

RECONNOITERING IN THE EASTERN SIERRA NEVADA & GREAT BASIN BY 4-WHEEL-DRIVE

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Exploration Field Trips

March 31-April 2, 2000

Into the Nevada Triangle with Lew S.

Lew S., of southern California, and I had been corresponding by email for quite some time, yet we had never met. Early in the year 2000, we finally did, when I went south to spend a couple days with a friend and his wife while he was recuperating after suffering major health problems. Since Lew and I both were avid history and off-road exploration fans, we started planning a trip together somewhere. Plans came to fruition March 30, 2002, when we met at the Red Barn in the ghost town of Bullfrog, Nevada. We planned to travel the "Nevada Triangle" of Death Valley National Park, using Lew's GPS and **THE EXPLORER'S GUIDE TO DEATH VALLEY NATIONAL PARK**, by T. Scott and Betty Tucker Bryan, to navigate through some interesting and historic countryside for the weekend.

Below is an account of our trip, based upon my transcribed verbal notes on microcassette.

Day 1 - March 30, 2000

Packed my truck after work. Plans were still a bit sketchy, a meeting in Beatty and dinner there was sort of the way we were going to start. Our trip itinerary was to visit the ghost town of Gold Bar in the Bullfrog District, Phinney Canyon Mine in the Grapevine Range, possibly go south to Carrara, then maybe into Death Valley and visit the site of Schwab in Echo Canyon. Lew was going to email me his final prospects that night. Due to technical problems with my ISP, I could not retrieve email.

Day 2 - March 31, 2000

I attempted to retrieve my email early in the morning. Technical problems persisted, no

email. Was Lew still coming, or would I be alone in the night in Rhyolite? So I decided my plan was to meet Lew [hopefully] at either at Beatty or Rhyolite after I got off work in Trona. Things went downhill that morning before work while undergoing final preparations. While putting in final items into the back of the truck, I find that my air mattress, which had been pumped up a week before to check for leaks and had held air fine all week, was flat. My 5-gallon water jug, which had held a mix of water and a light dose of chlorine to clean and check for leaks for the past couple days, leaked out its entire contents overnight and made a big mess in the back of the truck and all over the garage floor. In my mind, the big blow would come this evening after work and driving to Rhyolite, and finding Lew would not be there; and that his email stating so was locked in the big machine of my ISP who was not giving me my email for the past two days due to their technical problems.

At 5:45 P.M. I left work and left for Rhyolite. In case of another water jug failure, I purchased a few 1-gallon jugs of drinking water and ice before leaving Trona, as well as refilling my water jug. Not knowing the final plan on where to meet Lew, if he was to be out here at all, I started to call out for Lew periodically on my FRS two-way radio when I left Trona, just in case he was somewhere around waiting for me to get off work. The FRS was a new purchase specifically for this trip, and it has been a welcome tool since. Lew and I had already agreed on which channel to use for the trip.

North winds were brisk leaving Searles Valley and advancing darkness made it colder. The winds died down when I entered Death Valley. Forecasts were calling for decreasing winds for the weekend. The temperature at Stovepipe Wells was a balmy 70°. Climbing out of Death Valley, my high beams suddenly went out, the daylight driving lights on my 1996 Chevrolet S-10 came on. I switched to low beams and they worked just fine. I reached for the headlight switch and found it was very hot. Great! No confirmation, no air in the mattress, no water in the jug. Now this.

Topping Daylight Pass, I radioed once again for Lew. And I got an answer. Relief! Lew was waiting for me at the Red Barn in the Bullfrog townsite. He had his son, A. and A's friend, J. with him. Though FRS radio manufacturers state that generally a radio range of two miles is maximum, Lew and I were chatting clearly at eight miles distance.

