, but sometimes phantasmagorical—to describe an unprecedented dialectics of rock, color and light.” Davis aptly calls this the “convergence of science and sensibility,” adding that it has no twentieth-century counterpart. This convergence “compelled a moral view of the environment as it was laid bare for exploitation” by science, government, and entrepreneurs.¹⁹

Those who know vegetation very well will recognize differences between western Nevada and, for example, eastern Uzbekistan. However, even someone familiar with both places will marvel at how similar in general appearance they are. Their geomorphology, which developed under similar climatic conditions, and their sparse, low-lying vegetation make it difficult to say which is Uzbekistan and which is Nevada: only after carefully scrutinizing the vegetation by species—the genus *Artemisia* occurs in both—can one be sure.²⁰ As a map of the world’s temperate and cold deserts shows (fig. 2-3), west-central Nevada has far more in common with Uzbekistan than it does the Sahara. Southern Nevada, though, comes much closer to the Sahara, as it is a hot, rather than temperate, or cold, desert.



Map by author based, in part, on Neil A. West, *Ecosystems of the World*, Vol. 5, *Temperate Deserts and Semi-Deserts* (1983)

Fig. 2-3. A map of the world's temperate deserts having cold winters helps explain similarities between the interior American West and portions of Uzbekistan and southwestern Asia.

Comparisons between Old World and New World deserts are further complicated by human historical influences, notably the actual spread of plant species like *Salsola* (“tumbleweed”) and tamarisk (“salt cedar”) from the Old World to the New World since about 1500. So similar are the basic environments that these plants have found a niche comfortable enough to spread like wildfire; they are branded invasive species but are considered somehow natural because of the ease with which they dominate.²¹

Portions of the American West where dunes shift about are relatively rare, but they were especially evocative. They readily brought to mind the vivid descriptions of early desert travelers. Consider, for example, Marco Polo's descriptions of the sand dunes near Dunhuang, China, where the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas are located. These dunes were known for the mysterious sounds they produced. “Sometimes . . .” Polo related, “you shall hear the sound of musical instruments, and still more commonly the sound of drums.” Like many of Polo's accounts, this was regarded with skepticism. However, science has proven Polo correct: some dunes are “musical” indeed. These sounds have been heard in dunes elsewhere and are the substance of legends. The Arabs fancy them to be the bells of a subterranean convent,²² while to Native Americans in the West they were yet another indication that the landscape was alive and populated by spirits. More recently, they have been called “booming” dunes—testimony that differently trained peoples may interpret the same phenomena differently.

Dunes that make such sounds are also found in the American West, for example, at Dumont Dunes in the Mojave Desert and at some locations in the Great Basin of Nevada. The actual mechanism by which dunes boom is not known, but researchers deduce that the booming dunes have an upper layer of dry sand about six feet in thickness that lies over a harder, cemented surface. The sound is emitted when the sand grains, which are ideally of similar size, strike each other and emit about the same frequency. When the sand grains collide with each other, their sound resonates against the underlying, harder surface. Tall dunes with steep slopes are most likely to emit these sounds. These singing dunes impressed Nathaniel Curzon, who wrote about them in *Tales of Travel* (1923). A romantic at heart, Curzon called the sounds they make “the voice of the desert.” Although some people describe these dunes as sounding like marching soldiers or volcanic eruptions, most compare them to music. To Curzon, the sand dunes seemed to be “speaking in notes now as of harp strings,” or “as of trumpets and drums.” He too recognized that the dunes created a “mystic fascination to which no one can turn a deaf ear.” In his book, Curzon noted that he had found only one “Singing Sand-dune, analogous to the Asian and African cases which we have been discussing,” in North America. This dune was located in Churchill County, Nevada, and “is said to be 100–400 feet in height, and four miles long.” Curzon added that “when agitation of the sand starts it sliding a noise is produced like that from telegraph wires fanned by a breeze.”²³ That singing hum resonated as a kind of harmonic “Asian” note.

