

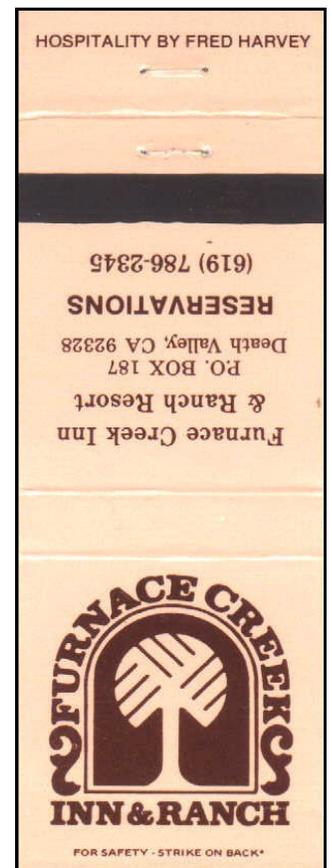
February 2005

Death Valley

by Mike Prero

Indians knew it as Tomesha, "Ground Afire." On the hottest day on record, the temperature peaked at 134°F. On a normal summer day, when air temperature is a brisk 120°, ground temperature on the valley floor can be 200 degrees. It has the hottest, driest climate in North America. It's also the lowest point on land in the Western Hemisphere...It's Death Valley, California.

Incredibly, it's been home to four successive Native American cultures. Last to arrive were the Shoshone, who settled there about 1,000 years ago. In 1849, emigrants looking for the California gold fields accidentally stumbled into the valley, and eventually prospectors came looking for gold and silver.



In 1873, borax, the so-called white gold of the desert, was discovered in Death Valley, and its harvesting and mining soon followed. Twenty-mule teams operated from 1883 to 1889, carrying the borax out of the valley, over passes in the Panamint Mountains and through the desert to the railroad station at Mojave.

In 1882, Bellerin Tex Bennett founded the Greenland Ranch, and in 1888 he sold the property to the Pacific Coast Borax Company, which renamed it the Furnace Creek Ranch. In 1927, in response to growing interest in the area, the company opened the Furnace Creek Inn to provide more luxurious accommodations to travelers. The Fred Harvey Company assumed operation of the inn in 1956 and purchased the property in 1969.

It was officials of the Pacific Coast Borax Company who brought the beauty of Death Valley to the attention of the National Park Service. On February 11, 1933, President Hoover signed a bill creating Death Valley National Monument, and 61 years later, Congress made it a national park. But, Death Valley probably first became familiar with most people outside of California simply from the the TV series, *Death Valley Days*, hosted by Ronald Reagan. I used to watch it all the time. If memory serves me correctly, I believe there's at least one, perhaps more, Radio/TV cover advertising the program.

Now, I suppose, most people identify 'Death Valley' with 'Death Valley National Park'. The Park has more than 3.3 million acres of spectacular desert scenery, interesting and rare desert wildlife, complex geology, undisturbed wilderness, and sites of historical and cultural interest. Bounded on the west by 11,049 foot Telescope Peak and on the east by 5,475 foot Dante's View, Badwater is the lowest point (-282 feet) in the western hemisphere.

The area has more than 350 miles of unpaved and 4-wheel drive roads, providing access to wilderness hiking, camping, scenery, and historical sites. Special attractions include Scotty's Castle, eight different ghost towns, and pristine sand dunes. The best time to visit is in the early spring—the cactus is in bloom, you can see wild groups of donkeys, and the heat hasn't started yet! When the kids were kids, I took the family camping in Death Valley during Easter Vacation [*Oops! I mean 'Spring Break'. Sorry, didn't mean to offend anyone's sensibilities*]. We visited Scotty's Castle, took the tour, and listened to the park ranger's presentation. We also toured the first aid station right after my youngest son decided to get better acquainted with a cactus. The weather was beautiful, and the scenery, although unlike a Yosemite or Yellowstone, was breathtaking in its own unique way. Well worth the trip and the time, should you have the opportunity.

There's a good representation of covers from Death Valley. In my own Parks collection, I count 17 20-strikes and 5 30-strikes, most of which are from the Furnace Creek Inn—and I know there are more out there.