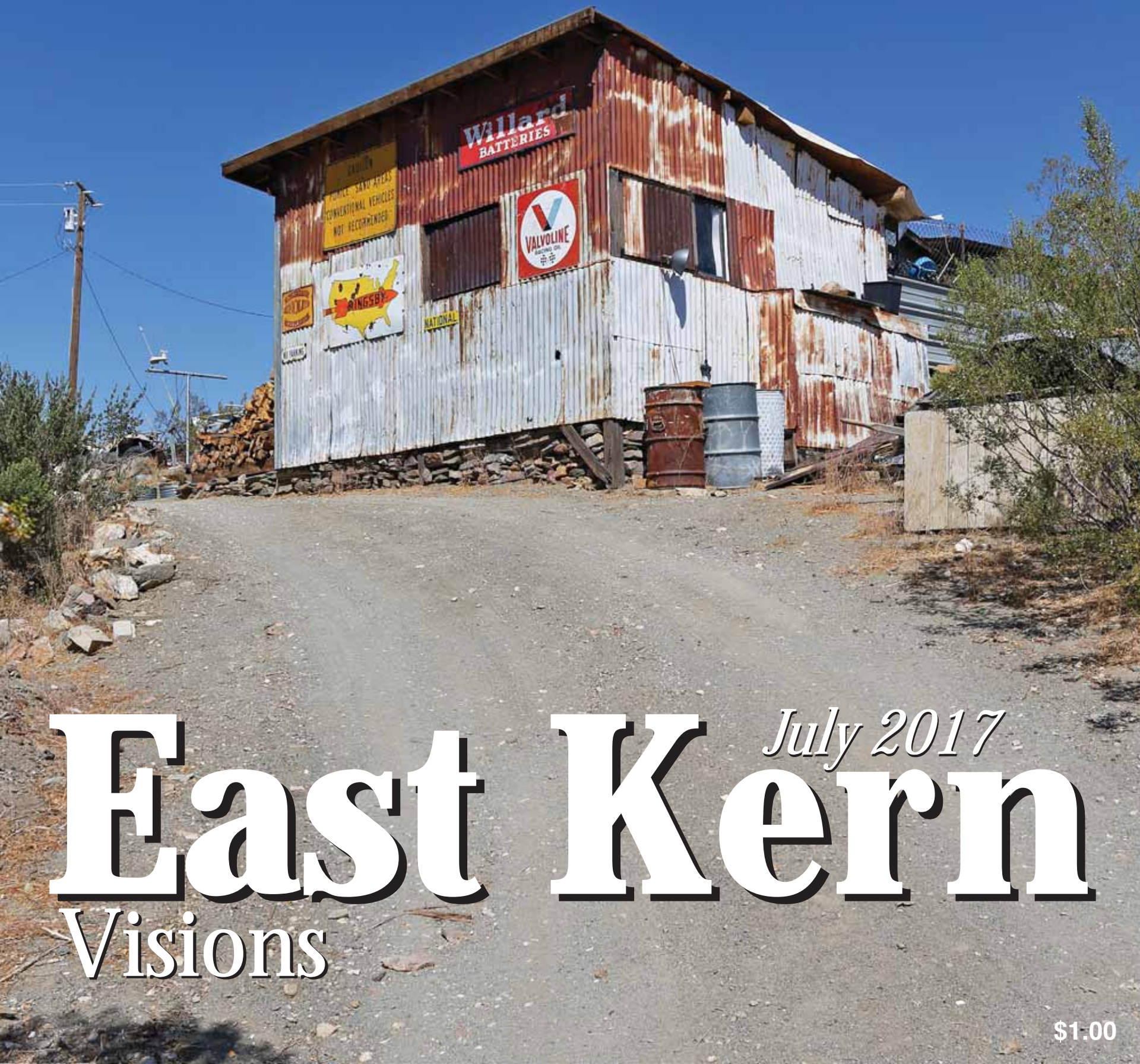


Ghosts in the Dust: a tour of ghost towns in the northwest Mojave Desert



East Kern

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On the cover: One of the many sights to be seen in Randsburg, among the many local ghost towns. Photo by Jack Barnwell.

