

Name _____ Date _____

Ground Afire

There is a narrow valley in the western United States. Part of it lies in California and part in Nevada. The Shoshone Indians claimed this land and named it Tomesha, which means “ground afire.” This strip is from six to fifteen miles wide and stretches for 140 miles between steep mountain walls. Rock canyons close it in. The Indians learned how to live there. They knew where to find food and water. When it was hot, they moved up to the high peaks where the air was cool. Nothing lived in its low part during summer. It blazed with heat both day and night.

One day in 1849, the first white men came to this place. They did not know this dry land they had reached. They hoped they would find a short way to California and gold. Their trip was a long one. Each day brought more hardships. They did not know the way out of that hot, dry land. Days passed, while food and water grew less and less. Weeks in the desert left the men starved, sick and thirsty. At last two of them did find a way out for the group. As they all left, one man said, “Goodbye Death Valley.” From that day, this has been its name.

More men came to Death Valley. Some hoped to find gold and silver, but they found none. For a few years men mined borax there. Borax is used in making glass and pottery, but then men found other places where it was easier to get borax. The mines were closed. The mining towns became ghost towns.

Scientists came to this land to study it. They found that it had been a desert at first. Then most of it was covered by a large lake. The lake dried up and once more the land was left dry and hot. Dried lake beds caked with salt are found in the south of Death Valley. In the north there are sand dunes. The lowest point in North America is located in the south central part. It is 279.6 feet below sea level.

This is the driest place in North America. Yet it has springs and marshes with much water. It is one of the hottest places in the world, too. Much of the time it is 125 degrees. Yet in winter the air makes it a pleasant place. The sky can stay a clear, bright blue for months.

Then in a flash the wind can rise. The rain falls in sheets. Men have drowned when caught in one of these bad storms. Death Valley was made a national monument in 1933. It has roads and tourist inns now, but the land has not changed much since the Indians named it Tomesha - “Ground afire.”