In searching for surrogate landscapes between the Near East and the Far West, we need look no farther than the dunes of sand that occupy portions of these desert landscapes. Whether they “sing” or not, sand dunes are especially prone to being mythologized: composed of inert geological material, they can move; situated in the quietest of deserts, they can hiss and, yes, even emit musical sounds or roar at times; part of a hard, rock-ribbed desert land, they embody softness; significantly, in the most masculine of desert landscapes, they introduce an element of the female. Writer Terry Tempest Williams, for example, describes the sand dunes near Utah’s Great Salt Lake as undeniably “female.” As Williams put it, they possess “sensuous curves—the small of a woman’s back. Breasts. Buttocks. Hips and pelvis.”²⁴ These dunes are visually evocative, but they form part of something even more profound. They are not only landscapes but also soundscapes—that is, places characterized by words for the sounds that describe them—in this case the hissing, shifting, singing, sliding, smooth sandscapes of the desert.²⁵

In a literary and folkloric sense, this linguistic effect is as profound as the visual in conveying the nature of this type of landscape. These dunes are, so to

speak, sinuous, slippery, sensual, seductive, and sexual in their connotations. Small wonder, then, that dunescapes provided the setting of such Orientalist romances as *The Sheik*, which bring Western popular culture face-to-face with the seduction of the “other” as lover. The very looseness of sand underfoot suggests that we may lose both our bearings and our balance, by being seduced. The metaphor is even more potent when, in the midst of that sensuous sandy skin of the desert, we arrive at the oasis—a fertile, moist place where protection and rejuvenation await.

The power of landscape in this drama between East and West should not be underestimated. In 1880s Nevada, travel writer Phil Robinson observed that the landscape beyond the Humboldt River valley was as dismal as any desert on the face of the earth. He characterized it as “desert again with the surface of the alkali land curling up into flakes, and the lank grey greasewood sparsely scattered about it.” Robinson then quickly and authoritatively informed the reader that “the desolation is as utter as in Baluchistan or the land of Goshen.” Those references to two desert places in the Old World position Robinson as not only a traveler to real places but also as a reader of the Bible. Continuing the description, Robinson finds a cultural comparison irresistible, adding that in this forlorn locale, “instead of Murrees there are plenty of Shoshonees to make the desolation perilous to travellers by wagon.” Murree refers to a rugged area in the province of Punjab, Pakistan, and its residents, including the city of Islamabad. As if this comparison were not poignant and dramatic enough, Robinson could not resist commenting on the enigmatic, mysterious nature of the Indians. “I do not think that in all my travels,” he observed, “I have ever met a race with such baffling physiognomy.” After declaring that it is impossible to determine what, or even if, an Indian is thinking, Robinson concludes “they are hieroglyphics altogether, and there is something ‘uncanny’ about them.”²⁶ That reference to “hieroglyphics” transforms the Indians into objects, but it is also a metaphor for Oriental inscrutability. Hieroglyphs can also symbolize something natural as well as cultural, however, as when Robinson earlier characterized a desert landscape in Utah as “sage-brush and sand, with occasional patches of tiresome rock fragments and unlimited lizards.” These, as he put it, were “nature’s hieroglyphics for sultry sterility—[which] were the only features of the journey.”²⁷ In either case, the reference to hieroglyphics Orientalizes both the Nevada landscape and the peoples who occupied it as mysteries needing to be decoded.²⁸

And yet despite its novelty, the desert experience touches a universal chord in all humankind, as Mark Twain observed when he witnessed his Western town-bred fellow travelers in the Middle East adjusting to the “free life of

the camp and the desert,” as he called it. This lifestyle, as we have seen, was easy for some European American travelers to despise, but Twain understood something grander about humankind. As he put it, “The nomadic instinct is a human instinct; it was born with Adam and transmitted through the patriarchs, and after thirty centuries of steady effort, civilization has not educated it out of us yet. The nomadic instinct . . .” Twain concluded, “can not be educated out of an Indian at all.”²⁹ That, in a sense, helped conflate nomadic Indians in the West with existing examples of the world’s most celebrated nomads—namely, those of the Near East and Mongolia.

