

# The Ghost Casino

by Jim Steffner

In 1904 Shorty Harris and E.L. Cross, a couple of prospectors, found a greenish colored quartz rock with streaks of gold. At the time the area was sparsely populated, in fact the closest resident to their find, an elderly man and his family by the name of Beatty, lived five miles away in a town that would be named after him, Beatty Nevada

What seemed like overnight, thousands of people from hundreds of miles away started to arrive in the Rhyolite area where the two found their first gold. Out of the more than 2000 mining claims in a 30 mile area, the most promising was the Montgomery Shoshone mine. Rhyolite is named after the silica-rich volcanic rock in the area. Several mining camps sprung up overnight. Beside Rhyolite, there was Orion, Bonanza, Gold Center, Bullfrog, Amargosa, and Jumpertown.



Undertaking Parlor - 1905



Presbyterian Church

Owner of the mine, Bob Montgomery sold his interest in the mine to Charles Schwab for approximately 4 million dollars. That same year, Tom T. Kelly, an enterprising miner began building the famous “bottle house” built from 50,000 beer and liquor bottles.

In 1906 Ernest L. Cross sold his share of his Bullfrog mining claim for \$25,000 and purchased a ranch near San Diego, living there until he died in 1958. Shorty Harris remained a prospector the rest of his life.

By 1907 the thriving town of Rhyolite had 10000 residents. Today it is a ghost town. During the heydays, Rhyolite had full telephone service, a school for 250 students, 45 saloons, a water company with piped water to homes, an ice plant, 3 public swimming pools, two railroad depots, hospital, police and fire service, 8 doctors, 2 undertakers, 2 dentists, 19 lodging houses, 18 grocery stores, hundreds of homes, opera house, slaughter-house, foundries, machine shops, and 400 electric street lights. The town also had an active social life including baseball and basketball games, dances, tennis, a symphony, Sunday school picnics, pool tournaments, and Saturday night variety shows at the local opera house.

Rhyolite also boasted the first Catholic and Presbyterian churches in the Death Valley area. Over 85 mining companies were active in the surrounding hills. A ore mill was constructed to handle 300 tons of ore a day and included a crusher, 3 giant rollers, a dozen cyanide tanks and a reduction furnace. The town was home to three railroads, the Tonopah & Tidewater Railroad stretching over 160 miles from Ludlow California to Gold Center Nevada (South of Beatty), the Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad stretching 210 miles from Las Vegas to Tonopah, and in June, 1907 the Bullfrog & Goldfield Railroad began passenger service covering 67 miles from Goldfield Nevada to Rhyolite. At one time the rail-



Telephone & Telegraph building



Bottle House - 2006

road sidings could accommodate over 100 rail cars unloading freight and then reloading with outgoing ore. The town was also serviced by three stage lines. In 1905 the towns newspaper, the Rhyolite Herald, began publication, and the post office was established

A town jail was built with 4 steel cells. Many impressive building were erected including the John S. Cook three story bank building and large mercantile store. H.D. and L.D. Porter brought supplies from their store at Randsburg, across Death Valley, arriving in Rhyolite they built a 1-1/2 story stone building and became the district's leading merchant. The Las Vegas and Tonopah Railroad depot was built of cut stone from Las Vegas with reinforcing made from railroad rails instead of lighter rebar.



Porter Mercantile - 2007



John L. Cook Bank Building - 2007



Jail - 2007



School - 2007

Times changed rapidly after the financial panic of 1907 and the San Francisco earthquake in 1906. Financial backing started to dwindle with investors pulling out of mining ventures and by 1910 the town's population dropped to 611 residents. On March 14, 1911, the Montgomery Shoshone mine closed, and two weeks later the final issue of the Rhyolite Herald was published. By 1915 the town had only about 20 residents and the next year the power and light company ceased operation.



Soon the desert started to reclaim the town and all that remained were some shells of once beautiful stately buildings, dirt paths where city streets once were filled with people, the massive railroad depot which would probably stand forever because of its method of construction, and the bottle house. In 1925 Paramount Pictures restored and reroofed the bottle house to use in a movie setting.



The railroad depot and later Ghost Casino as seen on two old postcards.



Ghost Casino as it stands in 2007 - "Ghost Casino" still slightly visible on right photo.

In 1924, N.C. Westmoreland rescued the depot and turned it into a roadhouse, the Rhyolite Ghost Casino and a museum. He ran the operation for 23 years. N.C. also owned the "Old Arizona Bar" in Las Vegas. His sister, H.H. Heisler maintained it later as a museum and gift shop. Today it stands closed and fenced on private land.

Today you can visit Rhyolite, located 4 miles West of the town of Beatty on Highway 374 in Nye County, the East entrance to Death Valley. Still standing are partial walls of the bank and mercantile store, the town jail, the railroad depot, and a few other buildings including the now famous bottle house. Take the time to walk some of the street paths and imagine the many people who once walked the same paths over 100 years ago.

Don't think you are seeing things as you approach the town of Rhyolite. Yes you did see a miner and a penguin. These and six other equally strange sculptures are exhibits at the Goldwell Open Air Museum at the entrance to the town. The miner and the penguin were done by Belgian artist, Fred Bervoets and is called "A Tribute to Shorty Harris", the legendary character who achieved fame and notoriety for his mining exploits and rags-to-riches lifestyle in and around Death Valley, the Bullfrog Mountains and of course Rhyolite.



“A Tribute to Scotty Harris”



“The Last Supper”

