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Spirit of the wild west comes alive in Arizona's ghost towns

Kate Reynolds

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In the days of the Old West, five towns in southeast Arizona -- alive with prospectors, burro trains, and gunslingers -- were connected by a single desert trail. Now the once-bustling settlements in Santa Cruz County are practically vacant: doors swinging aimlessly, shutters creaking, tattered curtains fluttering in the dry wind.



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Welcome to the ghost towns, linked by predominately dirt roads winding through high-desert brush into the heart of the Coronado National Forest and emerging on the Mexican border. These days, travelers there find no gold or silver -- only stories as rich as the mines that once brought in thousands of people to try their luck.

The Patagonia-Lochiel Road begins on Highway 58 just outside of Patagonia, about 60 miles southeast of Tucson. It's accessible most of the year without a four-wheel-drive vehicle.

Harshaw, the first town on the trail from Tucson, was described by an old newspaper as "a seething pot of miners, cowboys, card sharks, gunmen and bandits." It was named after David Tecumseh Harshaw, a rancher who discovered silver on the land in 1877.

Prospectors from all over the world came to dig at the Hermosa Mines,

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several miles outside town. Ore cars and burros ran ore from the mines to the mill in town. Later, the ore made the trip to Guaymas, Mexico, and on to San Francisco. Harshaw's silver veins thinned out several years later, but some area mines kept producing until 1956.

Years after staking his claim, Mr. Harshaw sold his property to James Finley, a mining developer. The old Finley House, listed on the National Registry of Historic Places, is one of the few remaining buildings in the town. Other structures were bulldozed by the U.S. Forest Service in 1956.

At its peak in 1881, Harshaw boasted 2,000 inhabitants. Today, only seven residents remain.

"Sometimes, when walking in the hills, we see indentations where there might have been tents," says Nancy Hale, a retired Patagonia Elementary School teacher and one of the four Hale family members still living in Harshaw.

About 5 miles from Harshaw on Forest Road 49 is the town of Mowry. All that's left are two adobe walls in a landscape pockmarked with mine shafts, but the town had a lively past.

Historians generally agree that Mexicans owned the silver, lead and zinc mines there until they were sold to Lt. Sylvester Mowry in 1859. Mr. Mowry, a successful miner, shipped more than \$1 million worth of silver bars from this area.

Mr. Mowry also has the distinction of being involved in the first duel in the Arizona Territory. He and Edward Cross, a newspaperman, shot it out over a disagreement about a story Mr. Cross wrote. When neither man was able to inflict a wound at 40 paces, Mr. Mowry and Mr. Cross retired to a saloon with friends and a 42-gallon barrel of whiskey.

In a later imbroglio, authorities in 1862 arrested Mr. Mowry for treason, confiscated his mine and incarcerated him. He was later released and exonerated, but Mr. Mowry's reputation was ruined.

Farther down the road, Washington Camp and Duquesne (pronounced Doo-KANE) lie close together -- about a mile apart -- near the junction of Forest Road 49 and Duquesne Road. Miners often set up house in dugouts there. Typically, a miner would put in his cave a bed, a stove and a fireplace with a tin chimney that rose through the earth. Little of that remains now.

In its heyday, Duquesne sported a boardinghouse, a church, a clubhouse, a library and about 1,000 inhabitants. Today, most of the town is for sale.

Washington Camp, mined heavily in the 1860s, closed some years later, owing to the frequency of Apache attacks.

The last town, Lochiel, sits on the United States-Mexico border, but it wasn't always as quiet as it is today. Pancho Villa and his henchmen frequently rode north across the border near Lochiel to loot towns and steal horses before turning homeward.

Originally part of the Gadsden Purchase, the territory was often home to squatters and cattle rustlers. The \$15 million land deal of 1854 secured for the United States the route for the Southern transcontinental railroad through a boundary adjustment to the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. The treaty, signed Feb. 2, 1848, ended the U.S.-Mexican War.

Alberto Delaossa Jr., owner of DLO Plumbing in Nogales, was born in Lochiel. While his father drove ore trucks and dug for lead, zinc, copper and silver at the nearby mines, Mr. Delaossa remembers stories of Lochiel's other industry, too: movies.

In the 1950s, Hollywood fell in love with Lochiel. Broad stretches of wind-buffed plains, grassy fields, and the lack of power lines made the town a great place to make movies. The movie "Oklahoma!" was filmed in this small town.

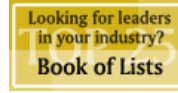
"Every morning my brother and uncle hung wax peaches on the trees to make the area seem like Oklahoma," says Mr. Delaossa. "They had to take the peaches down every night, too."

As you travel on toward the border, the desert towns once bustling with activity stand silent, their remnants offering a glimpse into America's past. But the spirit of the wild west remains -- you can almost hear saloon doors swinging open and shut, and the miners calling their burros.

KATE REYNOLDS is a freelance writer based in Tucson, Ariz.

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