Although it now had a pyramid, sand dunes, and even nomadic peoples that suggested the Near East and adjacent southwestern Asia, the interior West lacked one essential ingredient—the camel. That, however, would soon change, as the US military began to import them by employing the skills of a Syrian camel driver named Hadji Ali—or “Hi Jolly” as he became known to Americans prone to simplifying, or Anglicizing, names. Bringing camels to the arid American West was the brainchild of Jefferson (“Jeff”) Davis, then secretary of war and destined to play a major role in the military exploration of the West. Davis was always on the lookout for efficient methods to reconnoiter the southern Interior West, including the Mojave and Colorado Deserts. This episode brought Americans face-to-face with the Orient as well as transporting camels from that exotic part of the world to the American West.

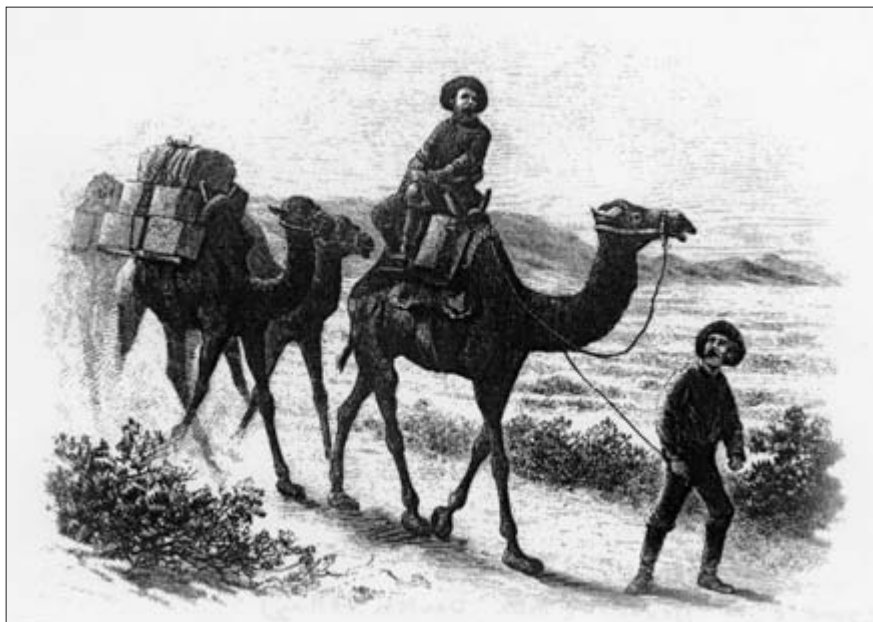
On May 10, 1855, Davis ordered Major Henry Constantine Wayne to “proceed without delay to the Levant” in order to import camels “for army transportation and for other military purposes.” Davis correctly noted that Wayne might first find, in France and England, connections to those individuals experimenting with using camels in military service. These were appropriate locales, as they were centers of European Orientalist thought. Davis was also aware that Barbary camels were being bred to improve their size and strength. Wayne carefully followed Davis’s guidance. At the beginning of his journey to the Middle East, Wayne stopped in London, where he visited the zoo to view the camels there. As planned, Wayne next visited France. In Paris, he conducted more research on camels, always keeping in mind Davis’s advice that superior breeds of Persian camels were said to exist in Salonica.³⁰

Wayne was joined by Dixon Porter, and both were about to learn a good deal more about camels and about Middle Easterners than they had ever imagined. Upon arriving in the Middle East with ample cash that they flashed around openly, Wayne and Porter were at the mercy of people who hoped the Americans would buy anything they offered. Many people, in fact, were amazed that Americans would want to buy a camel at all. When a Turk asked

incredulously, "Have you no camels in America?" Porter answered "No," upon which the Turk exclaimed, with pity: "My, you must be many years behind the times."³¹ This cultural bantering was typical of the period, as was stereotyping on both sides. For example, Porter observed that "the Egyptians, most inconsiderate and cruel camel-masters in the world, have the most wretched-looking beasts, while the Turk, more humane in disposition, keeps his flock in fine order."³² The Turks, like most Middle Easterners, used the single-humped dromedary camels that were so well adapted to that region's hot deserts (as opposed to the Bactrian camels, two-humped creatures with heavier fur that were native to colder Central Asia).