Lew and I met, then we drove a couple miles west and found a camp spot atop the Las Vegas & Tonopah Railroad grade. We both set up camp amid the blackness of the night and the chilly northern breeze - Lew and the boys would sleep in Lew's Jeep Cherokee, myself in the back of my truck. Our vehicles were T-boned into each other on the railroad grade. I blew up my air mattress with my 12-volt compressor with hopes it might hold air at least for the night. I made me a meal of canned chicken, instant split pea soup and instant mashed potatoes with wine - relished while sitting on the tailgate dressed in a hooded sweatshirt with a jacket over it. Lew and the boys had hot dogs. Conversation to the light of several Coleman lanterns ran the gamut from history to finalizing our travel plans to GPS units. Lew showed me the remains of his favorite type of GPS - an old 486 laptop computer running Windows 95 and DeLorme Street Atlas

USA, with a Garmin GPS unit plugged in. The CPU on the computer blew that afternoon, so Lew allowed the boys to have fun with the .22 rifle. Lew had picked up the pieces and bagged them for disposal later.

It was a chilly night. I had my oversize bag plus my wife's sleeping bag opened and laid over mine for extra warmth. I'm glad that I had it. But I had forgotten my pillow. The chilly night and no pillow made for a night of tossing and turning and little sleep.



Day 3 - April 1, 2000

At 12:25 A.M. I still was not asleep. I guess it was the fact that it was April Fools Day. But this April Fool finally got some sleep and woke at 5:15 to enjoy the cold morning atop the Las Vegas & Tonopah Railroad grade to enjoy the sunrise and view of the Amargosa Desert.

My first priority was to set up the Coleman stove to boil water for coffee. I tried to be as quiet as possible so as not to wake up Lew or the boys, who were still asleep in the Cherokee with fogged up windows a few feet away. After making coffee, I began preparing breakfast - eggs, sausage, and hashbrown patties. While doing so, two well dressed men in a brand new truck drove by on the dirt road, they seemed puzzled at the sight of us camped there. I speculated that they were connected with the Barrack Mine working Ladd Mountain at Rhyolite.

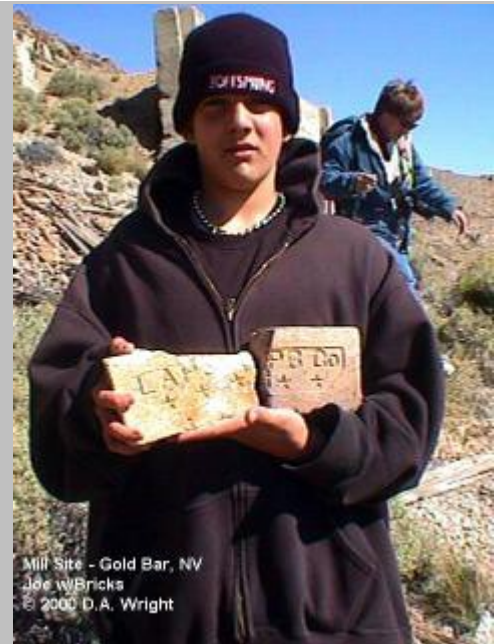


At 8:30, Lew and the kids were up, breakfasted and ready to go. Our first stop was Gold Bar, a few miles northwest of our campsite. Our two vehicle caravan drove over a good

dirt road to Gold Bar, our FRS radios kept us in communication vehicle to vehicle and proved to be worthy the remainder of the trip. Within a few minutes of leaving our campsite, the huge mill ruins of Gold Bar came into view high upon the slope of a mountain, to the south of it the entire mountaintop had been quarried away by modern mining machinery.

The Bullfrog Gold Bar Mining Company was formed in the spring of 1905 by two Goldfield men, James Loftus and James Davis. Also working the same ore body was the Homestake Consolidated, organized later that year by a Dallas real estate man, B.D. Millam. Both companies reported claims of fabulous ore bodies being opened, but both of them eventually turned out to be very disappointing, though they were considered safe bets. Both sets of company organizers played financial games with stockholders and drove their respective companies into the ground. The Gold Bar built a small 10-stamp mill at inflated cost, which immediately proved ineffective; then on June 1, 1908 the mill was shut down - it was claimed the ore body was exhausted. Stockholders were again swindled by the Bullfrog Gold Bar when owners attached them for more money to pay off the loan on the mill. Stockholders cried foul, Rhyolite newspapers condemned the Bullfrog Gold Bar for giving mining a black eye. The Homestake, on the other hand, built a larger 25-stamp mill at a more inflated cost than that of the Bullfrog Gold Bar. But shortly after start up, the ore proved to have little value, so the mill was shut down in April 1909. The stockholders were again attached for the remainder of the loan, they tried to sue and lost, the Homestake blackened the other eye of the mining world.





