

Title: Getting to the Bottom of Lake Tahoe

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Summary: Historical Myth a Month-Myth # 151

by Guy Rocha, Nevada State Archivist

The BS associated with Lake Tahoe may be as deep as the lake. That's if you believe the Sierra Nevada lake has a bottom. Some claim a fresh-water monster, equivalent to Scotland's Loch Ness monster and affectionately named Tahoe Tessie, lives in the alpine lake. Others tell tales of dead bodies sinking to the lake bottom still intact today because of frigid water temperatures. They include Chinese woodcutters from the late 19th century and victims of 20th century mafia hits. Perhaps every sizeable lake in the world has its equivalent stories, but what do we actually know and why? Stories of bottomless lakes seem to be very popular. However, Lake Tahoe has been sounded and scientifically mapped using the latest technologies. All the depths are known. We can thank Nevada journalist, writer, and politician Sam Davis for giving us the tall tale of The Mystery of the Savage Sump (1901) which claimed that Lake Tahoe had a hole in its bottom and was connected to the lower levels of the Comstock mines. The hole was plugged or unplugged as needed to manipulate the price of mining stock, or so Davis's tale went. William Meeker, a San Francisco stock speculator involved in the elaborate stock market swindle was murdered in 1869 at Lake Tahoe by Colonel Clair, his partner in crime, according to Davis, and his mangled body found in the scalding waters of the Savage Mine sump. The short story is pure humbug and a hoax. Then again, if there were a hole in the bottom of Lake Tahoe, maybe Tahoe Tessie commutes to Pyramid and Walker lakes in western Nevada. Both lakes have their tales of water monsters. However, there is no hole and Lake Tahoe is not bottomless. That would help explain all those bodies floating at the lake bottom after so many years. The stories are myriad about a submersible under the direction of the famed Jacques Cousteau detecting perfectly preserved bodies including those of drowned Chinese woodcutters. The truth is that Philippe Cousteau, Jacques' grandson, visited Lake Tahoe in April 2002, but there is no record of Jacques ever seeing the jewel of the Sierra, much less his being involved in an underwater expedition or using a motorized submersible camera to explore the icy depths. One online story explains that Jacques Cousteau didn't follow through on his plan because "a stop was quickly put on the mission by some powerful people." Claiming that the Lake Tahoe area had a long history associated with organized crime figures, and recalling The Godfather II movie (1974), we are told in the website, "You see, it is so deep, so cold, -- so crystal clear, that there were a few people that were worried that a guy wearing concrete shoes, swimming with the fishes, if you will—might pop into the camera's sights. Therefore, even though the technology is there, no one knows exactly how deep the lake is or what secrets it might hold." Speaking of fish stories, this website story is a whopper! Dr. Graham Kent of the University of California, San Diego's Scripps Institute of Oceanography who has extensively studied Lake Tahoe's depths finds these flights of fancy incredible. Kent is unaware of Jacques Cousteau ever visiting Tahoe, but more importantly he points out dead bodies would not last even at the bottom of the frigid lake. If the fish and the crawdads didn't eat them, the indigenous bacteria eventually would. The naïve will continue to swallow these imaginative Lake Tahoe stories hook, line, and sinker. Yet in the end discerning minds will see through the fish tales that pass as fact and have a good laugh at the never-ending gullibility of human beings. Photo credit: Site of the future Sand Harbor State Park on Lake Tahoe's eastern shore,

looking north, ca mid-1960s. Photo by Don Boone, Nevada State Library and Archives. The Historical Myths of the Month are published in the Reno Gazette-Journal and in the Sierra Sage, Carson City/Carson Valley.

For the complete "Historical Myth a Month" series, visit

<http://nevadaculture.org/docs/nsla/archives/myth/sitemap.htm>