If Wayne and Porter were regarded somewhat skeptically by the locals in the Middle East, their exploits drew intense interest back in the United States. In October 1857, a reporter for *Harper's Monthly Magazine* vicariously rhapsodized about the search for camels. In a passage that referred to the founder of Islam, he wrote: "It is the one-humped, or Arabian, camel that we have in our mind's eye when we read of the prophet's mild-white darling." The Americans here had their choice of many kinds of camels—"the camel squadrons of Semiramis, and Xerxes's simoon of hedjins—of the proud Mahri stallion, exulting in his pure lineage—of the wind-challenging Nomanich, the never-failing Bicharieh, the wondrous Ababdeh hedjin, such as he that went from Cairo to Mecca, nine hundred miles, in nine days, nor paused to eat or drink." It was, however, "the caravan camel, the merchant-ship of the Sahara, first in the song when the night-bound drivers sing of sand—of the true warship of the desert"³³ that was selected. Although confused readers back home evidently scurried to dictionaries and atlases in order to comprehend exactly what they were reading about exotic lands, the story confirmed that the camel was capable of traveling great distances with little food or water, that is, it was perfect for the arid interior West.

After negotiating, the Americans found what they were looking for, and soon the camels were headed back to the United States on a steamship. Arriving in the bustling port of Indianola, Texas, the camels excited much interest. Some people regarded them with skepticism: Could the camels really measure up to the rigors of the West? The answer was yes—and no. Historian Harlan Fowler observed that "the truth was, the soldiers did not take too well to the camel." That was an understatement. The soldiers found in this odd-looking beast "none of the lovable qualities that the Arabs imputed to him."³⁴ Camels were considered to be smelly, ill-tempered, and even dangerous. They were difficult to ride at high speeds without most riders becoming, well, "sea-sick"—the term they often used for the jostling provided by these ships



Author's collection.

Fig. 2-4. As suggested by this illustration of “Camels in Nevada,” which appeared in *Harper’s Weekly* in 1877, the importation of these “ships of the desert” helped impart an Old World character to the arid American West.

of the desert. Plus, it was believed that camels held grudges! As proof of this latter claim, it was said that when an Arab was the focus of a camel’s ire, he would put his clothes nearby, and the camel would ferociously attack them, after which the camel and the thankful Arab would call a truce. Despite these alleged character flaws, government explorer Lt. Edward Fitzgerald Beale claimed that camels could “live on anything and thrive,” and go long periods without drinking. Beale added that “I have never seen or heard of one stumbling, or even making a blunder.” Whereas mules were desperate for water after a long trek, Beale humanized the camels by claiming that they seemed to view the mules’ distress “with great contempt.”³⁵

Through stories and news dispatches, readers soon learned that camels were used in a number of desert areas across the American West. These became part of the folklore of the West and added to the region’s mystique. An evocative illustration of “Camels in Nevada” (fig. 2-4) was published in *Harper’s Weekly* as part of a series about the West that ran in the 1870s. In it, the gangly-looking creatures saunter through the desert guided and ridden by modern day “Bedouins” in the vicinity of Death Valley. Although this image seems Middle Eastern enough, with a rider perched high atop the camel,

reports from this expedition reveal that the camels were used to haul supplies and equipment only, not for riding.³⁶ Those on the expedition had evidently learned by this time that riding a camel, either in the Middle East or in the Nevada desert, was no easy feat; most of the riding was done on the backs of trusty mules, and many simply preferred to walk rather than ride the cantankerous camels.

As historian Arthur Woodward noted, the camels used on the Nevada-California Border Survey of 1861 proved valuable transporters of all types of cargo in one of the most arid portions of the Intermountain West. Camels also found other uses and other owners, too. A telegraph operator reported that camels “owned by some Frenchmen in Virginia [City] . . . are now transporting salt from Humboldt [Nevada] to that place.”³⁷ Camel mania gained strength during the 1860s. No sooner had the transcontinental railroad been completed than Costello’s Great Show Circus Menagerie and Abyssinian Caravan arrived at Corinne City, Utah. The centerpiece in the show’s advertisement was an Arab-garbed man holding the reins of a towering two-humped camel—about as fine a symbol for the exotic as could be imagined³⁸—even though Arabs were (and are) more likely to ride dromedary camels instead.

