

Opinion: Getting to the bottom of Lake Tahoe stories

By Guy Rocha

The B.S. associated with Lake Tahoe might be as deep as the lake. That's if you believe the Sierra Nevada lake has a bottom. Some 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?

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' 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.

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.

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