

Darwin California ... and the People Who Built It

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Frances Black [Mayor of Darwin for the past 12 years], taught school in by Darwin as well as in Death Valley Junction and Lone Pine.

DARWIN IS a lengthening afternoon shadow of its former self. Echoes of earlier, more glorious times whisper like early evening breezes through the cracks of buildings long deserted and tip-toe along the streets where in 1877, more than 4500 souls moved through their individual existences. A hundred years later, the hot desert sun dapples the exteriors of mobile homes instead of tents and sets bright glints of light bouncing off four-wheel-drive vehicles in place of wagon braces. But the spirit of Darwin is unchanged. Today's citizens -miners, indomitable desert lovers and weekend residents -- remain as fiercely independent and strong-of-will as those early pioneers who harkened to the fateful call of silver.

Located in the mineral-rich environs of the Owens Valley, Darwin was born in 1874 when Darwin French, a rancher near Fort Tejon, led an expedition into the area in search of the lost Gunsight lode. He never found that legendary silver deposit, but his efforts to do so resulted in the settlement of the town which bears his name, and it wasn't long before this bustling mining camp grew into the hub of one of the richest silver mining districts in the West. For many years, it served as an important mining camp in its own right, as well as a supply station for the hundreds of silver, lead and zinc mines that would appear in the next

hundred years between the Coso and Argus mountain ranges.

Three years after Darwin French first visited the site, the town's population stood at 4,500 which was the same as in Los Angeles of the same year. (Of course, it must be remembered that during those early days, Mexicans living in the coastal city to the southwest were not allowed to vote and the actual population would have been much greater than recorded.) Two of Darwin's richest veins - the Defiance and the Independence - spewed out a reported \$1,580,000 in precious metal and more than \$2,000,000 was removed from assorted other silver claims in the district. During the 1880s, almost 60 mines were operating in the immediate vicinity of the booming town and five smelters worked around the clock to handle the onslaught. As word of the riches to be earned in the vicinity spread like a flash-fire through the miner's grapevine, more and more people began rushing toward Darwin. The camp's first boom years were in full swing.

Today, as you drive south toward Darwin on the dirt road cut-off from U.S. Highway 190 which connects Lone Pine with the western entrance to Death Valley, you'll pass a large mining operation on your left. This Is the Anaconda Mine - originally known as the Defiance - and although it's closed now to visitors, you'll want to stop along the road and visualize it as it might have been during a more exciting time. Squint your eyes against the sun and you might even see Pat Ready, a one-time District Attorney in the area, peering here and there into the workings of his operation. And make no mistake, it was his domain. Although the Spanish were the first to begin mining operations on the spot, Mexicans took over in 1840 and Pat Ready was directly responsible for removing this second group from the very profitable claim. After taking possession of the property, he literally defied the Mexicans to return and when they didn't, the mine naturally became known as the Defiance.

Although the Defiance closed in the late 1880s, the mine proper continued to weave itself into the history of Darwin and became known, in turn, as Darwin Silver, Darwin Lead, Consolidated, American Metals, Signal Oil and finally, in 1945, Anaconda.

The most exciting years in Darwin's history incorporate the decade between the mid-1870s and the mid-1880s. In other parts of the country, men and women were concerning themselves with the resignation of Boss Tweed as New York's commissioner of public works; the plague of grasshoppers which was devouring everything in sight between the Dakotas and the tip of Texas; and strikes by railroad workers which would ultimately signal the birth of the labor movement in the United States. But Darwin's citizens cared only for silver - the bright, shiny metal that could, if Lady Luck was with him, make any man rich beyond measure. During these years, the town was populated by characters such as Pat Ready, who in addition to taking over the Defiance, showed another side to his personality by starting the first school in the area for the children of the miners. Living just outside of town were Chinese laborers who, while ostracized from the town's social and political life, helped move the underground riches into the light of day - and into the pockets of other men. And, of course, there were Indians. In this case, Shoshone. Their settlement was located just north of town.



This school house is one of the few original buildings still standing after two huge fires destroyed the balance of the structures.

