



Source: Grasses and South Tufa, Mono Lake ©2007 Richard Kuepp

30 Years and Counting

From pencils to PCs, the lake endures

by Sally Gaines

Well, they have again enlisted me, the old timer, to write the essay for the 30th anniversary of the 1978 incorporation of the Mono Lake Committee. In the 20th anniversary essay, I reminisced about the early years of the cause; how a group of shaggy biologists learned to behave in attorneys' offices on the 30th floor in San Francisco, to lobby in Sacramento and D.C., and to travel non-stop around the state presenting a slide show to gain grassroots support and funds, and to attract the media.

This year my theme is the technological changes between doing business in 1978 versus 2008. Bear in mind, I am writing this in March 2007, so it will be out of date when read.

The Committee has had to keep up with worthy innovations just like other businesses, and staff has had to stay mentally youthful as the times change. Although Dave Gaines was the leader for the first ten years before his death in 1988, capable hands have carried on, growing ever more successful over the years. I have high praise for all the employees, from the first handful to the current several handfuls.

The physical indoor office space has improved only slightly, now offering a larger public area, and modern office equipment for staff, but they still work in tiny cubbyholes with plywood desks. When we opened the doors to headquarters, we were renting a building that was built as a dance hall for aqueduct workers back in the 1940s. We started with a card table and two folding chairs, a few posterboard displays, and sold T-shirts and bumperstickers. We manned it irregularly all summer, telling visitors what was happening to Mono Lake, and how to get down to South Tufa, as no pertinent road signs existed.

Next door on the property was the icehouse where large chunks of ice came sliding down the chute if you were lucky after inserting your quarters. If not, you could come over and complain to us. Too bad the ice company was in Yerington, Nevada. One day I came out after hearing a man shouting instructions up the chute. He had sent his small son up to un-jam the ice lined up on the tracks inside. After we purchased the buildings, the icehouse was converted into offices.

Since the Visitor Center was unheated, we retreated to our home office the first winter, then put in a wood-burning stove in the office area. The public area was freezing and nobody lingered over the displays. The phone system was two black rotary dial desk models, one that rang in the Visitor Center, one that rang in Dave's office at home, a block away. The staff always picked it up first, Dave a second later, and if the caller asked for him, he would announce himself. The current phones that sit on every desk have multiple buttons and do every trick from play hold music to connect conference calls.

Cell phones were unimaginable, much less car phones or satellite phones or tiny phones attached to your ear. Being constantly in touch was impossible. If someone didn't show up as planned, you waited a while and then left; you would figure it out later.

Calendars were on paper with pretty pictures like this one in your hands. On them you wrote appointments and such with a pen or pencil and kept them tacked to the wall. Now there are PDAs with little screens that you tap or type on or maybe you whisper to them, I don't know. If you like, the little screen will tell all your secrets to your laptop or PC. From looking at advertisements, perhaps one device does everything you need: calendar, camera, TV, video player, Internet, appointment reminder, alarm clock, GPS, hand warmer, sock danner, etc. Beats me. I use a pencil to write on a paper calendar, no electronics involved.

Which brings up typing. Thank goodness my mother insisted I take typing class as a high school freshman. The big manual machine had blank keys that took finger strength to depress. Now kindergarteners learn keyboarding.

At the Committee, our first year we had a typewriter complete with carbon paper and white-out, a great improvement over erasers with a stiff brush at one end. Then came the electric IBM Selectric with a changeable font ball, then an electronic version that could be "programmed" to type a form letter on a new piece of stationery. Hog dog!

Then came early computers which could do wonderful things in Word Perfect, even draw a box and sort a small mailing list alphabetically or by zip code, then print on Avery labels or paper pulled by tractor feed via a dot matrix printer. Yee ha!

As for preparing the *Newsletter* for the printing press company, we used rub-off letters for the headlines, typed the articles on a carbon ribbon typewriter, then did a lot of cutting and pasting onto translucent grid paper backlit on a light table. Correcting a misspelling meant cutting out one tiny letter to paste in, which was invariably lost until it reappeared at dinnertime stuck on the elbow of your shirt.

If you needed copies, you waited until you went to a big town for Xeroxing. Fax? What's that? Phone lines were just for talking, satellites were Sputnik.

I was at the mail and membership desk close to the woodstove, so in winter, I was too hot and everyone else was too cold, so on average we were just right. Our membership data was kept on Hollerith (IBM) cards, a deck that was taken to the mailing company in

Oakland every time we sent out a mailing such as the Newsletter. I typed new members onto a space on the card and filed it by zip. If you changed your address I removed your card (random access memory), typed a new one, and filed it anew.

We applied for and received bulk mail permit number one in Lee Vining. Once a day, I walked over to the Post Office with a big canvas LL Bean bag to deliver and pick up mail. If we were doing a big bulk mail, I'd take my kids' red wagon as transport. Actually, we still walk an LL Bean canvas bag back and forth each day for the mail. The predictions of a paperless society were incorrect.

If a group invited us to give a talk, we loaded up the slide projector and showed slides. Our cameras didn't need batteries and film was mailed off to the Kodak processing center, returning two weeks later.

The first Bike-A-Thon saw no lycra, no bike shoes, and only a few helmets on a dozen riders mounting ten speed bicycles. Energy bars and drinks had not been invented yet, so raisins and lemonade kept us going until the next rest stop. We figured our mileage from road signs, not handlebar computers.

Gasoline prices rose fast in 1978, and we presumed that when a gallon cost \$1.50, all the Winnebagos would be off the road.

While everything inside the office has moved fast in 30 years, our outside activities like field trips and canoe tours remain about the same. The outside landscape putters along on a slower time frame. The lake has risen as the creeks resumed their flows, but a walk through the sagebrush, along the beach, up a canyon or mountain is as peaceful as ever. There you see evidence of glaciers, volcanoes, with obsidian chips at your feet.

The food chain at the lake remains as simple as it is prolific; the winter green lake clears to blue with the chewing of the shrimp and flies which attract the California Gulls back every spring to nest, and the migrating shorebirds stop to feed on their ways north and south.

People still enjoy getting unstuck from their automobiles to walk the long solitary beaches, meadows, creeks, and mountains, marveling at the wide open landscape under a blue, blue sky. The lake endures. Long Live Mono Lake!

Sally Gaines is the co-founder of the Mono Lake Committee and Chair of the Board of Directors. She lives in the Eastern Sierra with her husband Rick, keeping track of her globetrotting children Vireo and Sage. To this day, swimming in Mono Lake remains one of her favorite activities—and she'll be the first one to tell you, you don't need anything high tech for that!