I REMEMBER
THE GREAT
SALT LAKE
GREAT SALT LAKE BEACHES

The freeway sign reads: "Great Salt Lake Beaches." The exit leads to the broad, flat shore where swimmers and sun worshippers can enjoy the balmy air and buoyant waters in the summer time. The area is barren of all growth, the salt having made everything sterile on the lakeward side of the freeway. The beach is almost as flat as the top of a table. This bleak vista is somewhat compensated for by the lake and the scenic panorama it presents.

It was not always this way. When I was a boy, the land behind the shore was marked with rolling sand hills that supported many shrubs and desert plants that seemed to thrive in the sand.

In the spring there were numerous wild flowers curiously adapted to this unusual microcosm where enough salt had leached from the sand to allow this springtime display. The hills, built by the wind from the sands washed from the lake over the centuries, were composed of what is known as "oolite" sand particles which are spherical in shape. The hills varied in width from a hundred yards to a quarter of a mile or more. They seemed to form a buffer between the lake and the land beyond.
In the summer time, my playmates and I used to roam these sand hills. We would often pick the flowers and bring them home only to find that many of them didn't seem to respond when placed in water. Our yearly ritual after school closed for the summer was for us boys to have all our hair cut off and to go barefoot until school started again.

It was an agreeable experience when our feet were tender at the outset, to walk through the sand that felt so soft after trudging on hard, rough ground that made us wince at every step. Sometimes the sand was hot and uncomfortable to walk on, but one had only to push his feet down an inch or two to feel the delicious coolness of the damp sand that lay beneath the surface.
Lake
Sky
and
Sand
Today there is no place around the perimeter of the lake where the ecological impact was felt more than the four miles of beach and adjacent land between Black Rock and the old Saltair amusement park. Most of this was due to the activities of the Garfield smelter of the American Smelting and Refining Company (now Kennecott Copper Corp.). The sand hills and shoreline were literally torn up and removed to provide a limestone flux for the copper smelting process (the Oolite sand is a calcium carbonate). For many decades a clamshell steam shovel could be seen loading steel gondolas that were hauled to the smelter. This relentless process left ugly scars on the land in the form of sinkholes and uneven excavation of the surrounding ground.

Millions of tons of material were removed in this way, never to be returned. Then the highway and freeway construction totally altered the land. True, the land was leveled and the roadways constructed, leaving the area as you see it today. But what you see today is completely different from that sight that greeted us many years ago. There is not a single natural feature of the shoreline in this stretch of the beach which has not been removed, changed, or altered. Even the old Saltair amusement park has vanished without a trace.

In these days of ecological consciousness, I can close my eyes and see those great sand hills overlooking the inland sea. I can once more look down and see the line where beach and hills met, where sage and greasewood hundreds of years in the making yielded to the harsher alkaline beach. What a great natural asset has disappeared up the smokestacks of the smelter!

"...all our pleasant things are laid waste."

Isaiah 64:11
SALT FROM THE LAKE

In the beginning \\
there was the wheelbarrow

and the scoop shovel

and backbreaking labor
In the winter of 1857-58, Brigham Young sent a quantity of salt to the commander of the United States Army Detachment at Fort Bridger. The military force under his command had been sent out to put down the mythical Mormon Rebellion. In spite of their need, the commander refused the offer, saying that he would not accept gifts from the enemy.

On the basis of that incident, one may conclude that the settlers had already begun the manufacture of salt, most likely from the waters of the Great Salt Lake. Some of the earliest attempts had been made by boiling the salt water. But these attempts were soon superseded. With a salt content of about 20%, it was possible to extract salt from the water by solar evaporation, a process that is still used today.
The lake yielded up her salt. My family knew the savor of salt.

I was raised on salt, so to speak, because my father earned his living by working in a salt factory. The salt company, located near the eastern shore of the lake, was first known as the Inland Crystal Salt Company, then it was renamed the Royal Crystal Salt Company, and finally it was acquired by the Morton Salt Company.

I remember in the 1930's that the plant could process about 150 tons of salt in an 8 hour day. This amount has no doubt increased considerably since that time.
I remember as a boy that the salt "harvest" took place in the late summer. The water pumped from the lake was directed into vast shallow ponds (of many square miles) confined by dikes of wood and mud. The water was then allowed to evaporate into a brine or saturated solution for about 90 days. When the salt crystals had formed to a depth of 8 or so inches, the flow of water was shut off and the ponds were allowed to drain.