As usual, wherever miners congregated, fancy ladies would also be found. A true original of this particular caste was Nancy Williams, a Madam reputed to have come to Darwin by way of Cerro Gordo. In her new surroundings, she went into semi-retirement and began filling her days with the proverbial good deeds. Although she spent most of her time ministering to the miners, she was willing to help any of the townspeople

who would condescend to have any sort of polite relationship with her. In the end, unfortunately, good deeds proved not to be enough. In 1877, Nancy's throat was slit by an unknown assailant and she died at the age of 45. After a grand send-off by her many friends, in the mining community, Nancy was buried in the cemetery west of town and the site was marked by a large monument which can still be seen today. The footstone was stolen time and time again by souvenir hunters, but was always quickly returned - as it was in the 1920s when it was taken and then returned several days later via express mail. The shipment included a note that read, "Get this tombstone back on Nancy's grave. We've had nothing but trouble since we took it." It seems the thieves had driven from the scene of the crime in an automobile, only to be slowed by a blown radiator, flat tires and myriad other problems - indications, they were sure, of Nancy's ire.

Darwin never was a particularly sophisticated city, but rather a raw mining camp that served as a safe haven for those who followed less than lawful pursuits. The celebrated bandit, Joaquin Murieta, is known to have visited the vicinity but it is his partner, Three-Fingered Jack, about whom the following story is told. For some long-forgotten reason, Jack decided to shoot - and kill - a man in one of the many saloons which served thirst-quenching refreshment to the hard-working miners. Turning his back on the scene, Jack casually walked outside and down the street to another drinking establishment. Naturally, the dastardly deed demanded revenge and it wasn't too long before the dead man's brother had followed the outlaw to the second watering-hole. A single bullet quickly dispatched one of Darwin's more disreputable visitors.

In spite of this story, Darwin was never known for hosting a large number of gunfights. Other subjects - such as water - topped the list of engrossing conversational topics, for although Darwin is located at an altitude of 4,750 feet, it is surrounded by a dry desert landscape. In 1875, the first water pipes were laid from the nearest spring suitable for the purpose:

the area is about eight miles southwest of Darwin in the Coso Range and since 1944, has been known as the China Lake Naval Weapons Center. The first water line consisted of four-inch riveted pipe which was first neatly buried, but the line needed continuous repairs when cloudbursts would wash away the dirt and expose the pipe. Somewhere along the way, it was decided to set the pipe above ground and the only problem with this solution is that it tends to freeze in winter. Today, water line maintenance crews must first obtain permission from the U.S. Navy to enter what is essentially a bombing range.

Frank Carthery, who led the original decision to lay the water pipes, saw a real future in this natural resource. In 1888, he became caretaker of the water supply and kept the main valve pad-locked near the horse trough. He charged 50 cents to water a team or 25 cents for a single horse and later, for \$3.00 per month, the



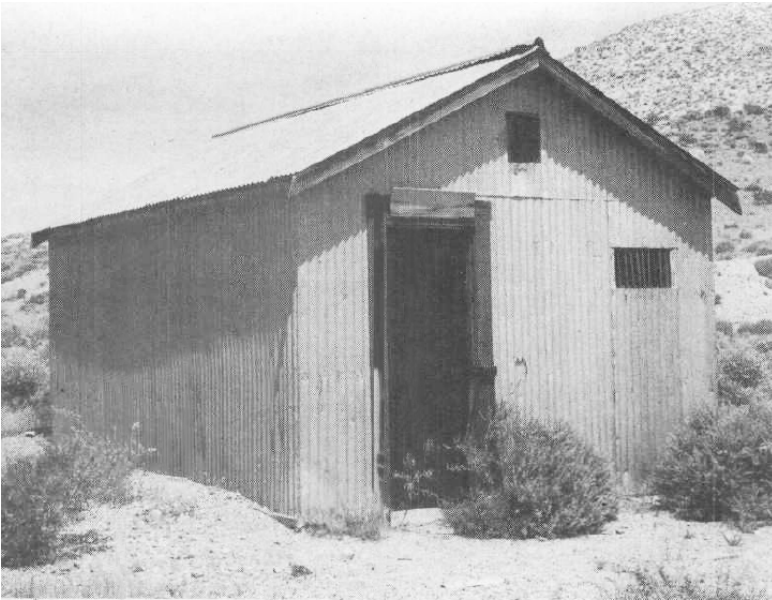
The monument erected to the memory of Nancy Williams is a testament to her popularity in the mining camp.

townspeople could have their water barrels filled at their own back doors. Carthery continued as caretaker until after 1915 and in addition to his shrewdness as a water mogul, Carthery was also known as the caretaker of the Defiance Mine during the 1880s. Nobody seems to be certain whether he died a wealthy man or not - but everyone agrees that he tried.

