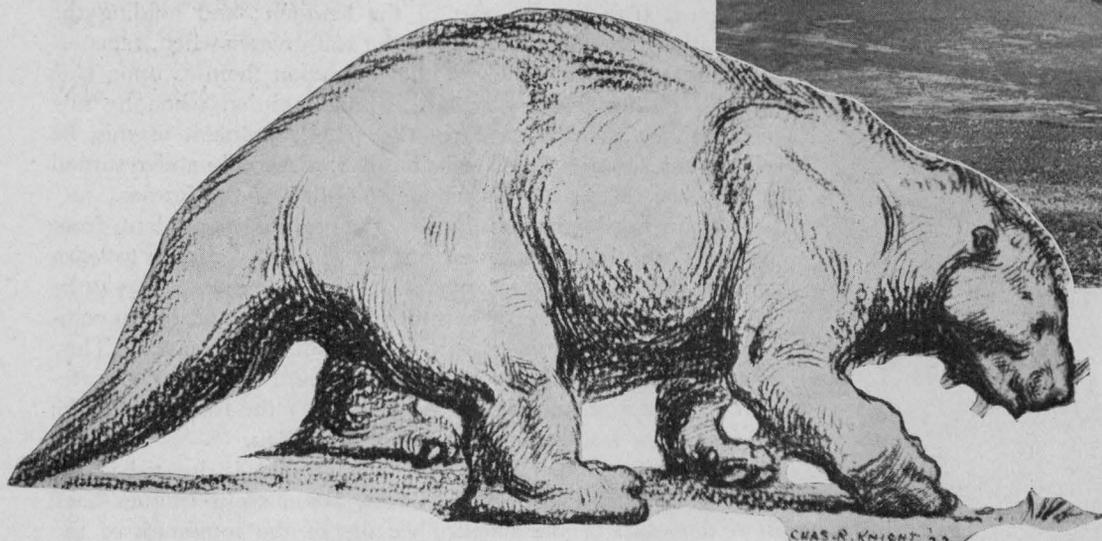


Soil washing down from the mountains into Eagle Valley covered the footprints, preserving them for later scientific searchers. The State prison, site of the discoveries, is in the circle at the extreme right

Below is the beast that made the Nevada tracks. The Mylodon was about the size of the modern rhinoceros and walked curiously on the outside edges of its feet



By CHESTER STOCK

Sloth

THE

IN much the same manner that a print of man's hand or foot leads to individual identification, so fossil footprints reveal the kinds of creatures who unwittingly have left their mark on the sands of time. Some four-footed animals, whose tracks have been uncovered in ancient rock formations, furnish for posterity only this evidence of a former existence. On the other hand, tracks like those of a dinosaur convey something more tangible. Scientific fact and popular fancy have done much these days to make the layman dinosaur-conscious. But realization that particular tracks were left by reptiles now long extinct comes largely from demonstration that the skeletal parts and bodily form of these animals correspond exactly to those surmised from the imprints.

Curiously enough, fossil footprints of extinct mammals have not been found so often as have those made by reptiles or birds. Among these occurrences one of the most noteworthy is in western Nevada: imprints of prehistoric mammals uncovered in the course of quarrying operations for building stone near Carson City.

Eagle Valley, in which the capital of Nevada lies, is one of several valleys in this section of the State flanking the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada. During the Ice Age, some fifty thousand years ago or less this valley received outwash materials in the form of sediments from the surrounding mountainous country, much as it does at the present time. At the particular site where the deposits have been quarried, the sediments were cemented and solidified to form layers of hard rock. Evidently,

Sealing up their footprints in sand and silt,
Nature Bertilloned her Ice Age creatures; and
fifty thousand years later Man dug up the file

much of the sand was originally laid down in and about a lake and its cementation largely brought about by the presence of mineral springs.

It was early recognized that the strata contained skeletal remains of extinct mammals. Most striking of all, however, were the footprints. These occurred in certain layers of the rock and were sometimes in long series. Moreover, at one or two places the rude impression of the body of some mammal could be discerned, as though the animal had lain down leaving its impress in the soft, moist sand or silt.

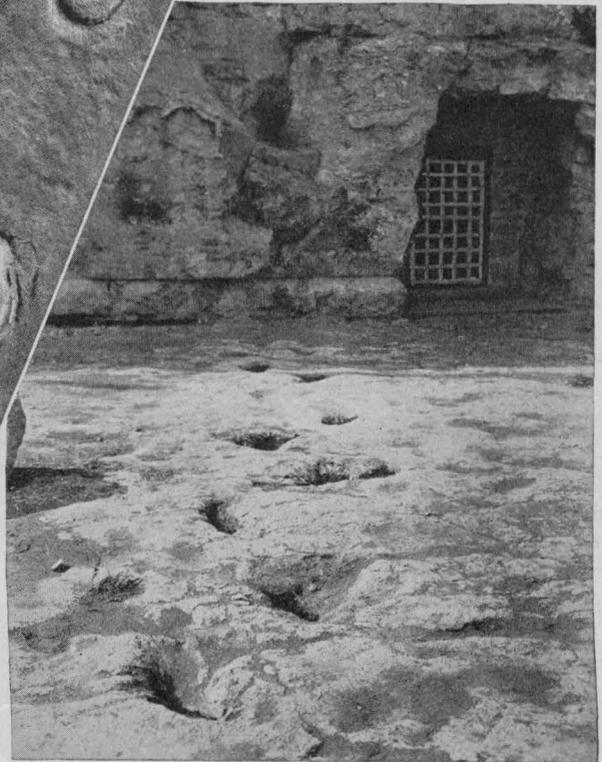
This discovery aroused much scientific as well as popular interest. Some of the tracks were readily identified, as for example those of the extinct horse and of the elephant or mammoth. Others were thought to have been made by some two-footed creature and bore some resemblance to the foot imprints of man. They were considerably larger than tracks made by a human being of average size and measured eight inches broad by eighteen or nineteen inches long. Casts were made of the tracks and exhibited at several expositions during the 'eighties and 'nineties. The occurrence was heralded as one which clearly showed the presence of a large primeval man, who wore sandals, at a time when the mammoth and other extinct types were living in this portion of Nevada.

