

# Desert

WESTERN TRAVEL / ADVENTURE / LIVING

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# PIONEERTOWN

A ghost town haunted by people

WE ENTERED the central compound of Pioneertown with caution, expecting a fight to tumble through the saloon doors any minute, or the "fastest gun in the West" to make a fast draw. It was soon evident, though, that our fears were unfounded—this town is only a fascinating echo of the West's wild past.

Pioneertown, four miles out of Yucca Valley, California, on Pioneertown Road, has the appearance of an old frontier settlement unspoiled by the march of progress, though its buildings have been attractively spoiled by the elements. As we stood on the board sidewalks at the head of unpaved "Mane" Street, we saw nothing to suggest that we were living in modern times—other than the automobiles of the out-of-towners. A stagecoach, drawn by two horses, provides local transportation; the town newspaper, "The Jackass Mail," is delivered by jackass; and the natives stroll around in old-time frontier garb. This is a real chunk of western lore!

There's a Golden Stallion restaurant and bar, a corral well stocked with horses, a United States Post Office (officially



*Pioneertown mail is delivered daily by jackass.*

recognized), a printery, general store, jail, trading post, bowling alley, and all sorts of other buildings—all in keeping with an early settlement theme. The center of Pioneertown's night life, the famous Red Dog Saloon, features a massive oaken bar, a honky-tonk piano, and a "face on the barroom floor."

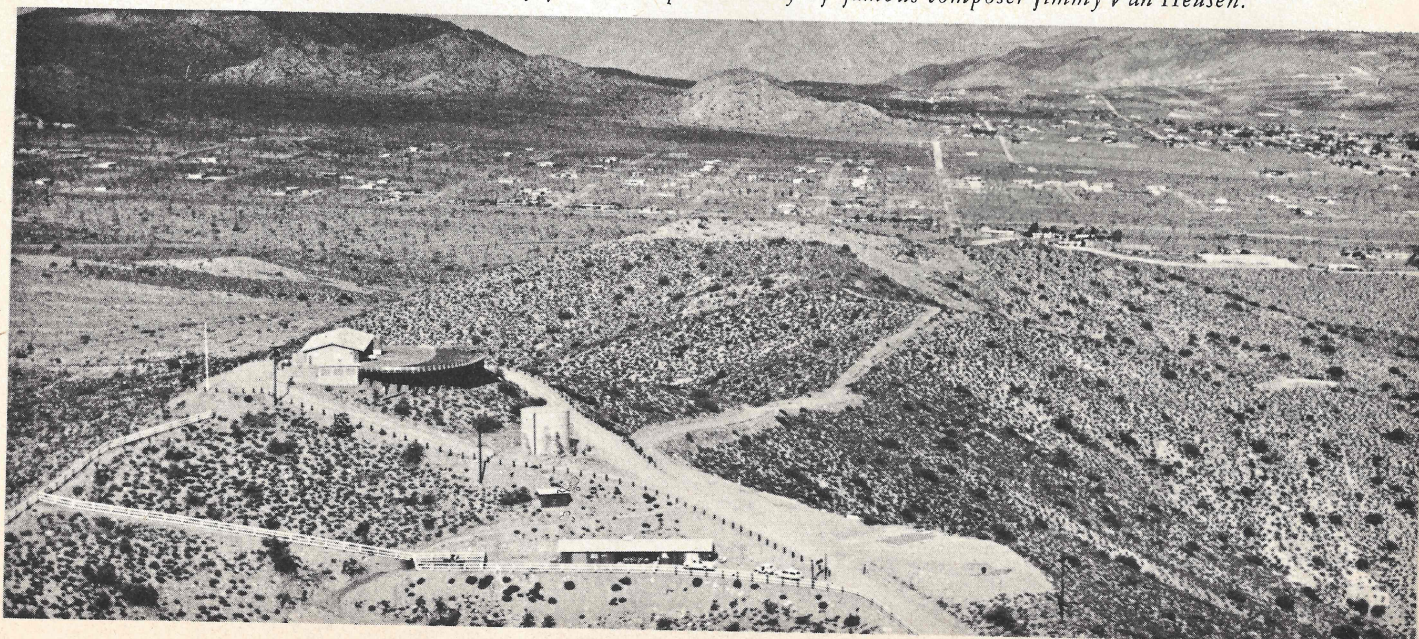
You wouldn't expect to find, in this setting, an institution usually associated with modern day living, but among the shanties and shacks is a *motel*, for those who wish to stay awhile. The fact that

these highway dormitories were not in existence during the pioneer days is easily overlooked in viewing this one. Although its room interiors are modern, the Townhouse Motel has walls of old railroad ties cemented together, as have many of the other structures. One of its owners is Jack Bailey of the "Queen For A Day" television program and it's operated by Cactus Kate of old time movie fame.

