

Again Rises Darwin

By Elizabeth Beebe, Photos by Bill Kelsey
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On the road into Darwin you see the human shape of a low-lying mountain. Called "The Reclining Indian" by the Shoshone Indians, the long-time residents of Darwin say it symbolizes the spirit of their rising desert community.



DARWIN is one California ghost town whose ghosts are fast being replaced by real people. In the summer of 1967, to the great surprise of the Clerk of Inyo County, people came to ask about free lots in Darwin. These inquiries were traced to a notice which had appeared on a public bulletin board in Lone Pine, near the county seat of Independence. Although it is still a mystery who posted the notice, the land rush which resulted dealt a death blow to Darwin's ghosts.

Darwin is approximately 100 miles west of Death Valley and 30 miles southeast of Lone Pine, six miles off California State Highway 190. The six miles took us through gently rolling desert country to a large, working mine and mill, with offices and employees homes on the sunny hillside. Less than a mile further we were driving down the main street of Darwin, once filled with miners' voices and now almost silent and deserted.

Here we saw for the first time the mountain the Shoshone Indians long ago named "The Reclining Indian." Outlined against the sky a couple of miles to the south, its sharply etched profile resembles a human form. It has served for ages as quiet witness to the hurly-burly of Darwin's boom days when adventurers rushed in, some to make fortunes, others to lose them. Now the Reclining Indian seems to brood over the fallen shacks and sagging store fronts that for many years have caused Darwin to be known as a ghost town.

However, because of the sign on the bulletin board in Lone Pine, there are stirrings in Darwin; stirrings that are chasing away errant ghosts. Darwin is rising again and this time it is destined to become a solid residence city before long. At least this is the considered opinion of the town's most ardent devotee, Mayor Frances Black. Seated comfortably in a deep, soft chair by the cheery fireplace in her living room, Mayor Black chuckled as we hesitantly asked about ghosts.

"Ghosts?" she repeated. "Do I look like one? I've lived here for fifteen years, helping other residents to keep Darwin going and, like the others, I see a great future here. It is like a modern Rip van Winkle awakening from his long sleep."

Darwin was born in 1860, the year Dr. Darwin French discovered rich silver deposits in that vicinity. The little camp took his name and, as news of the silver strike spread, soon had a brawling population of more than 5,000. Mines honeycombed the desert and nearby mountains. Some barely yielded a living, but there were two sensational strikes; the Defiance and the Independence out of which \$1,280,000 was taken in a few years. Other silver properties were to produce more than \$2,000,000. Before long there were no less than 57 mines operating within the city's vicinity.

Hundreds of men worked in the mines and the mills. Furnaces were built to smelt the ore. Water was piped in from a hot spring in the Coso Mountains several miles away. There was a newspaper. There were saloons, gamblers and gay girls. For a few years, life was fast, furious, uproarious and unpredictable in Darwin. One sheriff's report noted that of 124 graves in the cemetery, 122 of those buried died by knife or bullet.

About 1880, the boom faded. This was caused not so much by the ores playing out as it was by the surfacing of raw human nature. Wage disputes arose, rivalries led to deliberately set fires. Accidental burnings took their toll in life and property. A decline in the price of silver was the final blow. With the departure of the miners, the itinerant gold seekers and the good time girls, an almost deserted Darwin settled down dismally in the shadow of the Reclining Indian.

The big mill, which we passed on our way into Darwin, was purchased by the Anaconda Copper Mining Company in 1945 along with a group of small mines. Subsequently it was leased to West Hill Exploration Company, a Canadian firm and it is now in full production of lead, zinc and silver. It employs about 70 men. This mining operation is like a world of its own, however, and has little to do with the old town settlement.



The old and the new Darwin. Left, the first schoolhouse in Darwin still stands on Market Street. Another once-abandoned building has recently been renovated and now serves as a combination school and community hall. Right,

George and Martha Simonson moved to Darwin from Gardena last July and reopened "The Outpost", which had been vacant for 20 years. They offer everyday commodities. The Green Streak pump is empty as the gas has not been made for 25 years.

Now the faith the 30-odd residents have held in a revival of Darwin seems about to be justified. Their dreams that Darwin would some day become a modern, lively, happy town has received its unexpected and dramatic boost by the anonymous note on the bulletin board in Lone Pine.