The discussion led to a humorous commentary by Mark Twain published in the *San Franciscan*, February 16, 1884. In his delightful way he took issue with the scientists and maintained that the several types of tracks were left by inebriated members of the First Nevada Territorial Legislature. The tracks of the so-called primeval man were in reality, according to Mark Twain, those of the Speaker, "a prime man in two or three ways, and evil in forty", who on adjournment of that legislative body was in the van of the trek to the nearest saloon.

The stone quarry has since become the site of the Nevada State Penitentiary. Probably no other prison in the country offers the interesting and



Looking at the footprints on the left, it is easy to see how they were assumed to have been made by a prehistoric man of huge size. Below are the tracks approaching the west wall of the prison yard. Tracks of both the sloth and the mammoth were discovered near this spot



TRACKS IN CARSON PRISON

unique exhibits to be seen here. I am referring of course to the tracks, not to the inmates. Some of these are still plainly visible in the prison yard and particularly where they have been followed by two tunnels penetrating the east wall of the yard. In one of the tunnels may be seen the large, round tracks left by the mammoth, in the other the so-called human footprints.

Much information has now been gathered regarding the creature responsible for the "human" tracks. Scientific investigation fails to substantiate the claims for a human origin of these imprints, either in the fossiliferous or in the legislative sense. Perhaps more prosaic, but no less interesting, is the conclusion that the footprints were made by an extinct mammal of peculiar type known as a ground sloth, and in scientific parlance as a *Mylodon*. This determination is based upon comparisons made possible by the discovery of numerous skeletal parts, including practically all of the foot bones, of these animals in the asphalt beds of Rancho La Brea. Further proof that the great sloth was present near Carson during the time of the mammoth is shown by the fragments of its skull and skeleton that have been found in the sandstones of the quarry.

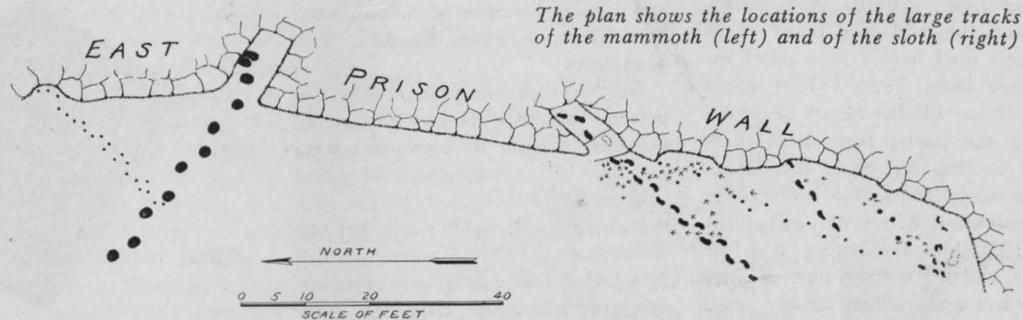
The ground sloth tracks may still be seen at one locality in front of the west wall of the prison yard. Here the animal must have walked across soft sand for the individual imprints are relatively deep, but the outlines are rather indistinct. Above the layer containing the tracks may be seen the face of the wall, some tens of feet in height, in which are exposed sandstone strata that accumulated after the tracks were made, thus giving the observer some idea of the antiquity of the occurrence.

On the floor of the tunnel in the east wall, the sloth footprints were recorded in a silt or mud and have clearer outlines. One may note where the mud bulged upward around the hind foot as the animal walked across the surface of the ground. Moreover, close inspection of some of the

tracks reveals the fact that an impression was occasionally left by the large claws carried on the toes of the front feet. In most instances, however, superposition of the print of the hind foot on that of the front has obliterated all signs of the latter.

The ground sloth *Mylodon* is of an ancient South American lineage. Its nearest kin today are the tree sloths that live in the forested regions of Central America and northern South America. During the Ice Age, or the geologic period just before the present, *Mylodon* appeared in North America, leaving traces of its presence at a number of localities in the area now comprising the United States and Mexico. It was a heavily-boned vegetarian, sluggish of movement, and with a Falstaff paunch.

According to early observers of the Carson tracks, footprints of the bison, deer, peccary, wolf and possibly sabre-tooth cat occurred along with those of the sloth, mammoth and horse. Many tracks of birds were likewise present. A shrinking lake with diminished water supply, resulting perhaps from a changing climate, may account for the congregation at this locality. Whatever the cause of their disappearance, the certainty of their presence records one of the last episodes in the history of life of the Nevadan area before the coming of recent time.



The plan shows the locations of the large tracks of the mammoth (left) and of the sloth (right)