Exotic Feline Breeding Compound in Rosamond is the cat's meow

BY JESSICA WESTON
The Daily Independent

Cat lovers alert! Feline fans living in the high desert area are within driving distance of a unique and fabulous cat compound: the Exotic Feline Breeding Compound Conservation Center in Rosamond.

The EFBC-FCC was founded in 1977 and is a 501(c)3 non-profit. A breeding facility rather than a rescue, it works with other facilities all over the world to establish feline bloodlines. The EFBC now houses 70 of the world's most endangered felines.

Visitors in years gone by could expect to encounter a small site with the gift shop housed in a trailer, small feline enclosures and possibly even a snow leopard asleep on an employee's desk.

It has since grown into a large enclosure with a full-sized gift shop, picnic tables, trees, and paths winding through a beautiful tree-lined expanse. Most of the bigger cats have large, habitat-like living spaces with ponds and rock enclosures and peacocks roam the premises.

The compound is open to the public 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. It is closed Wednesdays, Christmas day, Thanksgiving day, and the day of Feline Follies (Aug. 12 this year). Admission is \$7 general, \$6 seniors 60+, and \$5 for ages 3 to 12.

The compound currently houses felines from 19 species: tiger, jaguar, fishing cat, serval, Pallas cat, black footed cat, ocelot, bobcat, Canada lynx, Geoffroy's cat, margay, jaguarundi, jungle cat, cougar, leopard cat, sand cat, clouded leopard, snow leopard, and three subspecies of leopards.

Visitors can take self-guided tours down winding paths past realistic habitat enclosures housing the cats. Plaques give the animals' names, species and zoological details. Many cat-loving docents are also in evidence, sharing more information about the cats along with amusing anecdotes about their behavior.

The EFBC-FCC also periodically hands out "enrichments," such as toys,



One of the big felines is spotted at the Exotic Feline Breeding Compound-Feline Conservation Center.

JESSICA WESTON/DAILY INDEPENDENT

treats or even phone books for the cats to tear up. One event even features a phone-book ripping contest. Chinese leopard Li Ming was the most recent winner.

Cats range from the enormous Amur leopard Gregori to the dainty Maggie the margay, not to mention Pandora the chatty jungle cat.

Many people come to "visit" a favorite cat. And for those who want to keep up at home, the compound has a website that offers updates on all the compound's feline residents. Their Facebook page does one better. In addition to updates it contains adorable videos such as the antics of the EFBC's most recent litter of Pallas cat kittens.

Feline lovers can also sponsor or "adopt" cats. "Adoptive parents" pay their cat's food bill on a month-by-month basis, so the price varies depending on the size of the cat. A tiger costs \$210 a month to adopt; smaller cats are \$80-90 a month.

Half adoptions are also available "but you always get the half that eats!" the EFBC-FCC website notes.

Adoptive cat parents receive an 8-inch-by-10inch color photo of the cat,

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JESSICA WESTON/DAILY INDEPENDENT

One of the many peacocks strolls the grounds at the EFBC-FCC.

and have their name mounted on a plaque on the cat's cage. They also receive full membership benefits, including free admission for themselves and their friends when they visit, as well as free admission to the summer Twilight Tour. The minimum commitment is for six months. And the 12th month is free with 11 paid months. Call 661-256-3793 for more information on available cats.

The EFBC-FCC also holds several yearly events. A couple of times a year, special Red Light tours are held. These start at dusk and are conducted under a red light.

(The cats can't see the light.) Cats are crepuscular animals, which means they are active at dusk. The Red Light tours allow visitors to observe them in action, not always aware they are being observed.

Upcoming Events

- The Fabulous Feline Follies dinner will be held Aug. 12 at the compound. Tickets are \$80 each and the event features a live animal show, raffle, and door prizes. Raffle first prize is \$1000, winner does not need to be present to win. Raffle tickets are \$5 each or 5 for \$20. Tickets can be purchased online or call 661-256-3793.

