

MINING CAMPS AND GHOST TOWNS

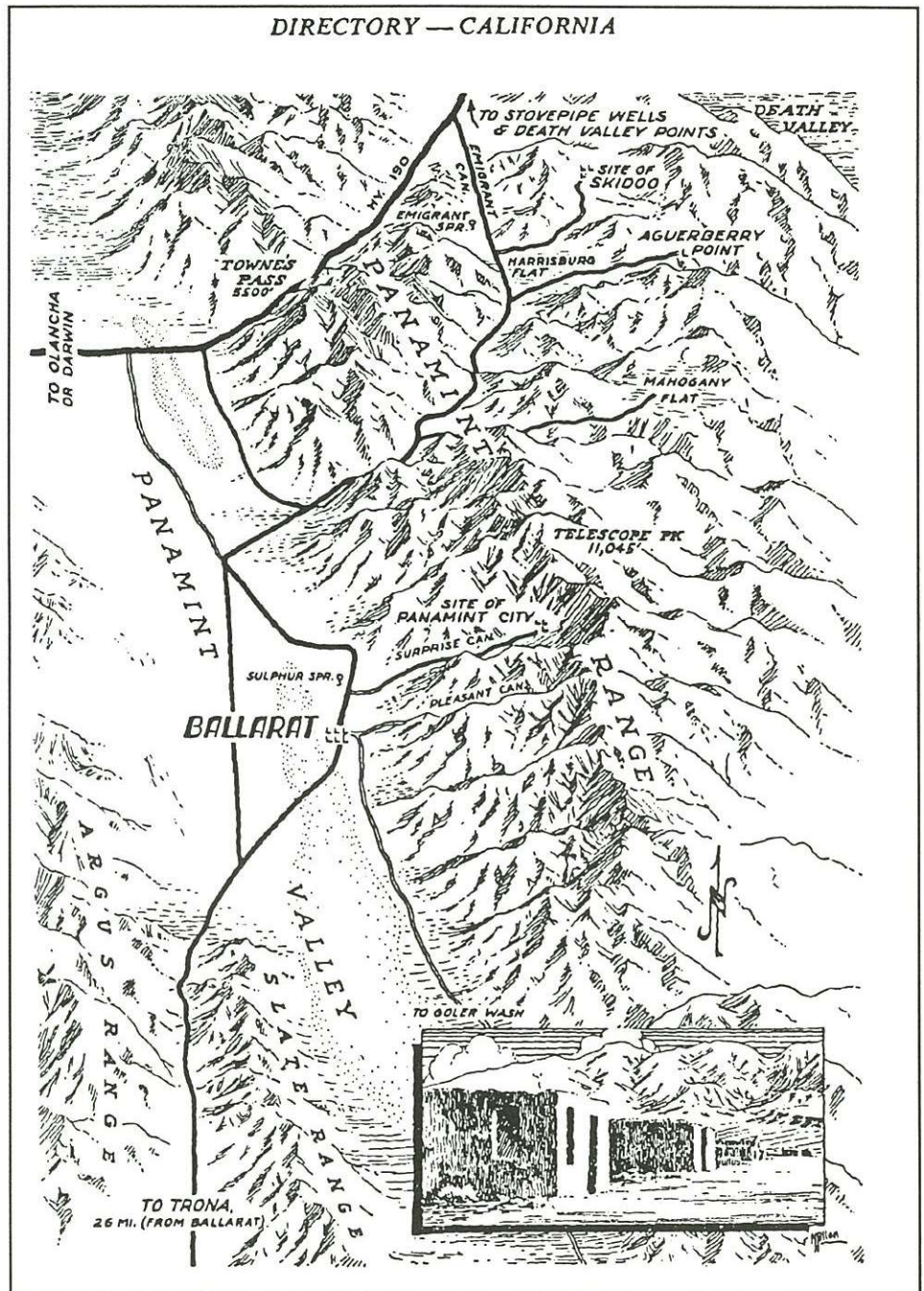
Bob Schroth

My collecting of mining related artifacts began over twenty years ago. The quest for adventure took me and my good friends out to the southern California desert. We had read many ghost town books about the mining camps and the remote areas they were located in. Rag Town, Steadman, Ludlow, and Calico were just a few of the towns our weekend trips took us to. Getting lost, fixing flat tires, and exploring what was left of these mining camps was all part of the adventure. When you're a teenager, it's funny how being stuck in a sand dune out in the middle of nowhere, with only yourselves to get out of that situation can be construed as fun. Now twenty-three years later, I find myself still going out, looking for remote mining camps, being a lot better prepared with a four wheel drive instead of a Datsun pick-up, but I still enjoy exploring the ghost town desert. As time passes, many of the camps that had standing buildings just ten years ago are now down, burned, or shot full of holes by vandals. Mining companies are forced to close open mine shafts, and in some states it is a crime to even go into an open mine. The BLM has closed many areas in the last few years, so finding new areas to explore is a very challenging task.

