

History's guardian debated in Death Valley

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DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK – The first sign says: "Private Road – Authorized Vehicles Only." A short distance later, at a locked white gate, another reads: "Borax – Do Not Enter."

Ahead, less than a mile from Death Valley National Park, is one of the most well-preserved historic mining camps in America: Ryan, California.

Here, for select tour groups, scientists and guests, history comes alive. At a one-room schoolhouse, you can ring a bell that called students to class 90 years ago. Near the dining hall, you can step into a meat locker and, in the thick wooden walls, smell the slabs of beef that fed miners in the 1920s.

In dorm rooms, you can peer through cracked, tattered window shades that have held back the sun for generations. Outside, you walk by rusty ore carts, wheelbarrows, picks, shovels and other relics. Up a steep hill is a rare treasure: a much-weathered weather vane once photographed by Ansel Adams.

Four years ago, all of this nearly became part of Death Valley National Park as a gift from London-based Rio Tinto, the third-largest mining company in the world.

But in a surprising turnabout, Rio Tinto chose instead to give Ryan to an entity it felt could better care for the site: a fledgling nonprofit – the Death Valley Conservancy – headed by one of the company's own executives.

Park visitors who long had dreamed of touring Ryan were dismayed. So, too, were park managers.

"I was very disappointed," said J.T. Reynolds, a former Death Valley superintendent who worked with Rio Tinto in 2007 to make Ryan part of the park. "It would have served many people, many organizations and the best interests of historic preservation."

What's unfolding here is more than a story about the curious fate of a remote mining camp in the hottest, driest corner of America. It is part of a wider debate about how best to protect historic resources across the West in an era of limited and declining government resources.

Already much has been lost. One example lies inside Death Valley National Park, where someone has chiseled into a rock wall in an attempt to steal American Indian petroglyphs, defacing the area forever.

In one of the most brazen cases, thieves used power saws, ladders and generators last year to steal centuries-old petroglyphs from federal land north of Bishop. Although the rock art has been recovered, no arrests have been made.

"It's akin to someone defacing part of the Vatican or damaging an important artistic piece, like the Mona Lisa," said Greg Haverstock, an archaeologist with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. "A few greedy, self-minded individuals destroyed an amazing, finite resource."

His budget to monitor and protect such sites across 750,000 acres of public land is \$52,000 – seven cents an acre. "It is just not a lot of money," Haverstock said. "It forces me to seek outside sources of funding."

Many historic mining sites are at risk, too – and that's one reason Preston Chiaro, president of the Death Valley Conservancy, cited in explaining why he believes Ryan should remain private.

"The fact that it's been in private hands rather than part of the national park has been one of the things that has helped to preserve it," said Chiaro, Rio Tinto's group leader for technology and innovation. "There is a proven model here. It works. Why would you want to change it?"

But private ownership of historic treasures also raises questions: Who will have access? Under what conditions? What will it cost? How will tax-deductible contributions be spent?

"Once a site gets into private hands, there is really no control of it," said Michael Newland, past president of the Society for California Archaeology. "You are at the good graces of the (owners). Some people are fantastic. Some may not be."

As the donation nears completion, some have asked the conservancy tough questions, in writing, about its budget, management and plans. They have learned little.

"I got one reply to four letters saying they have every right to do with this property whatever they want to do and furthermore, they have no time to talk to me," said Steve Bruce, member of a group called Save Ryan.

"As a public charity taking public money, they have a responsibility to respond to the public," Bruce added. "It's very frustrating."

An outpost in the wilderness

There is one thing on which all agree: In a region peppered with old mine shafts, shacks and diggings, Ryan is a remarkable place, an outpost of culture and rustic comfort in a harsh, unforgiving wilderness.

It began humbly, with a cluster of cabins, lean-tos and dugouts at the base of a dark cliff overlooking Death Valley. "A stranger would have been amused to see the heads pop up all over the place like prairie dogs when the warning whistle blew before breakfast," wrote mine superintendent Harry Gower in a memoir: "50 Years in Death Valley – Memoirs of a Borax Man."

But like the cactus that clings to canyon walls, Ryan would blossom into something special.

Down a narrow, winding rail line came the heavy timber, wood stoves, concrete, bed frames, mattresses, wash basins, electrical wire, tools, windows, medical supplies and other building blocks of civilization.

Ryan was never large – just a few dozen buildings that housed 150 to 200 people, including some wives and children. But for a company town – it was owned by Pacific Coast Borax – it was surprisingly well furnished.