All of us climbed up the mountain to the huge mill foundations and scrambled over the remains. The mill was on a slope so steep, it was one step forward, sliding two steps back. The wind was really howling at the site, it setting near a pass to the north into the open Sarcobatus Flat, making our footing in secure. Massive concrete blocks that once supported machinery of the failed attempt at making a fortune held few clues of the shattered dreams and hopes of an era nearly a hundred years before. We all found tidbits of the mill - large timbers, lumber debris, door knobs, bolts, glass shards, a few broken crucibles, bricks, remains of light bulbs, a fuse block, an intact wooden stairway, insulators - our FRS radios called back and forth with our finds to announce them to each other. Asked by the boys if they could keep some of them, Lew told them they were "leaverites" ... leave 'er right here. Lew found a deep hole. He thought it would be fun to take a photo of something scary in it - like his mother-in-law. I was thinking it would be more scary to come face to face with a badger living in it. Lew went up to an access road above the mill ruins and walked south toward the modern day excavations. He got a scare



when he walked up to the edge and saw the drop-off into the open pit, screaming over the two-way "Oh my God! Oh my God! Oh My God!" I stayed at the top of the mill with the boys, finding remains of ore cart trackage.

After our inspection of the mill ruins at Gold Bar, we continued north and over the narrow pass between Sawtooth Mountain and that which the mill ruins sat and down into the Sarcobatus Flat. Our next destination was Phinney Canyon. Along the way we chit-chatted over the FRS about the landscape, history and comparing our tires. Lew quipped about his Goodyear Wrangler RT/S tires standing for "Really Thin Spare." After nine flats caused stone punctures in less than 10,000 miles on the OEM Goodyear Wranglers that came with my Chevy, I concurred. Since that mileage mark I had run B.F. Goodrich All Terrain T/As without a single flat.

We made our way over to the Las Vegas & Tonopah Railroad grade as it came off of Mud Summit, meeting it at Currie Well. We saved investigation of that site for tomorrow and continued north to the Phinney Canyon road. Along the way we saw wild horses.

We entered Phinney Canyon and climbed subtly into the piñon-juniper country. Before long we were hitting patches of snow on the shady sides of the canyon and under sagebrush and trees. Soon we were at the point where we stopped the vehicles and switched to foot power for the walk to the Phinney Mine.

Lew advanced first on foot into the canyon. Immediately he found signs of human habitation - a water tank, pipeline, lumber debris and eventually the mine up in the canyon a couple thousand feet. Though we had difficulty with FRS signal in the rugged terrain and narrow canyon, Lew managed to get me and the boys to his location.

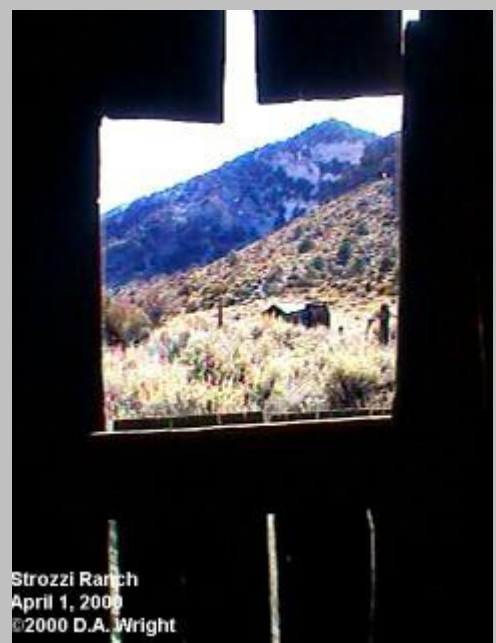




The Phinney Mine was worked by two people between 1930 and 1938. A cabin used to stand here, shown in Roger Mitchell's early Jeep trip series of books, but Lew and I only found a pile of rotted lumber, the leveled spot where it used to stand and an upside down outhouse.

Lew, the boys and I then backtracked to the mouth of Phinney Canyon and drove south a short distance, then turned up to Strozzi Ranch.

Strozzi Ranch was occupied by Beatty resident Caesar Strozzi in 1931 as a summer ranch. He operated it as a cattle and goat ranch until 1947. There are a few buildings left and are fun to explore.