Then the harvest began. The ponds were plowed up like a field in preparation for planting. I clearly remember horses pulling plows to break up the hard crystallized salt deposit. Dozens of men then moved in with wheelbarrows and shovels to gather the salt and deposit it in storage piles beside the railroad tracks. They laid planks on the wet salt for a track for their wheelbarrows. Then they built ramps up which they pushed the heavy wheelbarrows to dump the salt in the storage piles which were often as much as ten feet in height. I remember how I marveled at the heavy manual labor it took to move the salt into the piles.
To move the salt from the stockpile to the box cars, again the wheelbarrow, the ramp, and muscle power were used.
You may never have seen a person with goiter, or, for that matter, know what a goiter is. This enlargement of the thyroid gland in the front of the lower neck has been practically eliminated from our society. But I can remember a time when it was not unusual to see people with that condition, some with terribly enlarged glands. It seemed to me most of these people were in their middle years and often tried to hide their condition by wearing high collars or a form of scarf.

I was about ten years old when someone discovered that a small amount of iodine in the diet could largely prevent goiter from developing. This came about from observations and studies of people in various parts of the country where it was found that those living in areas where there was iodine in the drinking water or where fish were consumed in considerable quantities were relatively free from goiter.

About this time, I remember a man who came to our village where the salt factory was located. This man had the innovative idea that he could mix small quantities of an iodine compound with table salt and thereby provide the necessary iodine to the diet to prevent goiter and other ills. He rented one of the vacant houses and set up what he called the "Iodi-Salt Company." I often went into the building and saw the simple operation that he had set up. Today we would call it a "mom and pop" operation. The equipment consisted of a sizeable mixing machine similar to a plaster mixer—only larger—and some equipment for packaging his brand of salt. The process was simply mixing a small quantity of potassium iodide in powder form with the table salt purchased from our salt company. The treated salt was then packaged and marketed.
I don't remember what happened to the "Iodi-Salt Company," for it was no longer in operation after a disastrous fire destroyed the salt mill in 1927. When the salt mill was rebuilt a few years later, the Royal Crystal Salt Company began making and selling iodized salt. Other salt companies did the same. I like to think that the manufacture of iodized salt started at the Royal Crystal factory at Saltair and that I can recall some of the circumstances of its origin.
BOATING ON THE LAKE

Living so close to the lake, I found it a source of endless fascination. I spent many hours as a child beachcombing its shores. The beach and shore were lined with driftwood of all kinds—logs, planks, tree limbs, parts of wrecked boats, rags and bottles. The bottles were highly prized because we could sell them to the junk man who came around periodically to buy all kinds of stuff like that. There were other things, too, that were valuable to us. The old nails, screws and bolts of copper or brass—once removed from the wreckage of the old boats—could also be sold. Some of the wood was perfectly good to be used in repairing and building chicken coops and other outbuildings. My father used to gather wood that he would stack in the yard to saw and split for firewood. Most of the firewood we used during the winter was driftwood from the shore of the lake. I often wondered why my father was so obsessed with the collection of wood and the need for cutting and splitting when it was far beyond the need we had.

The answer did not come to me until years later after I had visited Switzerland and the ancestral home in the highlands of Bern. Here I found the ages-old ritual of woodcutting, splitting and storing as the essential spring and summer activity in preparing for the coming winter. The neatly stacked wood in a protected place adjacent to the dwelling was a source of pride for each homeowner.

In later years, I built various watercraft to explore the lake. First there was a rowboat in which I took great pride, but which was stolen from me on two different occasions and recovered. The third time it was lost forever. I then built a canoe that was used more on fresh water than on the lake. The craft was light and could be carried on the top of the car. I could take it almost everywhere. My last effort was a sizeable sailboat that served me well and earned me the nickname of "Cap."
There was a time in the early 1930's when a friend and I decided to take a trip to Antelope Island. With a borrowed boat and rented motor, we took off from the pier at Saltair and headed for the island. It was a thoroughly delightful cruise. We reached the island in a short time and continued up along its west side, coming in to shore several times.

Near the north end of the island the motor gave out on us, and we could not get it re-started. We finally had to beach the boat, stash the motor, and resolve our predicament. We were faced with two problems: how to get home, and how to get the boat and motor back. The first problem was the most urgent. We decided to pass over the spine of Antelope Island, which at this location not very high and did not require much climbing. Descending the eastern slope, a vast panorama was laid out in front of us.

We could see the entire Wasatch Front extending from Ogden on the north to Salt Lake City on the south. A flat stretch of sand—which had been covered by water a few years before—separated the island from the former shoreline. It was now possible to walk from the island to the eastern shore of the Salt Lake.
This is what we decided to do... to walk home.

A ranch house lay about three miles south of us. We made our way to the ranch and found several workers there who were very friendly to us. They took us in a truck down a road on the east side of the island to the southern end, where we parted company with them. We then began the long walk home.

I would guess the walk was more than ten miles. It was way after midnight when we got home. A week or so later, I hired a man from the boat harbor to retrieve the boat and motor.
Portraits left by N.R. Hacken, many assumed to be self-portraits...
THE WORKBOAT "RUTH"

Like a beached whale, the old workboat "Ruth" lies stranded and helpless on the gray sands off the south shore of Antelope Island. Where once she floated in water eight or more feet in depth, she was left here high and dry following the receding waters of the late 1930's and early 1940's.