There was a hospital, schoolhouse, post office, general store, two bunkhouses, even a community hall where residents gathered to watch silent movies – a vast improvement from the early days when miners scraped borax off the Death Valley floor and hauled it to market in mule-drawn wagons.

After mining stopped in 1928, Pacific Coast Borax retooled Ryan into a tourist attraction: the Death Valley View Hotel. Visitors rented rooms, played tennis and rode the "baby-gauge" rail with its jaw-dropping views of the valley.

Pacific Coast Borax didn't just promote Ryan, it protected the site with a full-time caretaker, a practice continued by U.S. Borax and Rio Tinto. Though some buildings are deteriorating, others are in great shape. Even the train engine that once carried tourists is kept in working order, though it is no longer used.

"It's just like going back in time," said Linda Greene-Smith, former chief of resources management at Death Valley National Park. "This place has really been lovingly cared for. It's a treasure."

Two Pacific Coast Borax executives, Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, even joined the National Park Service. As its first two directors from 1917 to 1933, they called for protection of Death Valley, which was declared a national monument by President Herbert Hoover in 1933. It became a national park in 1994.

Albright's daughter, 91-year-old Marian Schenck, said that before her father died in 1987, he told her he felt Ryan belonged in the park.

"It would be ridiculous not to bring it in," Schenck said. "The whole (park) concept came from borax. When you don't include Ryan, it's eliminating a big part of it."

Decision stunned park officials

In 2008-09, a donation to the park was close. Rio Tinto officials met with Death Valley officials. Park officials prepared planning documents and a legislative plan for U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif.

Rio Tinto put together a color fact sheet titled "Public benefits of the Ryan Camp donation."

"Donating Ryan Camp is a natural step in the long partnership between Death Valley National Park and the company who was instrumental in its creation," the fact sheet reads.

"With the addition of Ryan Camp ... the complete historic continuum of borax mining within Death Valley would be preserved."

But in 2009, the plan was dropped after Chiaro met with Rio Tinto officials, including its CEO, and persuaded them to donate Ryan to the Death Valley Conservancy.

"We believe that the DVC shares our vision to preserve this unique facility," said Rio Tinto's spokesman, David Outhwaite, by email from London.

Asked recently about the decision, Death Valley spokesperson Cheryl Chipman said by email: "It is always up to the property owner whether they want to donate property to the park."

At the time, though, officials were stunned.

"Very disappointing," wrote Sarah Craighead, then superintendent of Death Valley, in a July 2009 email. "Lots of people, including the folks at Rio Tinto, worked a long time to get Ryan to the park service."

Since then, the park and Rio Tinto have remained quiet, kindling interest, speculation and numerous requests for information from the conservancy.

"If you go to them asking for details, asking for facts – one of my questions is, where is their money actually coming from? – their response is 'we don't have the time to deal with you,' " said Bruce with the Save Ryan group.

Chiaro said his organization's reticence is rooted in online speculation and criticism from Bruce and others that he feels are ungrounded.

"The human reaction when you are being attacked is to defend yourself," Chiaro said. "I suppose we did some of that. That's not maybe our proudest moment. But I think that's a bit of human nature."

The real reason for keeping Ryan private, Chiaro said, is that he believes the conservancy can better protect it.

"It's not that the Park Service wouldn't care about the site and treat it with respect," he said. "I don't think they have the vision for it. I don't think they have the money."

Reynolds, the former superintendent, disagreed.

"The Park Service is the caretaker of the country's cultural history," he said.

"You could have had a world-class historic preservation training program," Reynolds said. "We could have employees in historic and period dress. It was endless. You could have that whole area as your classroom."

Chiaro said the conservancy has similar goals and plans to work with the Park Service on ways to achieve them.

"We want more people to be able to share in this incredible piece of history that's been preserved at Ryan, but we don't want to damage it," he said.

For now, Ryan remains closed to the public. And for Kathleen Knowler – whose grandfathers were Harry Gower, the man who helped carve Ryan out of bare rock, and Horace Albright, who was director of the National Park Service from 1929 to 1933 – that is unfortunate.

She recalled visiting Death Valley a few years ago with her daughter, hoping to see Ryan, only to discover it was off-limits.

"It was very disappointing not to be able to get there," said Knowler, a first-grade teacher in Arizona. "That's family history we can't appreciate. It's a really neat little mining town that should be part of the park service."

Call The Bee's Tom Knudson, (530) 582-5336.

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