Just above Strozzi Ranch is a surprisingly nice camping spot. It has a couple of wooden tables, an older chemical outhouse (it even had a fresh roll of toilet paper!) and a pleasant setting in the piñon forest of the Grapevines. A few fruit trees lined the road.



Lew and the boys erected a large dome tent, but he forgot his tent stakes. So we improvised with all the screwdrivers we could muster up from both of our toolboxes and some bungee cords I had in my box also. Lew ventured back down to the Strozzi Ranch and found some railroad spikes in what appeared to be a workshop, so the screwdrivers went back into their respective tool boxes. I prepared my camp in the back of my truck. My air mattress had again leaked out most of the air, so I pumped it back up with my 12-volt compressor. Though sunny and pleasant, snow patches lay all around us under the trees and sage.



After the sun went down it got pretty chilly. Coats, knit caps and hoods went on. Lew broke out some Duraflame logs and we started a fire. Lew then prepared dinner for himself and the kids, consisting of boil in the bag fettuccini. I prepared a supper for myself consisting of cous-cous lentil soup, instant mashed potatoes and smoky link sausages. We all ate at the big wooden table, Lew thoughtfully put a propane space heater under it to warm our feet.

After dinner, the kids went to the tent to play their portable Nitendo games, Lew and I stayed out at the fire to enjoy wine and conversation. It ranged from our favorite '70s TV shows to today's music. At 8:30, Lew called it a day and went into the tent with the

boys. I opted for a sponge bath in the dark - naked, wet and freezing my butt off - then crawled into warm sweats and into my warm sleeping bag to read a bit before retiring.



Day 4 - April 2, 2000

My day started at 5:45. But it was actually 6:45 because Daylight Savings Time started while I was asleep. I arose and began the morning ritual of making coffee, then started breakfast, the same as the previous morning. Lew and the boys got up just after I started rambling around. Lew and the boys had instant oatmeal. He likes to rough it on trips, he says, but I pondered where the roughing it part was in the boil in the bag Italian cuisine he had the night previous.



After a leisurely morning, we left our camp spot a bit after 10:00 A.M. and headed to the Sarcobatus Flat floor at the Las Vegas & Tonopah Railroad grade. Stopping at the grade crossing Lew walked the grade a bit and found what appeared to be a metal heel plate for a miner's boot, still with hobnails intact. We turned south and followed the railroad grade on a parallel road, running along with several wild horses.



We made a stop at Currie Well, which was an important water stop for the Las Vegas & Tonopah Railroad. We found several stone ruins here, can dumps, plus the well with a little stagnate water in it.

Then we turned south again for the run of a short distance to Mud Springs Summit. It was here that the LV&T turned around helper locomotives to aid trains running north from Rhyolite up the steep climb of the Bullfrog Hills to the summit. A large turning wye is still easily made out, with a long tail track cut into the mountainside to the east.



Driving south along the LV&T grade toward Rhyolite, our next destination was the Hooligan Mine. Our route took us through a meandering path through rough and tumble hodgepodge of cone shaped peaks, jutting up in no particular fashion, interspersed with deep gullies and washouts. After what seemed like a long time, we finally made the Happy Hooligan.



The Happy Hooligan was discovered in May 1905, during the Bullfrog rush. By the next year a camp formed around the mine workings, complete with boarding house, blacksmith shop, store and saloon. A large advertising campaign in the nation's newspapers ensued, which drew many investors. But the good stuff was only at the surface, deeper diggings revealed nothing. The workings were abandoned by 1907.



Lew and I were disappointed in the Happy Hooligan. Our group became Unhappy Hooligans. We were hungry and tired. We found little at the mine. A few metal tanks, some bits and pieces of scrap and a nice view. It would make a nice camp spot with a nice view east and southeast. We were too hungry and anxious to get to Beatty to a hot meal. Lew also needed to drive back to Orange County that day so to go back to work the next morning. So we declined driving further up the canyon to investigate, though the EXPLORER'S GUIDE said there were some stone ruins a bit further up before the road ended at Cave Spring.

Our group head into Beatty for a bite at the Burro Inn, then we both head back over into Death Valley to our respective homes - except mine was much closer.

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