The low water level persisted until the 1960's, then it rose slowly, accelerating in the 80's to reach the highest point in the lake's history.

The rise was too late for the "Ruth," for she disintegrated in the sun and heat of the low water years, leaving her bleached bones scattered about.

A converted pleasure boat, her main task for many years was to tow large live-stock barges back and forth between Antelope Island and Saltair, where a holding corral was built adjacent to the tracks of the railroad. The barges seemed to be quite large, and I would guess that each one could haul 25 head of cattle and about twice that number of sheep.
Ever since the early settlement days, Antelope Island was used for livestock. Originally the tithing herds of the Mormon Church were kept here—until the land came under private ownership.

Buffalo were introduced and seemed to thrive there; I still remember once a year when a buffalo hunt was conducted, and the meat was brought to the resort at Saltair for a big buffalo feed. I was surprised how good the meat was. In my young mind, it was every bit as good as beef. I haven't tasted buffalo since then, so I have no way of knowing whether my taste buds have changed in the intervening years.

I remember that in certain years the "Ruth" would bring in barges loaded down with huge sacks of wool... I'd never seen such big sacks. They seemed to be eight or more feet in length and as big around as two men could reach. They were really awkward to handle, for it took several men to move them into the freight cars.
Looking westward from certain places in the northern part of Salt Lake Valley, on a clear day you can see forever. The Great Salt Lake provides a break in the mountain-rimmed valley that makes it possible to see glimpses of the flat horizon between the islands where lake and sky meet. A prominent feature on this horizon is an island that extends from the south end of the lake about 15 miles northward. It is really an isolated extension of the Stansbury Mountains and is called Stansbury Island.

It is uninhabited, dry and desolate but it projects its silhouette to thousands of Salt Lakers every day. In the morning sun its flat gray appearance reflects its barren character. Toward late afternoon, however, its appearance changes gradually to provide more warmth of color until it stands out in bold dark contrast against an often brilliant and spectacular sunset.

I was quite young when I learned that the outline of this island could be used as a calendar of the seasons as they came and went. By observing where the sun would set behind the island, we could determine the time of year. Although we had a calendar, we casually used island time as an approximate back up. We could be particularly aware of the winter and summer solstices when the sun had reached its ultimate point of travel, north or south, then seemed to hesitate and reverse its direction. With the extreme points fixed, the equinoxes and months of the year could be fairly well determined.

I remember my mother saying in her native German after noting the winter solstice, "Jetzt kommt die Sonne wieder zurück." (Now the sun is coming back again).

The points shown on the illustration (on the previous page) are approximate and would change with the distance of the observer from the island. The illustration is for locations near the east shore of the lake. From Salt Lake City, the points of solstice would be considerably farther north and south of the island because the island’s size is reduced due to distance and perspective.
RUDOLPH VALENTINO
AT THE SALTAIR RESORT

In the 1920's there was no one in the world of moving pictures that could match Rudolph Valentino for popularity as a romantic actor. At the peak of his career, in about 1924 or 1925, he made an appearance at Saltair Resort that the people of Utah remembered for many years afterward. I was a young boy of about twelve and observed this occurrence while peddling popcorn and peanuts from a basket.

The trains which carried passengers to the resort were crowded to overflowing. Extra cars were added for the occasion. Automobiles kept the dusty roads choked with traffic in two directions—from Salt Lake and from Garfield. Early in the evening, automobiles were parking at the salt works, and crowds of people were walking and running over a mile to get a glimpse of Valentino. Cars were being parked in the sagebrush, any place where space could be found. Then a shuttle car was sent out from Salt Lake to carry people from the remote parking places around the salt works to the Saltair Resort. No one had ever seen anything like this before.

The great dance floor at Saltair was one of the largest in the west. It fairly rocked with excitement as the thousands congregated there. The floor and the excited crowd seemed to suit Valentino admirably. He danced with his beautiful wife in various exhibitions which brought thunderous applause from his admirers. My view of Valentino from a distance was enough to excite my imagination into becoming one of his admirers.

At about midnight the Valentinos departed. Then the real chaos began. The trains which carried the people to the resort now were saddled with the task of transporting them back to Salt Lake City. Several extra trains were needed. Then came the exodus of the cars—a continual stream heading east for Salt Lake or south toward Garfield. It must have been 3 a.m. before all the cars were finally gone.
In Xanadu did Kublai Khan a
stately pleasure dome decree.

* Pronounced "Saltair"
In the aftermath, huge amounts of garbage were left behind, and it took the disposal crews until the middle of the next day to clean things up. The garbage dump was near the salt works, and I remember the piles of debris being burned. Among them were thousands of programs with Valentino’s picture on them. I often think what good collectors’ items these would be today.