But alas, despite this popular widespread interest in camels in the American West, they were met with opposition by many. As historian Woodward observed, camels “were cordially hated by owners of mule, ox, or horse drawn vehicles.” He suggests this was because those frightened animals “took off across country in every direction when they caught a whiff of camel odor or met the ungainly creatures face to face unexpectedly on the road.” Other factors for the camels’ demise in the nineteenth-century West included the outbreak of the Civil War, lack of training on the part of those who took care of them, and “the inhumanity of man and his intolerance toward innovation plus the ready trigger fingers of the angered teamsters.”

A look at legislation in the interior West confirms that the teamsters’ concerns and threats were not idle. They badgered the Nevada legislature so effectively that the Silver State passed a measure making it “unlawful for the owner or owners of any camel or camels, dromedary or dromedaries, to permit them to run at large on or about the public roads or highways of this State.” The law passed but was ultimately repealed in 1899, possibly to permit the camel races in Virginia City to be held.³⁹ This change of heart confirms the growing power of tourism in the West more than a century ago.

Despite their relatively short time in service, the camels of the West live on in legend. As some of them escaped captivity, reports of them were heard for many years. From Nevada and Utah to southern Arizona, miners and others

rubbed their eyes (or put down their whiskey bottles) to see an astounding sight—wild camels sauntering across the American desert. Among the most interesting sightings, if it can be called that, is a Chemehuevi Indian basket featuring a single-humped Arabian camel—an interesting example of how an exotic element can become part of traditional crafts. A circus even rounded up some feral camels near Flagstaff, Arizona, in 1880 and put them to work under the big tent.⁴⁰

Although unsuccessful, the camel experience in the interior West represented an effort to Orientalize the American West. Ironically, the only remaining physical evidence of the camels themselves in the West today exists in a museum that has the skeleton of the male camel named Said (sometimes written as Seid), who was killed by an older and evidently more ferocious camel named Touli in Los Angeles in 1861.⁴¹

Before leaving the western portion of the Great Basin, it is worth noting that near Frémont's pyramid is yet another symbol of Egypt, namely, a slightly less distinct feature that is interpreted as a sphinx by some. That patiently crouching creature, seemingly part human and part feline, is an enduring symbol of the power of ancient Egypt. In popular culture, the sphinx can signify any enigma or riddle. Some mysterious people can be enigmatic enough to warrant characterization as sphinxes, and when they are associated with the desert, that makes the association even more apt. In this regard, no denizen of the Nevada-California desert borderland was more enigmatic than Death Valley Scotty, the eccentric desert prospector and entrepreneur who bewildered America about a century ago. Always in the spotlight, Scotty was perennially involved in showy stunts and mysterious schemes, a number of them involving lost mines. When it was reported that Scotty's lost mine had been found, a *New York Times* editor was saddened because "once located on the map . . . it would quite likely be found that its treasure had a limit—that it was not the vestibule of Pluto's bullion chambers or propylaea of God Mammon's vaulted crypts, but just a hole in the ground, capable of petering out like the rest of them."⁴² Actually, Scotty's own demystification was far less noble. As it turned out, his fortune was about to be revealed as a pyramid scheme. When the already legendary Scotty was exposed for his involvement in a fraudulent mining scheme, the *Los Angeles Evening News* could not resist satirizing him as the sphinx whose mystery had been solved, though even that bad publicity did not diminish his appeal among gullible investors (fig. 2-5).

Given Scotty's reputation as a wheeler-dealer in America's hottest and driest desert region, this cartoon's association of Scotty with the desert sphinx was

“SCOTTY” NO LONGER IS A MAN OF MYSTERY



Fig. 2-5. On March 19, 1906, the *Los Angeles Evening News* featured a cartoon showing Death Valley Scotty as the sphinx, complete with a vulture perched ominously on his hat.

perfect. It conflated the American West with Egypt by rendering one of the West's own most colorful characters with what is arguably the world's most ancient figure. By the turn of the twentieth century, then, this most arid and inhospitable section of the West could still claim a connection, albeit sometimes satirically, with ancient Egypt.