Ghost Towning for Fun, Adventure, and Discovery

Excerpt

Preface

The ghost towns of the American West have a historic lure for the adventuresome, explorers, academics, and photographers. For over a century, the romantic mystique of the westward migration has captured our rustic imagination: wagon trains, gold rushes, gunfights, bawdy saloons, and all the melodramatic characters therein. We satiate our curiosity in novels, film, television, games, and during trips to these remote regions to savor their storied ambiance. Yet we must understand that these ghost towns, precious remnants of our past, are fragile and non-renewable resources. They are vulnerable to a harsh environment, artifact collectors, and lawless vandals which have done incredible damage to these sites. Enjoy your visits and be an assiduous conservator to protect them—take out everything you brought to the site and take out nothing that you did not bring to it.

There are strict federal and state laws protecting our ghost towns. Yet, some folks tend to ignore them to satisfy their illegal and untoward activities: serious looting, senseless damage, and infantile graffiti. I've seen it all, and then some. Once a ghost town is sacked, it's lost forever.

At the conclusion of each chapter, I've included several photographs of ghost towns that are scattered throughout many of the western states. And, in Chapter 17 I've included a potpourri of scenic sites.

Introduction

Scattered throughout the western states are a plethora of ghost towns—a few are nearly complete towns—and for many others, all that remains is a hole in the ground and two tin cans, if anything. In between lay sites of all sizes, conditions, and accessibility. I use the all-inclusive "ghost town" to include abandoned (or nearly abandoned) towns, mining camps, military outposts, stagecoach stations, deserted ranches and farms. Unfortunately, vandals, time, wildfires, and the vagaries of weather are taking their toll on these historic sites. In just a few years, some have changed drastically due to these negative elements.

For the adventurous, ghost towning is a daunting challenge in exploration and hearty satisfaction in discovery. It's an excellent opportunity for photographers to exercise their artistic talent to get that "great shot." My purpose here is to provide a comprehensive guide to the process of ghost towning—how to, don'ts, guides, cautions, and tips. I do not delve in the history of these sites—that's beyond the scope of this publications and my capabilities. Several excellent books detail the history of the ghost towns of the West. (See bibliography).

For some thirty-six plus years, I've ventured into these states to go "ghost towning." Overall, I focused my main effort in Nevada. Additionally, I've documented most of the sites in California, Arizona, and New Mexico, and a few sites in Utah and Colorado. My goal was to find the site and to document it with photography, and prepare a written description that details what remains at the site: structures, equipment, geographic description, flora environment, and hazard. Critical to this documentation was the determination of the sites' precise location. To this

end, I used a Global Positioning System device to determine the site's latitude and longitude. Prior to my on-site visits, I researched the literature, studied U. S. Geological Survey (USGS) topographic maps to plan my routes to the sites, and consulted any source of information. On the whole, it took me one day of planning for one day in the field.

In thirty-nine trips over twenty-three years, I've documented some 1,400 sites in sites in the Silver State—including 122 sites lost to history or not recorded on topographic maps or in the literature. I reckon that I've found ninety-seven percent of the extant sites. No doubt, I've missed a few sites, but not for lack of purpose. It was because the records are inaccurate or incomplete, or the topographic maps did not spot them. Sometimes I could locate a site within a general area but could not pinpoint its exact location because there was nothing left to find—not even a tin can. At some sites few, if any, structures remain because the miners carried away the scarce lumber after the mine became unproductive and abandoned. They reused this timber to build another site in the next bonanza-mining district.

My photographic inventory includes 6,640 Kodachrome slides, and 2,500 plus, 8" x 10" color and black and white prints. In 2003, I donated this photographic collection to Nevada. The custodian was the Nevada State Historical Office in Carson City. Also included in my donation were the topographic maps I used, Operation Plans, logs of my trips, and a Office Access document that listed alphabetically the sites, alternated names, location, condition, and type of roads to the site. In 2010, the Nevada State Historical Office sent the collections to the University of Nevada library—now it is residing in the Special Collections Section.