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THE GREAT BASIN.

Some Interesting Facts About It—Lecture by John Muir.

John Muir, the distinguished geologist and naturalist who has been termed the Thoreau of the Sierra, lectured before the Sacramento Literary Institute at the Congregational Church last evening, on "The Great Basin." He was received by a large and very superior audience. He spoke for nearly two hours and kept the close attention of his audience throughout. Mr. Muir is not a lecturer; he is a simple unskilled talker, a man who lives in the free air of the mountains, and whose highest ambition is to delve into the wondrous mysteries of nature. He talks to his audience simply, as if speaking to a small circle of friends. Graced by the arts of oratory his lectures would be wonderful productions. He said his subject was too great for one evening's talk; he could, therefore, only sketch its outlines, skim over the surface of what should form a whole course of lectures. Mr. Muir said that he made his maiden speech in Sacramento two years ago, and was so kindly received that in returning he felt like coming among old friends. He had brothers and sisters in number, in society and in business, and so he thought it didn't make much difference if he for one wandered off to commune with the mountains and the forests. About fifteen years ago he went to take a walk in the woods, and he had been in the woods ever since. Perhaps some day he might come out and mingle with men, but just now his loves and friends were all with mountains and the trees, the birds and the fishes, the rocks and streams of this beautiful Pacific coast. The great basin is bounded on the one side by the Wasatch and on the other by the Sierra Nevada mountains, and is some 500 miles in width. On the blackboard he exhibited a cross section of the basin. It was called a basin by Fremont, because all the waters that pour into it are absorbed in it, not a drop reaching the ocean; but it is in reality table land and not a basin. In the basin are over one hundred ranges of mountains, the lowest being 8,500 feet above the level of the sea, the highest 18,000 feet, and the average height being about 10,000 feet. Each of the chief ranges he named and gave the altitudes and location. Most of the valleys are covered with sage brush, with here and there alkali flats which are the dried up basins of ancient lakes. On the dryest of the plains some beautiful flowers are found, and rarely beautiful sage foliage, and then up in the mountains are little gardens of floral beauty. Occasionally you find at the altitude of 8,000 and 9,000 feet, coniferous forests, though to look across the basin one would think there was no forest growth at all. In all the basin no oak grows. The basin is highest in the middle, with a dip each way, and a gradual declension toward the waters of the Columbia on the north, and the Colorado on the south. There are what are called rivers in the basin, but they are small, but a few miles long. The Humboldt is the only real river. Reese river a grasshopper can jump over anywhere, and the Twin rivers are but about four feet wide. We always consider mountains the home of stream sources, and in the Sierras you are hardly ever out of hearing of falling water, but in the mountains of the great basin there is no such thing. The rivers spring up suddenly, flow but a little distance, and then disappear. From this rule he excluded the streams of the Wasatch and the Sierra. He next took up the lakes of the basin, Pyramid, Walker, Winnemucca, etc., and described each. The Wasatch mountains received about as much snow as the Sierras and send forth abundant, full flowing streams, such as Bear river, Sevier river, Provo river, etc. He described Utah Lake, 25 by 10 miles, receiving several streams and discharging by the Jordan into Great Salt Lake. Great Salt Lake he also described briefly. He next considered the deserts of the great basin, giving the dimensions of each. The deserts are but the beds of vanished lakes; the great American desert was once a part of Great Salt Lake, which latter once stood at a level 900 feet above that of to-day, and in those days Utah Lake and the River Jordan did not exist. The water lines and benches establish these facts indisputably. The deserts are covered by the sediment deposited by the old lakes, and this is so filled with various salts that little vegetation can grow there, and so the deserts are the most barren and desolate wastes. Some of the curiosities of the great basin he described, illustrating with diagrams upon the blackboard. One of these was a seeming river of fire, which rolled across the desert from mountain top to mountain top, a scene he observed the past summer near Eureka, and which he said in grandeur of effect surpasses all powers of description. Other beautiful scenes, mirages and electrical and atmospheric phenomena, he described and illustrated. He described the desert dust whirlwinds which nearly all travelers have observed. By diagrams he next illustrated the cloud bursts peculiar to the Great Basin, and which so frequently prove so terribly destructive. On the day the cloud bursts fell on Austin and Eureka, for they occurred on the same day, though one hundred miles apart, he was on a mountain top 40 miles from Austin and witnessed a cloud burst in that mountain. Subsequently he found that twelve cloud bursts took place on that day, so there is nothing local in them, and they are not due to the smelting furnace fires, as some suppose. A cloud burst is nothing more than a thunder storm, but it may be called a condensed one, for such a thing as a cloud bursting is impossible. He explained that the rush of water is but an accumulation in a canyon from a heavy rain storm. The lower tributaries send their supply down slowly, the higher ones meet suddenly, and flowing more precipitously, their waters overtake those of the lower ones and fill and choke the canyon, and down comes the accumulation, bearing bowlders and trees on its bosom, and sweeping away towns in its course. The birds and animals of the great basin are few. The mountain sheep is the noblest animal of them all. He is hard to kill, alert and wild, and will be one of the last of our animals to become extinct. There are a few mule deer, so called from their large ears. There are a few antelope, though most of them have been killed off. In a tramp of 2,800 miles last year, he found but one flock of antelope. Coyotes are found in plenty. The wolverine lives in the great basin, and he looks as if he is connected by relationship with the bear. Indians and white hunters, alike, are afraid of him. Never a bear nor a bear track can be found in all the basin. Squirrels are plentiful; rock wrens he found in the forests and on the mountains, so unused to man as not to fear him, and beside him the thrush sings in the mountains. Trout in the streams are few. He devoted a few moments to the human beings living in the Great Basin, and explained the agricultural and irrigation systems practiced by the Mormons. He thought the capacity of Utah to support a given population had about reached its limit, as nearly all the water is now utilized for irrigation. He found that the Mormons were pushing north into Idaho, and south into Arizona, in which directions colonies, fully equipped, are sent constantly. He never met a people so wrong-headed on religion, and so right-headed on practical, and especially agricultural, affairs. His description of the customs and doctrines of the Mormons was very amusing. He then took up the geologic history and formation of the great basin, which he illustrated with numerous chalk sketches, that had evidently been prepared with great care. He believed the great basin was once filled with great fresh water lakes all connected, and with a great outlet by way of the north to the ocean. There are now but five glacial lakes in the mountains of the great basin. The mountain ranges all trend north and south, and when the lakes girdled all the ranges, these mountains were covered with glaciers. He then explained in detail the evidences which led him to these conclusions, elaborating the glacial theory and pointing out the undeniable marks the glacier leaves behind it.