When the Defiance closed in the late 1880s, the miners left for new vistas but Darwin, itself, refused to die. Oh, it may have faltered now and then, but the mine continued on under new management and as it did, the town, too, limped along - always to rise up out of its lethargy with renewed vigor whenever a new strike was proclaimed.

The year of 1916 is memorable as the year of the second great fire. The first is cloaked in mystery but the second is attributed to faulty gas pipes. Untouched by the volunteer fire department's bucket brigade, the fire ravished that half of the town which had been left standing after the first holocaust - and explains why so few of the original buildings are still intact. Most of the homeless left Darwin while those remaining stayed with friends or found shelter in tents or in the dugouts at the west end of town. The buildings were not rebuilt until around 1932 and of the original structures, only three are still standing.

The dugouts mentioned above were used by the early miners, although some recent residents remember a family living in one of them as late as the mid-1950s. Jim Burns, "Copper Stain" Bill Finnimore, and Bill "Burro" Jones are but three of the hardy breed who found the accommodations under the hills to their liking. "Copper Stain" Bill went so far as to outfit his dual-entrance dugout with running water, and decorated the two rooms with carpets and other niceties.



The jailhouse has three rooms - and no windows except those seen here. In the summer, its interior is as hot as an oven - punishment enough for any misdeed.

The Defiance Mine changed hands soon after Black Friday. It was purchased by Signal Oil (at an understandably reduced price) after the owner of American Metals plummeted from a 17th floor window in New York City. Signal Oil kept the enterprise going until it was sold to Anaconda. Their operation peaked in 1956.

About 1962, a water war broke out among the townspeople to the point where the town was literally split in two. It all began when some of the residents decided to build a swimming pool below the Anaconda Mine and the plan called for the willows and brush near a natural spring to be cleared, after which a dam would be built. The argument became so heated that the town was soon divided along the north-south lines and on the south side, signs began to appear which read, "The South shall rise again!" Battle stations were drawn and it was

only after shots had actually been fired that the Darwin Dam dream was put to rest. Soon after, the town settled down to its accustomed state of somnolence.

But the reprieve gained for lazy men was not to last. A second big boom occurred in 1967, when a sign on a public bulletin board in Lone Pine announced the availability of free lots in Darwin. Again, the run was on - this time, for land instead of silver - and Superior Judge John McMurray was so intrigued that he decided to look into the matter. He discovered that during the early days of Darwin, the court had assigned plots of ground to miners on which they were to be allowed to build any sort of housing they might desire. The fee of a few dollars was to be applied to the cost of plotting the townsite. Only a minimum number of lots had been improved through the years, but Judge McMurray learned that the precedent - a charge of \$5.00 per lot - was a simple matter of record. With the land rush in full swing, he decided to allow the price to stand but he managed to slap on a quota which limited the purchase to a total of three lots per buyer. During the late summer of 1967, the rush ended as suddenly as it had begun. On the final day, over 250 lots were sold at the long-before stated price of \$5.00 each. Some of these were purchased for speculation while others were purchased as prospective home sites for permanent or weekend residents. The fact remains that whatever the reason for their purchase, most of the lots still stand empty.

Finally, in the late 1970s, Darwin is quiet again. The most movement you'll see is if you happen to visit the town when university geologists are present. Their blue and yellow tents dot the hillside behind the wash and they lay out their study materials on rickety tables lined up in the old Crossin building on Main Street. Their interest lies in the ore hiding in the limestone of the Darwin District and they are generally more than willing to describe their findings to anyone with interest.

The road out of town to the east will bring you relatively close to Darwin Falls. The BLM has blocked the road about one-half mile from the Falls but you can park your vehicle and hike in, if you've a mind to. It's a postcard-perfect sight, but take care to carry water with you, even on a mild day.

Rockhounds, of course, can find all sorts of treasures around Darwin but it should be remembered that most of the mines are on private property. Unless posted, "good pickin's" can be found around the smaller - but legally-accessible - mines.

It's a good idea to fill up on gas in Lone Pine (approximately 40 miles to the west) although if John Moody is home, you might be able to obtain gasoline in Darwin. Lodging and food is easily found in Lone Pine and plenty of camping sites are available in and around Darwin.

The old mining camp of Darwin is a fine place to visit if for no other reason than to gain a sense of what it might have been like to have lived there so many years ago. And if you allow your heart to listen, you might hear the voices of Pat Ready, Nancy Williams, "Copper Stain" Bill, or Frank Carthery whistling on the wind.