



The Osceola Ditch Story

In the dry deserts of the West, water is often called “liquid gold,” being the precious resource that it is. But in the 1880’s in the Osceola Mining District, water was the key to gold itself. Without ample water, there would be no gold.

Water and Gold

In 1872, the first gold was discovered in what would become the Osceola Mining District, three miles west of what is now Great Basin National Park. And although around 100 claims were filed, producing gold from the “lode” deposits was difficult, as the gold was encased in solid rock. It was the discovery of placer gold deposits five years later that gave Osceola a jump start. Placer gold has already eroded away from its host rock, requiring little more

than a pick, shovel, a gold pan, and water to retrieve the precious metal.

As the Osceola District grew, so did its need for water. To add to the placer mining boom, there were plans to begin hydraulic mining, using streams of water under pressure to erode hillsides and expose the gold. Hydraulic mining would require significant volumes of water --water that Osceola did not have.

The West Ditch

In the early 1880’s, a daring plan was proposed. Build a ditch diverting water from the creeks draining off the western slope of the South Snake Range. By 1885, the dream was a reality. In that year, up to 175 men, working for the Osceola Gravel Mining Company completed construction of the sixteen-mile ditch at a cost of \$80,000. The increased water flow enabled the limited use of hydraulics. The

force of gravity brought the water down into increasingly small pipes until the force of the streams coming through the eight-inch nozzle at the bottom was sufficient to wash the mountainside away from the gold. Gold production increased appreciably during production hours, but those hours were limited to about two hours per day.

The East Ditch

If one ditch improved production, think of what two could do! Plans were soon underway for a second ditch diverting water from creeks on the east slope of the range.

The second ditch, two miles longer in length, proved more difficult to construct. Due to the frequent rock outcrops, enclosed wooden troughs or flumes were

often necessary. The flumes carried the precious liquid over areas where digging was not possible. For the flumes, Ponderosa pine lumber was hauled from Mount Moriah, the South Fork of Big Wash, and Baker Creek Canyon. A head gate and rock dam were installed at Stella Lake to increase water capacity.

Construction of the east ditch began in 1889 and ended in 1890 with a cost of \$108,000. Expectations for the investment were very high, but the increase in profit was a disappointing \$4000 the first year. A series of dry winters provided little water and shrunk the wood of the flumes. A substantial portion of the available water leaked through the cracks between the boards long before it reached its destination. Water theft was commonplace. By the early 1900’s, both the ditches and the town were largely deserted. In all, Osceola recorded \$1,775,000 in placer ore sales between 1877 and 1901.



The Town of Osceola

At its peak, the town of Osceola was home to over 1500 people and was booming with its two stores and several saloons, as well as a hotel, Chinese restaurant, livery stable, butchershop, and post office. But like so many Great Basin mining towns, Osceola was short-lived. Over the years, flash

floods have erased the streets, and in 1950 a fire destroyed most of the remaining buildings. Remnants of the stone general store and a few wooden structures remain standing, and the cemetery (on the roadside hill west of town) is still intact.

Visiting the Town Site

The town site of Osceola is accessible from two points along highway 50. One takes off from the Sacramento Pass Recreation/Rest Area. The other leaves the highway at the historic marker on the west side of the

mountain range. A local miner, who is working the tailings, currently lives in Osceola; please be courteous of personal privacy.

The Osceola Ditch Trail

The Osceola Ditch Trail can be accessed from the Osceola turn-out, 4.7 miles up the Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive. From Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive, after 0.25 miles, the trail joins the Osceola Ditch. At this intersection you can either follow the trail north, towards Strawberry Creek, or south, towards Lehman Creek.

