

Ghost Towns

One of the coolest places we ever visited was a ghost amusement park. It had been in existence for 100 years before closing down unexpectedly one year, leaving everything behind: rides, paths, old vehicles, buildings, food stands, restrooms, and even part of a ferris wheel remained poking out of the trees that had grown up and around it during the vacant years. I would love to go back there and especially bring some friends, but it's not really a place for kids to run around, so I'll have to wait until they're older or I have a babysitter for a few days...

But CNN ran an article on ghost towns that reminded me of the place; check it out, then follow the link to ghosttowns.com – they have a state-by-state listing of ghost towns. Turns out, there are 6 in my corner of Ohio alone!

LAKE VALLEY, New Mexico (AP) – *The howling wind across a remote landscape, a creaky metal gate or a run-in with a rattlesnake or gun-toting local are the things that attract ghost towners. They are history buffs who take their outdoor adventures with a dash of mystery.*

Monument Peak, which some old-timers call Lizard Mountain, rises over what's left of Lake Valley in southern New Mexico.

Just as traditional outdoors enthusiasts enjoy mountaineering or hiking, and tech-minded gadget lovers enjoy geocaching, ghost towners have their own agenda: seeking out, documenting and photographing towns that one day will cease to exist.

"We are a subset of the outdoors culture," said Clint Thomsen of Stansbury Park, Utah, who writes newspaper columns about the ghost towns he visits. "If you're willing to drive around 200 miles along dirt roads and find something that's definitely crumbled, you're definitely part of the breed."

Ghost towns are prevalent in the West with 100 to more than 200 per state, but even states in the Midwest and several

Eastern states have between 10 to 100 ghost towns apiece, said Todd Underwood of Prescott, Arizona, who hosts a Web site for ghost towners, <https://www.ghosttowns.com>.

Underwood, a chemistry professor turned pilot who estimates he has visited about a thousand ghost towns, said the site has helped coalesce ghost towners into a group that logs millions of Web site visits a month.

And for those who think ghost towning is only a Western phenomenon, ghost towners are quick to say that even New York has 14 ghost towns. Pennsylvania has what one ghost towners calls a ghost highway, a 13-mile stretch of Pennsylvania Turnpike complete with overpasses and tunnels near Breezewood that was bypassed in 1968.

A ghost town is a place that is a shadow of its past glory. This can include everything from accessible historical towns – like Jerome, Arizona, or Calico, California – to the ruins of forgotten mining towns, abandoned farm settlements or railroad stops that disappeared when the trains stopped coming. Towns that are remote, hard to gain access to and have very little remaining are known as “true ghosts,” Underwood said.

Underwood said he began ghost towning in 1976 with his father.

“We were really fascinated as to how and why people would just up and leave towns. We were steeped in the mystery of that,” he said.

That mystery is palpable at the abandoned silver mining town of Lake Valley, New Mexico, which was founded in 1878. The Bureau of Land Management property has a renovated schoolhouse filled with wooden and wrought-iron children’s desks, an ornate wood stove and an old school bell. A nearby church holds wooden pews and ornate woodwork railings.

But along the dirt roads, the wind moans and whistles through the dilapidated wooden houses and around crumbling stone ruins. The town’s slow decline from a peak population of 4,000

people in the 1880s began with the devaluation of silver and was accelerated by a 1895 fire that destroyed its business district. Lake Valley's last resident left in 1994 at the age of 92.

A typical ghost town visit usually begins with an offhand remark from an old-timer or a mention on a Web site, ghost towners say.

Before leaving home, they try to solve the mystery of why the town disappeared and, more importantly, how to get there by hitting the history books and topographical maps.

Ghost towners give only vague directions to newbies. They figure those who are willing to unravel their hints and work to find these places are more likely to respect them.

Then, a visit is attempted. Thomsen recalled arriving at what he thought would be the abandoned mining town of Gold Acres, Nevada, at 3 a.m., only to find from a surprised mining office worker that the old buildings had been bulldozed a few months before.

Other ghost towners described making a half-dozen trips before finding the town, but agreed the search is half the fun.

Though their motto is to "take nothing but photographs, leave nothing but footprints," there are gifts to be found – literally and figuratively – at ghost towns.

David Pike, who grew up in southern New Mexico and now lives in Washington, D.C., has rated nearly 20 New Mexico ghost towns on his Web site.

He says ghost towning has helped him understand how his environment affects him and taught him to live in the moment.

"It's hard to ignore a metaphor when you're standing right in the middle of it," he said. "When you're standing in a building that was once something and now is slowly fading into

not being anything anymore, that's a stark reminder about appreciating what you've got when you've got it."

Pike said he visited a ghost town in southern New Mexico with his late father. He remembered his father had called out to him, but the howling wind blocked out the voice, which got Pike ruminating on the town's name, High Lonesome.

"He's been gone for a couple of years now and I still miss his voice," Pike said.

Laura Aden, who explores old mining sites with her husband mainly in Arizona's Tonto National Forest, says ghost towners are "the people who walk around with their heads down scratching the dirt, the crazy bunch of people who pick up nails and cans."

If she finds abandoned objects in the deserted towns, she offers them to local historical societies, which don't always want them. She's taken home some old tools to decorate her cactus garden, she said.

Ghost towners also compare notes on the danger of their hobby. They have to contend with rattlesnakes and other critters, running out of water or fuel, vehicle breakdowns and the hazards of abandoned mine shafts.

Underwood said he once entered a ghost town and sitting on top of a dilapidated house was a man with a gun pointed right at him.

"I turned around and left in a hurry," Underwood said.

Underwood encourages ghost towners to photograph the places they visit and post them on ghosttown.com as a way to document their historical significance and decline.

Often ghost towns are vandalized, they erode or are bulldozed over to make way for economic development.

"There is a time when this hobby will go away. You will not be able to go and appreciate these places anymore," Pike said. They are "slowly fading into nonexistence."

Ghost towns Worth a Mention

- 1. Lake Valley in southern New Mexico is a quintessential ghost town, said David Pike, who hosts a Web site that rates New Mexico ghost towns. The old mining town sits on Bureau of Land Management property and has several standing buildings, including a school house, general store and small church. "If a town is going to aspire to be a ghost town, that's the town that they should emulate," he said.*
- 2. Carson, Colorado, is an abandoned mining camp that sits on the Continental Divide at about 12,000 feet elevation. "It's very remote. It's covered most of the year with snow. All of the buildings are left intact. It's almost like somebody just upped and walked away," said Todd Underwood, host of ghosttowns.com.*
- 3. Frisco, Utah, is a favorite of ghost townner Clint Thomsen. The old silver mining town in southwestern Utah has several outdoor charcoal ovens that were used to make fuel for the smelter. There's also a cemetery and standing structures, according to ghosttowns.com Web site.*
- 4. Spring Canyon in central Utah is home to several small ghost towns, abandoned mining camps and a ghost known as the "White Lady of Latuda," said Thomsen, who counted it among his favorites.*