- The next Twilight Tour is scheduled for Sept. 16. This is a three-times yearly event held on a Saturday night which allows visitors to visit parts of the compound not usually open to visitors during the day. Twilight Tours are restricted to adults only 18 and over and there is an admission fee of \$20 per person.

- Doors open no later than 5 p.m. until dark. The event also includes a bake sale sponsored by FCC's American Association of Zookeepers (AAZK) chapter, a raffle, a Rotary Club barbecue. In addition, look for other surprises ranging from goldfish in the fishing cat ponds to watermelons for the jaguars.

- Kids' Day will take place on Oct. 21. This event combines educational live animal presentations with enrichments for the animals. The event also features scavenger hunts and train rides for the kids (at an extra charge).

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PHOTOS BY JESSICA WESTON/DAILY INDEPENDENT

ABOVE: A tiny Geoffrey's cat peeks out of an enclosure at the EFBC-FCC.
BELOW: Trish works the cash register in the EFBC-FCC gift shop.



preservation center and know they can be a part of the effort to help endangered species. They may even choose to return when they are 18 and assist us in our wild feline species preservation and conservation efforts," according to the EFBC-FCC website.

Event hours are from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.. Admission prices costs \$10 for adults and \$7 for children ages 0-12. Admission includes most activities and prizes to take home but there is an additional charge for the train rides. Members do not receive free admission

on this day. Children must be accompanied by an adult(s).

Scheduled tours may also be available for an extra charge.

**Exotic Feline Breeding Compound
 Feline Conservation Center**

3718 60th Street West
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Call 661-256-3793 or 3332, 10 a.m. - 4 p.m. except Wednesdays for more information on all events. ❖



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JACK BARNWELL/DAILY INDEPENDENT

The Old West Lawman Mounted Posse takes part in a gunfight during last year's Old West Day in Randsburg.

Old West Day celebrates 16 years

Step back in time and experience once again the splendor of the Mojave Desert's living ghost town at the 16th Annual Old West Day and Bluegrass Jamboree in Randsburg on Saturday, Sept. 16.

The 16th Annual Old West Day and Bluegrass Jamboree is free to the public, and is sponsored by the Rand Desert Museum, a nonprofit agency. This family oriented one day event features musical entertainment from 10 a.m. until 4 p.m.

The Jamboree includes dance groups, live bluegrass, American folk and country music. Other attractions are, "The Old West Lawman Mounted Posse," old time silent movies, gold panning demonstrations, fun contests for kids of all ages, and much more! The event will also feature its famous staged gunfight be-

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Susan & Diane



ABOVE AND LEFT: Scenes from last year's Old West Day in Randsburg. This year's event is Sept. 16.

PHOTOS BY JACK BARNWELL/DAILY INDEPENDENT

tween the Old West Mounted Law Men and its outlaw rival group.

But before you take in the sights and sounds of what Randsburg is and was back in the day, saunter over to the Opera House for a pancake breakfast, served from 8 a.m. to 10 a.m. The breakfast is also a fundraiser and a \$5 donation is appreciated.

Vendors wanted

Do you have a traveling business? Artists, craftspeople, antique dealers, and entrepreneurs are being sought for Randsburg's 16th Annual Old West Day & Bluegrass Jamboree.

The cost for a booth space is \$40 for non-food businesses. Spaces are approximately 10 feet x 10 feet. Unfortunately, electricity and water cannot be provided. Bring your own shade! Food booth space rental is \$125.

Classic car buffs are invited to display their vehicles in the Old West Days car show. The public will vote on "best" cars. Trophies and raffle prizes will be awarded to winning car show participants. For car show information, contact Bill or Debby Brickey at 760-608-3954.

Randsburg is located just one paved mile off of Highway 395, 20 miles south of Ridgecrest, and one half hour north of the junction of highways 395 and 58. For more information about visiting Randsburg or to obtain Applications for Vendor participation call Randsburg Old West Day Vendor Coordinator Ricca Charlon at 760-382-6180 or email at riccalg@yahoo.com.