A mining camp located by the Death Valley National Monument called Ballarat is one of my favorite areas to

explore. I have been to this ghost town several times in the last 15 years, and it is amazing how many more mountain canyon washes there are still left to explore.

Ballarat was named after the gold center half a world away in Australia. The first visitors were some lost members of the ill-fated Bennett-Arcane Party who, in 1849, lost their way



and separated on an "every man for himself" basis. Panamint City was the substantial start of Ballarat. Early in 1873, a Wells Fargo bullion shipment was robbed in the west part of Panamint Valley. The robbers hid out in the steep narrow recesses of Surprise Canyon. This remote area was a great place to hide. When whiling away time waiting for the heat of the robbery to cool, one of the men found a ledge of pure silver that promised far more return than what the robbery had netted them. One of the robbers knew Senator Stewart of Nevada. Stewart then became the intermediary who arranged a deal in which they would return the loot in exchange for immunity from the law. Senator Stewart's price for his help was a piece of the mine action. This turned out to be a great deal for all involved. The mine claim soon proved to be a rich one and the Panamint Mining District was organized.

News of the silver strike spread quickly and scores of prospectors swarmed up the tortuous canyon. Torturous is a more accurate term. In 1978 a great flash flood swept down the canyon, wiping out the main road. I have hiked the 13 miles from Ballarat, elevation 1300 feet, to Panamint City, elevation 7500 feet. The remaining canyon road was little more than wheel tracks through brush and boulders. The town of Panamint was rough too. The isolation encouraged violence, and guns settled arguments. In the town's short lifespan, over fifty men were killed in acts of violence.

Panamint grew to an all time high of 5000 people. Remi Nadeau was a freighter who, tired of the robbery attempts, transported silver bullion

in 750 pound balls. The would be robbers would have a high time trying to load one of those balls in a saddle bag. Production of the mines reached its height in 1874-1875 with over 700 men working the mines. The first time I visited this area in 1976, many people were living in the old camp and in dugout hillsides, probably remnants of the hippie generation. The flash flood of 1978 moved them out, just as a flash flood in 1876 roared down this same canyon, destroying the lower part of Panamint City.

In nearby Goler Canyon, our old friend Charlie Manson was captured by the FBI. I've visited this area. Old graffiti painted on the rocks, like "Helter Skelter," "Death to Pigs," and "Black Death" is still visible. The Parker ranch is now a weekend getaway and the new owner will not even acknowledge the area's past.

After the silver stampede of Panamint City, gold was discovered a little way down the valley and up Pleasant Canyon. Ballarat became the main city for the workers of the Ratcliff Mine. The most prosperous years of the Ratcliff were from 1897-1903. This mine is really incredible. It is located on top of a mountain cliff and has a 76 bucket tramway over 1 1/2 miles long to service the mine. It took me over two hours to hike up to the first level of the mine. There is no road leading up to it. I don't know how they constructed the trams or got the materials up to build the tram towers. This mine has several levels on the hillside. After I got my breath, the climb was well worth it. The view was great and the mine was totally intact. There were cars still on the track, picks and shovels right where the miners left them, drill spoons and

jackhammers still in the drifts. One tag on an ore car said San Francisco Iron Works 1899. I found a wire miners candle holder and several other homemade mining items. We spent several hours cleaning up an old miners' shack and left some of our finds in it, like a small museum.

I am sad to say that a mining company built a new road up this remote canyon and gave the area access to many more people. In just two years, there is not one roof left on the buildings. The walls have been torn down and shot full of holes, and the mine on top of the mountain has been totally vandalized. The ore cars have been pushed off the cliffs and the buildings burned. I wish that I had taken video tapes of this area as it was when I first found it. In 1904 the Ratcliff Mine closed. Its rich ore had been worked by crude methods. Then, between 1927 and 1940, more than \$250,000 was secured by reworking the tailing from the old mill. Ballarat is no more. The town was declared a State Historical Site and dedicated December 3, 1949 by the Death Valley 49'ers organization.

References:

High Mountains & Deep Valleys, Western Trails Publications, Lew and Ginny Clark, 1978.

Personal experience:

Ken Kenaga
Chip Hoffman
Shawn Preston
Bob Schroth