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## SAILING STONES

Can a 700-pound rock move along a flat surface by itself?

That is the mystery of a place called Racetrack Playa. This is in California. The large, flat area is part of Death Valley National Park. It was once a lake. But the water dried up long ago. Now, rocks of all shapes and sizes seem to slide across the land by themselves. These rocks, also called sailing stones, are clearly on the move. They leave long trails in the dirt behind them. Some are over 800 feet long. How is this possible?

Some people think the sailing stones are pushed by the wind. It is true that there are very strong winds in the area. However, not everyone agrees with this explanation. The rocks are very heavy. One study showed that it would take 500 mile-per-hour winds to move

them. Winds that strong have never been recorded anywhere on Earth.

Another theory is that the rocks move when the ground becomes slippery. This happens after it rains. However, rain is rare. Only about two inches falls in the area each year. The stones move all the time. It seems that the weather does not matter.

There is another mystery. The rocks don't always move in a straight line. Sometimes they zigzag. Other times they turn and change directions. Plus, not all the stones move in the same direction at the same time.

It gets even weirder. The sailing stones have been studied since the 1940s. That is more than 70 years. Still, no one saw them move until 2013. Scientists took a series of pictures over a period of time. In them, the rocks could be seen making their way across the land.

Scientists studied the pictures carefully. They looked at the weather during the time they were taken. Rain had fallen in the area. When this happens, runoff from the surrounding mountains covers the dry lakebed. Temperatures then dropped. The shallow layer

of water froze. It melted a little the next day and began to break up. Wind pushed the ice across the water. This slowly pushed the rocks forward. Sure enough, trails were left behind them.

Has the mystery of the sailing stones been solved? Many think so. But others are not quite ready to believe it.

### THE STRANGE TRUTH

- ◆ Some people believe aliens move the rocks in Racetrack Playa. Others have said it is just people playing tricks.
- ◆ Winds blow across Racetrack Playa from the southwest to the northeast. This is the same direction many of the rocks move in.
- ◆ Sometimes the rocks can sit for over ten years without moving.
- ◆ When scientists observed the rocks moving in 2013, the water covering the lakebed was only three inches deep.
- ◆ Scientists say people may have seen the rocks moving before 2013 without realizing it. It would be hard to tell if one stone was moving if all of those around it were moving too.



## DEATH BY MOLASSES

In 1915, a huge tank was built in Boston's North End. This was a busy shipping area on the harbor. From there, goods could easily be moved on and off ships. The steel tank was 50 feet tall and 90 feet wide. It was built to hold 2.5 million gallons of molasses.

Molasses was in high demand at the time. World War I was going on. The sweet, sticky liquid could be made into alcohol. Weapons factories then used this to make explosives. This alcohol was also used to make rum. Companies wanted to make as much rum as they could. Prohibition was starting soon. When Prohibition became law, their production would be shut down.

Many worried about the tank. It made noises all the time. There were several reasons. One

was that it had been built in a hurry. Another was that the man in charge was not an engineer. He worked in finances. Safety measures were often overlooked. The steel walls of the tank were too thin. Plus, the rivets were not handled properly. Small cracks may have been made. From day one, the tank leaked. In fact, it was once painted brown. This was done to hide the leaks.

In mid-January 1919, the tank was topped off. It was filled with 2.3 million gallons of molasses. Two days later, disaster struck.

It was just after noon on January 15. People in the North End heard a low rumble. Then there were loud popping noises. It sounded like gunfire. The giant tank was bursting apart.

Suddenly, a wave of hot molasses gushed out. It was over 25 feet high. Buildings were smashed. A firehouse was knocked off its foundation. Steel support beams for an elevated train snapped in half. People were swept away and drowned. Horses were too.

The molasses spread over two city blocks. As it cooled, it slowed and thickened. This created more problems. It became harder for

people and animals to move. In some places, the sticky goo was waist deep.

Rescuers worked for days. Cleanup efforts took even longer. The water in Boston Harbor was brown for months. In all, 21 people died in the flood. Over 150 were seriously injured. Many animals were also killed.

The tank was never rebuilt. For a long time after the flood, people could still smell molasses. This happened often on hot days.

### THE STRANGE TRUTH

- ◆ Just before the disaster, the tank was filled with enough molasses to fill three and half Olympic-size swimming pools. It weighed 26 million pounds.
- ◆ The tank leaked constantly. Children would often fill cups with molasses that dripped out.
- ◆ The wave of molasses started out moving at 35 miles per hour.
- ◆ Some engineers today think the tank may have actually been designed to hold water, not molasses.
- ◆ The molasses flood caused over \$7 million in property damage. Today, that is equal to over \$100 million.