Follow the event on Facebook for information or updates at <https://www.facebook.com/RandsburgOldWestDay/>.



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Tehachapi Gran Fondo

The Tehachapi Gran Fondo is set for Sept. 16 in the area surrounding Tehachapi.

The city of Tehachapi is a beautiful mountain community nestled between the San Joaquin Valley and the Mojave Desert. Located at approximately 4,000 feet, with picturesque views and friendly outlook, it will give you a fresh perspective on life on your first visit. Tehachapi is only 60 miles from the bigger cities, and with clean air and a beautiful location, cyclists in the know love it.

The Tehachapi Gran Fondo isn't just a cycling event, it's an entire weekend celebration. On the day of the ride the entire community comes out to support, with over 260 volunteers and the public cheers from many places along the route waving their cowbells. The Tehachapi Gran Fondo is much more about the whole experience than the cycling itself.

The third edition of the annual event in 2016 drew in more than 1,000 cyclists from 163 different cities, six different states and two different countries contributing to an estimated turnover of over \$300,000 for the local economy.

The 2016 Tehachapi Gran Fondo was voted Champions of Economic Development in Sports Tourism by Destination Sports Management Magazine (National Magazine), such was its success at putting

Tehachapi on the tourist map and making a huge impact on the local economy with the community's wholehearted support and love of cycling. Such is its reputation, it was named "Best Century in California" for the third year in a row by Cycle California Magazine.

The Gran Fondo is timed so that participants can compete for fastest times on certain timed sections (climbs). It takes cyclists on beautiful routes that showcase the areas scenic beauty and points of interest.

The mass start road cycling event features multiple routes ranging from 18, 38, 60 or 86 miles, to the full 104-mile Gran Fondo, so that all abilities of riders can participate. Participants wear a timing chip that records how long it takes them to complete the course. The Gran Fondo is an annual tradition imitating the Italian theme and participation is open to all recreational and amateur cyclists.

The weekend long experience is a festive one which includes a large cycling expo and an Italian themed pasta feed for participants. The free bike valet service will watch over your bike while you enjoy lunch as part of your registration and participate in the festivities. Wash the road dirt off with a glass of cold beer and kick back to DJ music.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Participants take part in last year's Tehachapi Gran Fondo.

With activities for all ages, invite your friends and family to join you to celebrate your completion of the Tehachapi Gran Fondo and celebrate cycling with the whole community.

Working with the Kern County Board of Trade, the Tehachapi Gran Fondo is destined to become the Premier Kern County Event, drawing several thousands of participants from across California and North America.

For full information, please visit www.tehachapi-granfondo.com.



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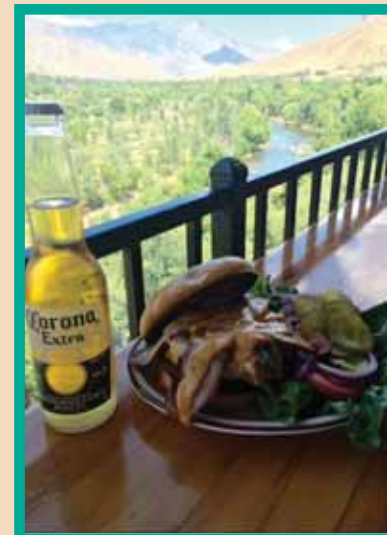
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Photograph of a 20-mule team hauling borax in a wagon out of Death Valley to the railroad, circa 1900. The team, which is stirring up considerable dust, is moving down a dirt path towards the right along barren rocky hills.

Boron's Twenty Mule Days marks three big anniversaries

BY PATTY CAILLIER

For the Daily Independent

The annual Twenty Mule Team Days fall event in Boron in 2017 will be the focus of a triple anniversary that will observe 145 years of Rio Tinto Borax's parent company, mark the 90th year of

mining operations in Boron, and celebrate the 60th time a parade will be marched through the streets in honor of the famed twenty mule teams and the borax-laden wagons they pulled from Death Valley Harmony Mines to the Mojave railroad depot from 1883 until 1888.

