

Desert Ghosts

Darwin, California

By Howard Neal
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LOCATION: Darwin is located six miles from California Highway 190, southeast of Owens Lake and the community of Keeler.

BRIEF HISTORY: In the summer of the year 1876, the silver camp of Darwin reached its zenith. Rich ore deposits were being mined, five furnaces were operating and the population of the town had passed the one thousand mark.



"Private Property-Keep Out" signs forbid the exploration of the mine buildings.

The word was out. People throughout the desert mining country were speculating that the fabulous Lost Gunsight had been discovered. That famous silver lode had been found, and lost, by members of the Death Valley party of 1849.

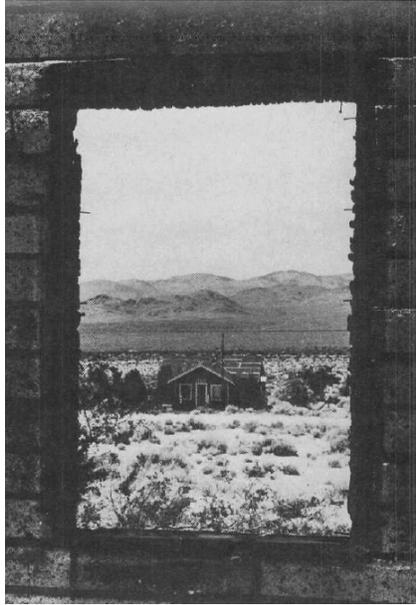
Many had searched for the Lost Gunsight, including Doctor Darwin French who, in 1860, had led a group of prospectors and explorers across the Coso, Argus and Panamint Mountains to Death Valley. The French party discovered gold at Coso, seven miles south of the site of Darwin, but the Gunsight silver eluded them.

The Darwin silver also eluded them. But, when it was discovered, the district was named in honor of Doctor French.

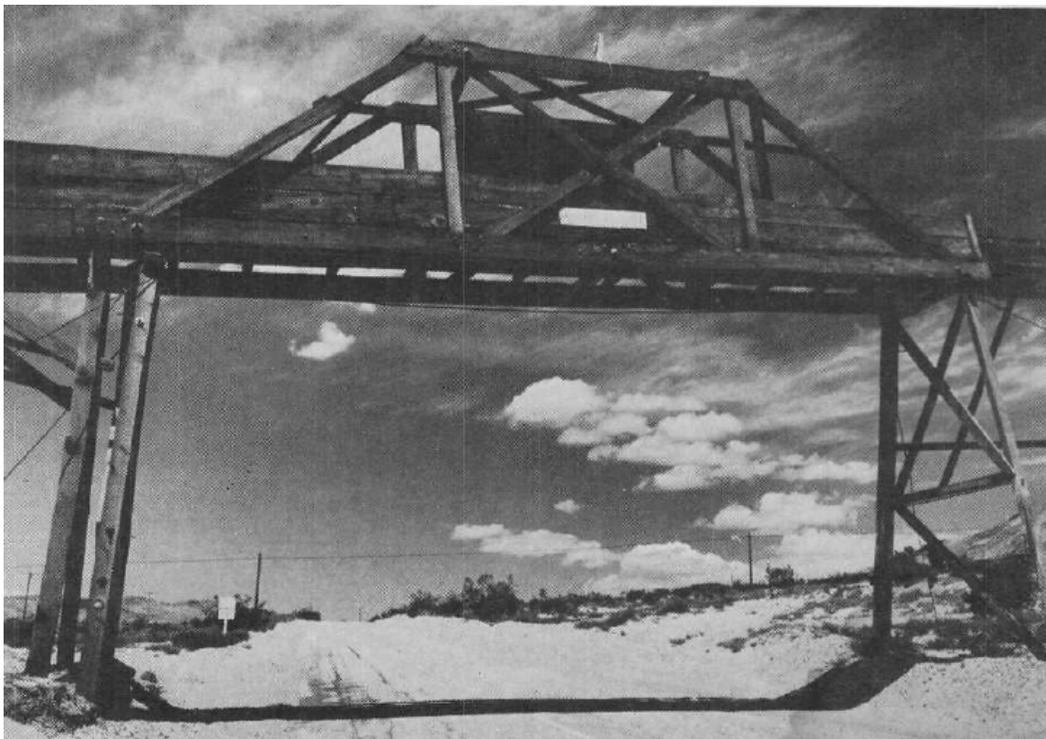
Silver was discovered on Mount Ophir in October of 1874. The relative proximity of the strike to Panamint City and Cerro Gordo caused an immediate rush. By the time 1875 drew to a close, Darwin boasted more than 200 permanent structures and near 1,000 citizens. The Defiance, and the other smelters, worked night and day. Several times a day, freight wagons loaded with silver bullion left Darwin. At night, the Centennial and 14 other saloons rollicked with the laughter of the miners and the saloon girls. Darwin was booming.

The boom at Darwin was quick. It took less than two years for the mining district to reach its peak. Starting in August of 1876, when the smelters started closing, the road for Darwin was down. Just as Darwin had drawn its population from Cerro Gordo and Panamint, so did Bodie and Mammoth City draw their citizens, in part, from Darwin. The final blow came in 1878 when a labor disagreement turned into a small shooting war and Darwin was moved quickly along the path toward becoming another desert ghost.

DARWIN TODAY: As you walk Darwin's streets, today as it was yesterday, the dust from your footsteps rises to mingle with the clear desert air. And, the summer sun is hot. You can almost see that heat reach out of the sky to bleach the many head-frames and mine buildings that attest to Darwin's beginnings. The homes of the town's few citizens are interspersed with the many ruins of yesteryear providing a quiet contrast of life and hope for the future with the rowdy history of a bygone era.



The homes of Darwin's few citizens are interspersed with many ruins that remind the visitor of a bygone era.



At the entrance to the town of Darwin, a bridge, carrying a pipe from a nearby smelter, crosses the main road.