Inquiries about free lots in Darwin continued to trickle in to the County Clerk's office to the extent that Superior Judge John McMurray looked into the matter. He found that, years ago the court had platted a Darwin townsite and had assigned to miners plots of ground on which to build small shacks. The fee was only a few dollars and was to be applied to the cost of platting the townsite.

Only a few lots in Darwin had been improved through the years but the precedent, a charge of \$5.00 per lot, was a matter of record. Now, with the sudden demand for lots, Judge McMurray decided the fee would hold, but lots were to be limited, three to a customer.

The sporadic inquiries came to an abrupt halt one day in late summer when scores of excited would-be Darwinites mobbed the County Clerk's office reporting that a new note on the bulletin board had announced this as the last date for acquiring free lots. On that day, every one of the 254 available lots in Darwin was sold, not given away. But no one minded paying \$5. The only figure absolutely unmoved was the Reclining Indian.



Mayor Frances Black is a school teacher and long-time resident. She never lost faith that "Darwin would rise again."



The Darwin Cemetery is below the western edge of town. Stone monument on right, according to legend marks the grave of the only woman ever hanged in Darwin - she was caught cheating at cards.

Some buyers say they will speculate. They purchased lots sight unseen and they will sell them the same way. But the happy Mayor says that more than 25 percent of the town's new landowners plan to build houses and become permanent residents.

Mayor Black is aware of many problems which will arise with the prospect of a jump in population and it is through her efforts, and those of other Darwin's leading citizens, that Inyo County has established a Community Service District here.

"Our first project," said the Mayor, poking the fire, "is to have the lots properly surveyed and registered. Then the County is going to get us more storage for water. At the present time, the water we get from the Coso Mountains is apt to become scarce toward the end of the season, and then flood us during the winter. The County is to give us fire protection and help with sanitation. The Edison Company is putting in adequate street lighting. Already I see new telephone poles going up.

"With the cooperation of Melvin Barasconi, County Superintendent of Schools, we hope to open the school again. As it is now, a few students here make the 35-mile trip to Lone Pine and back each day by bus.

"We've formed a Boosters' Club which we think will play a big part in producing worthwhile and interesting projects for the good of the Community. There are only five directors on the Community Service set-up but everyone is to belong to the Boosters' Club. There will be a lot of fun in that."

Darwin will soon boast a little general store. Until recently, Postmaster Elsa Haskins brought groceries to Darwin housewives along with the daily mail. Early this year Frank and Sarah Cooley opened a restaurant in the old Rock House, and across from it is the Mackey's interesting little shop of antiques, old bottles and unusual rocks. To both the Cooleys and Mackeys, their businesses symbolize the realization of long-harbored dreams.

Darwin offers livability of many kinds. For the retirees there is the respite from city life, crowds and traffic along with the comforting thought that these can be easily reached if need be. For young and ambitious adventurers there is the lure of prospecting as rich minerals are yet to be discovered in the vicinity. There is also the challenge of being in on the ground floor of a new, growing town.

And for all, there is the mild desert climate, the clear air and wide sunny vistas which are as changeless as the Reclining Indian.

Any ghosts that might be left in Darwin had best whip on out because the ether they once had to themselves is now an airplane for those who fly in and land on Darwin's airstrip. This is a concrete forerunner to Darwin's potential. It was built and is kept up by Inyo County for use in emergencies. So far, however, it is a convenience for private planes.

Vacationers looking for an interesting place to explore will find Darwin and its environs fascinating. Even a short visit here would be profitable, too, for abandoned mines yield rare rocks. Old bottles and other tokens of Darwin's lustrous days are still to be found.

The old cemetery south of town is a place for musing and picture-taking. The Chinese graves are unmarked except for crude wooden fences that once surrounded them but now lean in slivered ruins. The Indian graves are identified by elaborately carved wooden headboards against which bright artificial flowers

have been fastened. Also, if you are interested in Indian culture, there are still a few Shoshones living in Darwin who, while conforming to their ancient customs, are not averse to an interview.

If you have the time, hike up the side of the Reclining Indian where you can survey the broad desert he has dominated for untold ages. For, as Mayor Black points out, he has been the one steadfast witness to the downs and ups of the little desert town of Darwin.