The Oct. 7 parade will highlight a team of mules

under the masterful hand of jerk line expert Bobby Tanner and the newly reconstructed wagons created by wagon maker David Ingalls. The new wagons and drivers were recent participants in Washington D. C.'s 2017 National Independence Day Parade. Rio Tinto Borax will honor the employees of its mining operations at Boron's Community Park during the festival

with an abundance of food and activities.”
 The mining company, founded as Pacific Coast Borax Company in 1872 by Francis M. “Borax” Smith, contributes generously to the Boron Chamber of Commerce Twenty Mule Team Day Events Committee that oversees the yearly festival.

Smith was caught up in the “borax rush” out of Nevada, and he and fellow businessman William T. Coleman were responsible for filing claims in Death Valley and Teels Marsh where rich deposits of borates were discovered. In search of water, Dr. J. K. Suckow and his drillers discovered colemanite, a borax ore, in the high desert between Mojave and Daggett in 1913. It wasn’t long after Dr. Suckow’s discovery that mining operations began in Boron.

Learn more about the history and flavors of Boron, mining interests, and local color at the Boron Twenty Mule Team Museum and the Boron Aerospace Museum on Boron’s Twenty Mule Team Road. The Borax Visitors Center is another place of interest tourists will definitely find reasons to return to visit the old and new worlds of mining.



The boron ore truck on display in Boron.

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Ghosts in the dust

Taking a tour of the ghost towns of the northwest Mojave Desert

BY MICHAEL SMIT
The Daily Independent

“Ghost towns” may not be an entirely accurate term, but it fits. As I walked by abandoned houses in which people used to live and stepped over items people had abandoned where they were last used, I felt an eerie connection to these long gone people. I couldn’t shake the feeling that they were still there, too.

The majority of the ghost towns scattered across the Mojave Desert are old mining camps, connecting back to the 1849 gold rush, which was the beginning of modern California. These people came from all over the world to the desert. They wanted to find their fortune. They wanted to escape and find freedom.

People still come to the desert looking for an escape, hoping for freedom.



MICHAEL SMIT/DAILY INDEPENDENT

Space for rent — cozy, well ventilated, includes chemical-free vermin protection. OK, so maybe the “for rent” sign inside this building in Garlock isn’t exactly truthful. This is one of the sights to be seen in the ghost towns of the area.

As a modern desert explorer, I felt a macabre and voyeuristic fascination while snooping through the abandoned property of these wild west towns. But it was also an introspective experience, as I couldn’t help thinking about what I would some day leave behind for my descendants to wonder at.

For those looking for a different kind of attraction, here are some of the most intriguing ghost towns of the Mojave Desert.

Randsburg

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main in Randsburg try to make the most of the abandoned town. Signs leading to Randsburg from the 395 Highway refer to it as a "Living Ghost Town."

The surviving businesses are all on the main street. They display signs such as "Closed all day every day except when open," and "Hopen for business." The firehouse has a sign saying, "In case of fire, be calm and yell loud." A couple houses have spooky stuffed animals peering through windows.

Neil Shotwell owns "The Joint," one of the town's two local bars. Niel told me his bar was built in 1905 and was originally a German bakery. For only a 25-minute drive south of Ridgecrest, East Kern residents can have a night at a bar in a living ghost town. That's a shorter drive than most L.A. residents make to their downtown bars, and I reckon it's a far more peaceful ride as well.

Olga Guyett, Neil's grandmother, lived in Randsburg for 44 years through the wild times of the town's boom years. He said she ran the bar her way, and one of her rules was no foul language.

"I've met dirt bikers from the '70s who said she'd serve you bourbon all day, but she'd throw you out as soon as you cussed," Neil said.

He said the town is typically slow in the summer due to the heat, but gets a decent number of visitors in the spring and the fall. Some come for the unique shops, some come for the history. Neil said quite a few come for the wide open off-roading around Randsburg.