Cactus Kate is a friendly, outgoing (and outspoken in Western language) individual who can toss around more names of cowboy movie greats in a few minutes than you can recall from memory. She's been a close friend of all of them and anyone who goes to Pioneertown and doesn't drop in at the motel for a chat with Cactus Kate will be missing a treat.

Before dwelling on the interesting past of this community, a look into the neighboring town of the future might be in order. Yucca Valley, claimed to be the only true *high* desert valley town in California, is 120 miles from Los Angeles Civic Center, and about an equal distance from the Mexican border. From Los Angeles, drive east on the San Ber-

*View overlooking Yucca Valley from hilltop hide-away of famous composer Jimmy Van Heusen.*





by Jack Delaney

nardino Freeway and Interstate Highway 10 (100 miles), then 20 miles up the Twentynine Palms Highway. If the starting point is Indio, El Centro, Calexico, etc., drive northwest on Interstate 10 to the Twentynine Palms turnoff. Easily accessible, Yucca Valley is tucked into a high valley between the San Bernardino Mountains and the rugged hills of Joshua Tree National Monument. The town is a fast growing modern community, 3300 feet high, with a population of 8000 and it is proud of its luxury motels, fine restaurants, trailer parks, golf course and, especially, its desert landscape.

Visitors are always fascinated with the grotesque Joshua trees—the floral symbol of high desert country, which are particularly dramatic when silhouetted against a Yucca Valley evening sky. Some imagine them as a massive protest demonstration against man for encroaching on their desert, others claim they represent an army of teenagers doing the Watusi!

Among Yucca Valley's showplaces is the \$250,000 hilltop hide-away of Academy Award-winning song composer, Jimmy Van Heusen, Desert Christ Park, with an inspiring array of greater-than-life-size statues located at the foot of a hill near the center of town; and Pioneertown. The route from Yucca Valley to Pioneertown passes through Pioneer Pass, where thrilling pyramids of fantastic rock formations may be compared to those of Joshua Tree National Monument. Pioneertown is not a poor-man's Disneyland, nor Knott's Berry Farm. It's in a class by itself—more like a town abandoned by ghosts and reclaimed by humans than the other way around. Its beginning might have been back in the 1880s, but it wasn't. Actually, it was many years later. The man responsible for this shantytown is Dick Curtis, a Hollywood movie personality who interested Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and several other celebrities into forming a corporation to erect a pioneer town complete in every detail to accommodate the



*Historic photo shows Cactus Kate giving Gene Autry a typical Western greeting in Pioneertown.*

filming of western movies—a place where the extras could be drawn from the native population and horses and equipment could be stored between pictures. So Pioneertown is really a huge movie set with permanent structures, not a false-front structure, and behind its rustic facades are men and women carrying on businesses.

For many years activity in the town spun as fast as film. Among movies made there were *Pony Express* with Jock O'Mahoney, Dick Moore, and Peggy Stewart, *Daybreak* with Theresa Wright and Lew Ayers; *Jeopardy*, with Barbara Stanwyck and Barry Sullivan, the Cisco Kid pictures, Judge Roy Bean television films and Gene Autry movie and television films. As realtor Alice "Honey" Fellers puts it, "If all the movie greats who played here were laid end to end, they'd reach—for their six-guns, podner!"

After years of booming success, dis-

sension developed within the corporation, and, to shorten a long story, the bottom fell out. Ghosts nudged eagerly, determined to claim another "old western town," but the hardy settlers of Pioneertown just wouldn't give up. Through their efforts, prosperity is once again peeking around the corner. The Golden Empire Corporation, now in the driver's seat, has ambitious plans for the town (retaining its western theme) and the surrounding area.

In recommending this spot to one-day trippers, I very much want to de-bunk a popular rumor that local lingo there is likely to rub off on visitors. After being exposed to, and swapping yarns with, almost every "character" in town, I personally came out with no adverse effect on my speech. So, effen yer a-fixin ta git yerself out fer a ride fore long, jest git on up to Pioneertown and stay a spell—mite be jest whut yore a-needin!

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