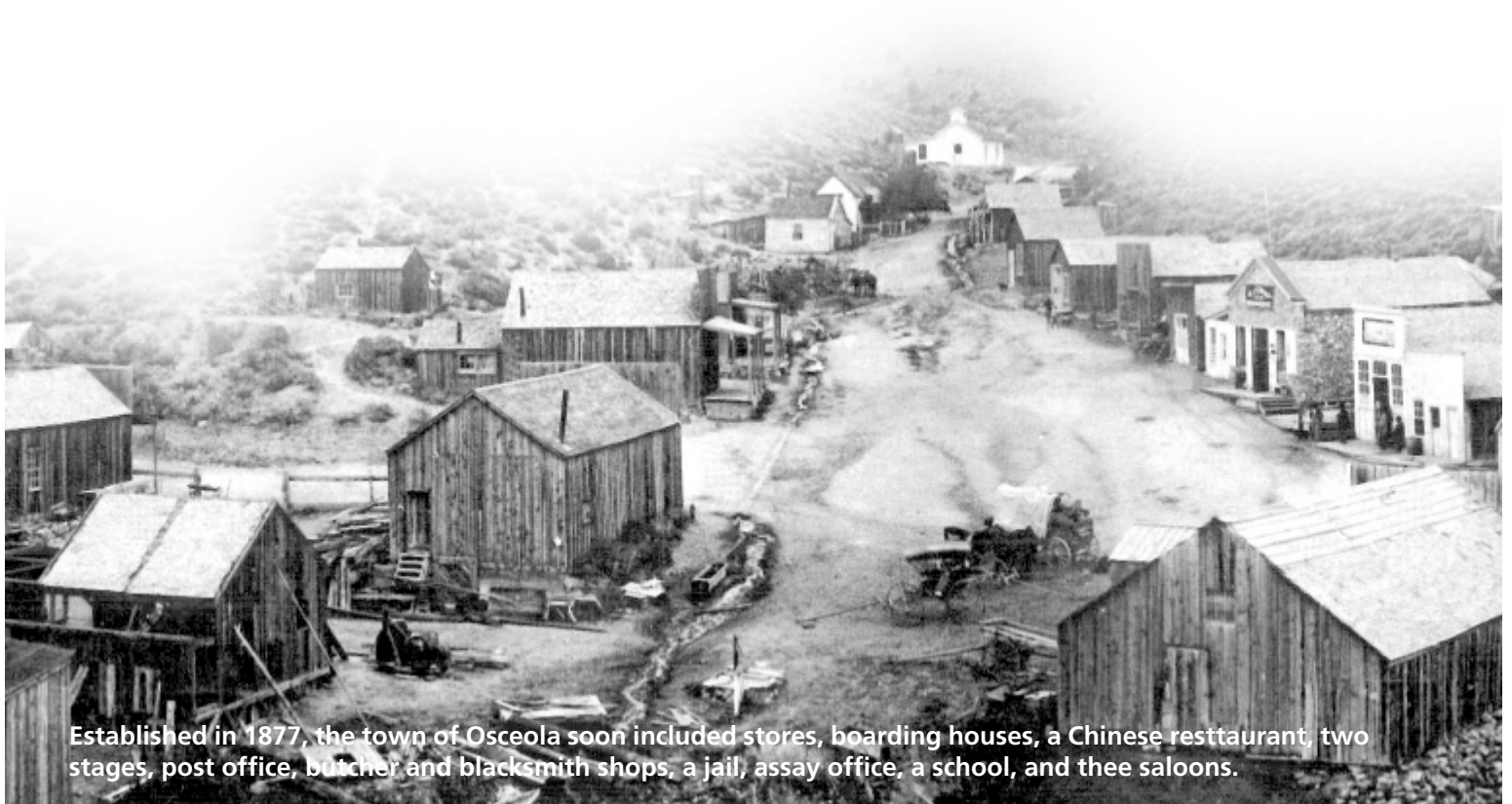
North Trail (4.8 miles one way, drops 500 feet). Turn left at the junction with the ditch and follow the historic flume. After 1 mile, the trail joins an old road bed which will lead you to Strawberry Creek. The trail ends at the junction of Strawberry Creek road. The trail can also be hiked the opposite direction, using Strawberry Creek as the trailhead.

South trail (1.5 miles one way, gains 150 feet then drops 150 feet). Turn right at the junction with the ditch and follow the historic flume back up towards Wheeler Peak Scenic Drive. Use caution when

crossing the roadway to continue the trail towards Lehman Creek. After a little more than 1 mile, the trail leaves the Ditch and crosses over a saddle and drops back down to the ditch where the maintained trail ends.

Cautions There are many loose rocks filling up the historic ditch. Watch your footing when crossing these rock fields. Also when following the Osceola Ditch south, watch for traffic as there is no warning for vehicles of a pedestrian crossing.

Regulations Cultural resources, such as the Osceola Ditch, are fragile and irreplaceable. The Archaeological Resource Protection Act (ARPA) protects them for the benefit of all. It is illegal to disturb any artifact in the park. Pets, weapons and vehicles are **not** allowed on the trails or in the backcountry of the National Park



Established in 1877, the town of Osceola soon included stores, boarding houses, a Chinese restaurant, two stages, post office, butcher and blacksmith shops, a jail, assay office, a school, and three saloons.