"It's one of the few places where you can stop anywhere to pitch a tent in the desert," he said.

Eddie Shotwell, Neil's uncle, grew up in Randsburg. "It's beautiful at night when you see the stars," he said.

Eddie grew up during the town's boom, then watched its slow decline year by year.

Randsburg sprang up in the 1890s when gold was discovered at Rand Mine, which they named after a gold mine in South Africa. Neil estimates it had 4,000 people at its height. When mining slowed down and eventually ended, the isolated town's population slowly dwindled. Today it has a population of less than 60.

Eddie said that it's difficult to gauge the actual population of Randsburg. Many of the houses are owned as a secondary property and only occupied seasonally.

"It's mostly people who retire, then move here," he said. "They want to get out of the rat race."

Garlock

Garlock is only about nine miles from Randsburg, straight down Redrock Randsburg Road, then north on Garlock Road.

Most of the small ghost town is hidden behind private property, but the buildings you can walk through are serene and picturesque.

One adobe building, whose wooden door has rotted away, has "Private property, no trespass" written in bold font on its front. To add extra kick to the message, the other side has a message that says, "Rattlesnake area." Some wisecracking vandal added to the messages, etching "For Rent" onto one wall.

The fate of Garlock and Randsburg are intertwined. A plaque outside of Garlock states that the town thrived with prospectors and freighters from the 1880s until 1898, when water was piped from Garlock to the booming town of Randsburg.

Garlock has an odd claim to fame. It's the location of William "Burro" Schmidt's infamous tunnel through a 4,400-foot mountain. He mined the tunnel himself, and his motivation isn't entirely understood.

He originally wanted the tunnel so he wouldn't have to use his burros to cross a dangerous ridge between his mining camp and his smelter. However, 20 years into his solo tunneling venture, a road was completed through Last Chance Canyon, making the need for his tunnel obsolete. But he kept on tunneling.

He began the tunnel in 1900 and finished in 1938, digging through 2,500 feet of granite rock. He never used the tunnel to move his ore.

Silver City

Silver City is unique. It's like a curated collection of ghost towns. In the late 1960s, the Mills family began bringing together historic, abandoned buildings. Many of them were scheduled for destruction, but the Mills family had another plan.

Purchased by the Corlew family in 1990, the collection of old buildings now functions as a sort of interactive museum. Rather than try to restore the buildings to their original condition, the Corlews keep the buildings in the condition they were found: abandoned.

J. Paul Corlew said, "We want to show how local gold outposts may have looked after the gold ran out and the miners moved on."

The effect is so successful that Silver City has been used as the location for dozens of films which wanted the look and feel of a town at the end of the Wild West days in California.

The site is open for walkthroughs to observe the buildings and the artifacts preserved within seven days a week. Its hours are 10 a.m. through 4 p.m. on weekdays, and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekends until Sept. 14. Then it's open only weekends until May 14.

For more information or to schedule a visit, go to <http://www.lakeisabella.net/silvercity/>.



The antique shop in Randsburg is "hopen for business."

MICHAEL SMIT/DAILY INDEPENDENT

Ballarat

Ballarat is 25 miles north of Trona up Trona Wildrose Road, and then cutting across the dried-up Searles Lake bed.

The plaque outside of the town states that Ballarat started when 49ers moved in to escape Death Valley in 1850. The town boomed while serving nearby mining camps between 1891 and 1917. It says that the town had a school at some point, but states that it had no church.

The town is entirely abandoned except for its caretaker, Rocky Novak. When I



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MICHAEL SMIT/DAILY INDEPENDENT


Here lies Seldom Seen Slim, an icon of the Wild West gold rush and the last living resident of Ballarat. His resting place is marked with a metal fence, a bottle of booze, and a layer of coins flipped on the grave.

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pulled up, Rocky was already slowly sauntering out of his house. He'd heard me coming over the sound of his radio, and seen the plumes of dust I'd been kicking up over the three mile drive across the lake bed.

Rocky said that the families who own the property in Ballarat hire him to greet tourists and take care of the place. He's been the caretaker for 13 years, but he said he's been in Ballarat, off and on, for about 40 years.

He said the town gets visitors throughout the year, but its biggest event is a festival that just started in the last couple years called "Freedom Days." He said it's Friday and Saturday every Easter weekend.

"Anything goes that don't involve personal or physical harm," he said. "They do a lot of fire dancing, a lot of beer drinking, a lot of everything. Half of the girls running around with no clothes on. Everyone just has a good time out here."

At his advice, I went to check out the town's graveyard. It held a number of mounds, many of which had empty headboards with text washed away by decades in the harsh desert. Or perhaps the headboards were empty to begin with.

One grave stood out, with its metal fence, a bottle of booze, and a layer of coins flipped onto the grave. Here lies Seldom Seen Slim, an icon of the Wild West gold rush and the last living resident of Ballarat.

When I came back to Ballarat's center, a wild burro walking right past Rocky's house. He told me that sometimes he leaves water out and they get used to his presence. He mentioned that some people want to get rid of the burros in the Mojave Desert.

"They want to get rid of them because they're not a native species," he said. "Well, neither are you!"

Darwin

You get to Darwin by driving into the middle of nowhere until the road ends.

When I mentioned Darwin to Rocky, the man who lives alone in the ghost town of Ballarat, he said he wouldn't want to live there because it's too isolated.

that tells you everything you need to know about this town.

A sign leading into Darwin states that it has a population of 50. The sign looked old. The town lies on the edge of Death Valley National Park, over an hour drive from any urban area. And yet, even this place still has residents.

The town is like a museum, except instead of artifacts preserved in glass cases, the items are in the dirt. Automobiles from the '50s sit in random arrangements, like the owners simply threw the keys into the desert and walked away.

As I walked through the town, I noticed an unpainted wooden building with a sign saying "No Trespassing, Private." I thought I might be able to speak to one of the residents.

When I walked around the building to the window, I let out an audible gasp in surprise. Someone had set up a wooden dummy sitting on a rocking chair, facing a small classroom of stuffed animals sitting in elementary style chair desks.

Just then, I heard a door open somewhere behind me. I turned around to see a lady poking her head out from the Darwin Dance Hall. Gathering my nerves, I walked over to talk with her.

Her name was Kristy Bowman. She didn't grow up in Darwin. She chose to move here with her husband in 2012. She now lives in that dance hall.

She said her husband bought the dance hall years ago. For a while, she and her husband would live in Nebraska for the summers and Darwin for the winters. They decided to move to Darwin full time when her husband's farm burned down in 2012.

She suggested people check out Howell Newell's sculptures in the display he built to remember his father, a renowned sculptor named Gordon Newell. The display is an eerie and beautiful series of sculptures in an abandoned town in the desert.

Darwin sprang up after silver and lead were discovered in a nearby town. Signs saying "Keep out: Active Mine" still block off the path to the mine and the neighborhood of abandoned shacks around it. However, Bowman says the mine hasn't been active in years.

Rather than mining, many of Darwin's current residents have taken to the arts. They've become painters,



sculptors, musicians, and poets. Bowman said that she makes fabrics. Still others decorate dummies in buildings to spook visitors, apparently.

I asked if Darwin residents usually stay in Darwin or if they go out to the towns often.

"Not any more often than we have to," she said.

She and her husband subscribe to Meals on Wheels, which delivers five meals a week. For anything else, Darwin residents do their shopping either in Bishop or Ridgecrest.

Darwin has a basic post office, but it has no police, no medical service, no fire station, and no shops. It does, however, have a community garden. If that sounds empty, emptiness is part of the appeal for Bowman and other Darwin residents. She says she appreciates the quiet and the freedom.

"People always ask what you do when you live in Darwin," she said. "I tell them you do whatever you want."

❖

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SMIT
/DAILY INDEPENDENT

ABOVE: The corpse of an old truck is typical of the scenery in Darwin.

RIGHT: One of Howell Newell's sculptures in Darwin.



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