

Climate Crucible

Nature and Culture, Companions in Survival in Death Valley Web Exhibit

As far as is known, Death Valley was given its name by one of a group of prospectors lost on their way to the California Gold Rush. While the moniker caught on famously—apt in many ways—Death Valley, and its history, are full of life. It is, however, life on the edge, as depicted in a new collaborative online exhibit developed by Death Valley National Park and the National Park Service Museum Management

pinyon pine, and mountain mahogany. Though little rain falls in the valley, wildflowers transform the desert in a spectacular display of color. More than 1,000 kinds of plants live there, some with roots that go up to a hundred feet below the desert floor and others that have adapted by reducing the evaporation from their leaves and stems. There are 50 species found nowhere else in the world.



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Program. Using photos, stories, objects, and specimens from the park's collection, the exhibit offers an inside tour of the park and its history.

The valley's extremes have long attracted the curious, just as its stark beauty has drawn lovers of nature. While the Timbisha Shoshone lived in the area for hundreds of years before the Europeans, much of the more recent history revolves around the quest for valuable minerals. The ecology and geology are remarkable, and the exhibit helps viewers explore the science of this enigmatic landscape.

Flanked by the Panamint mountains on the west and the Amargosa on the east, the three-million-acre preserve is often assumed to be as void of life as its name implies. While the valley floor is forbidding, the surrounding terrain includes colorful badlands, sand dunes, and snowy peaks. The higher elevations contain woodlands of juniper,

ABOVE: *Hauling borax. RIGHT: Panamint daisy, a species endemic to the mountain range of the same name, collected in Wildrose Canyon in 1939.*

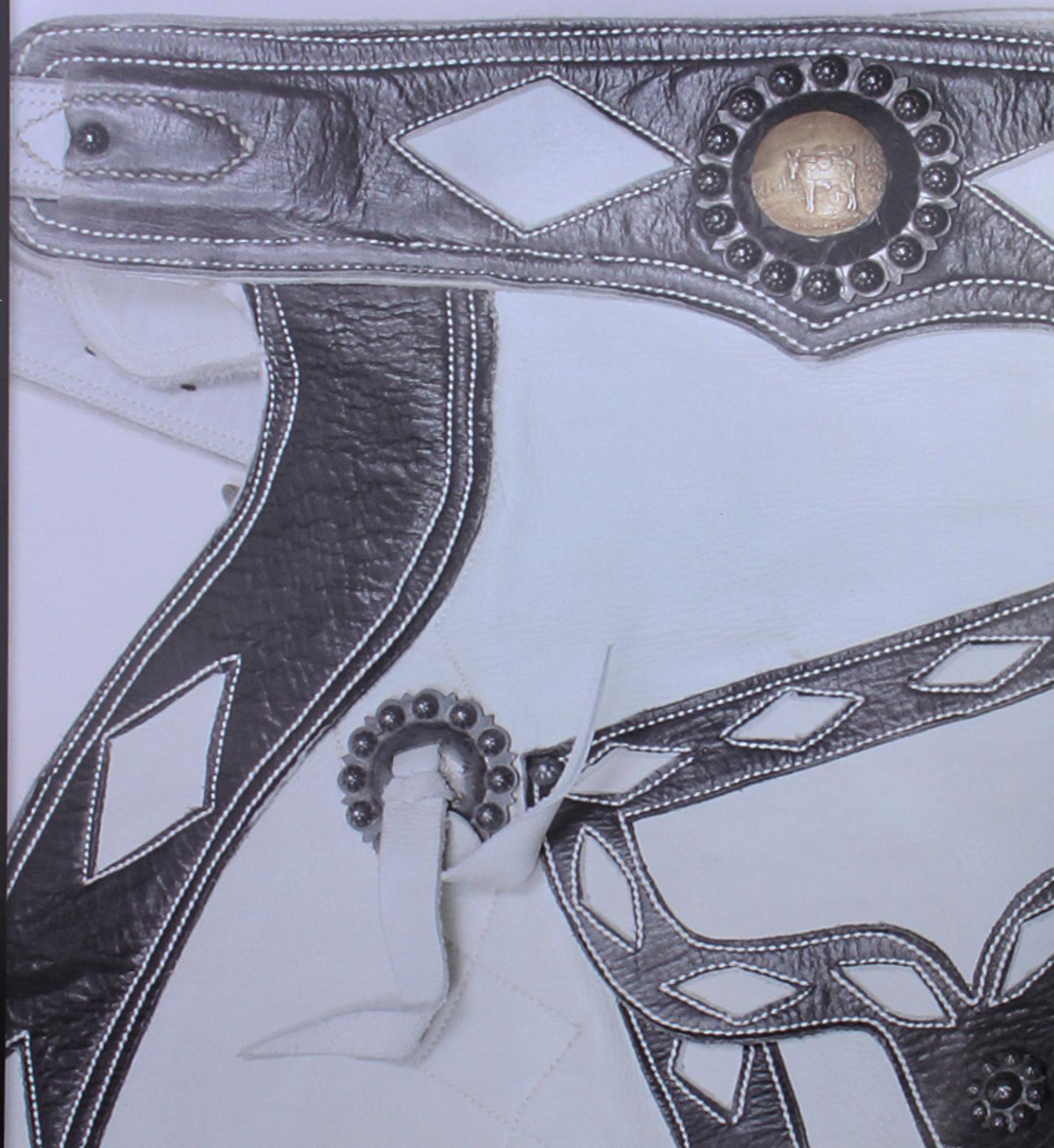
contact points **web** *National Park Service Death Valley Web Exhibit* www.nps.gov/history/museum/exhibits/death_valley/ *NPS Death Valley Teaching with Museum Collections Lesson Plan* www.nps.gov/history/museum/tmc/tmc_links.html#DEVA *Death Valley National Park* www.nps.gov/deva

The effects of pollution and climate change are increasingly evident in the national parks; Death Valley, though over 120 miles from the nearest major city, is particularly vulnerable. These threats are discussed in a section titled, "Science in Death Valley."

"We have a great number of species on the edge," says park ranger Terry Baldino. In an extreme environment, species are threatened by even slight shifts in temperature and precipitation. "One of the telltale signs is movement of plant communities as the temperatures change," says Kelly Fuhrmann, the park's chief of natural and cultural resources management. When plants migrate to higher elevations, the life they support likely follows, with repercussions throughout the ecosystem. But, says Baldino, "what happens if they have to migrate and can't go anywhere else?"

Distant cities are making their mark, too. "The night sky is critical to the experience here," says Fuhrmann. During the evening hours, Death Valley becomes one of the continent's darkest places. Yet research shows that light pollution from Los Angeles—five hours away—and Las Vegas—a two-hour drive—is having an effect. Likewise, urban smog can mask the spectacular views.

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These 21st-century challenges, faced by almost every national park in America, appear incongruous in a place that seems to hint at the beginning of time. It was the 1848 discovery of California gold that first brought outsiders to the valley. Some among the thousands of migrants wound up facing this formidable obstacle. Their story of survival is one of the great chapters of Death Valley lore.

Planning the transcontinental railroad, surveyors and scientists discovered the region's unusual qualities: its location far below sea level, its plant and animal life, its rare minerals. The mining of gold, silver, copper, and zinc saw almost a century and a half of boom and bust. Towns and supply centers grew up around springs and streams. Some entrepreneurs established ranches to serve the mining industry, operations that developed into permanent settlements. Today, there are

It was the era of a most unusual legacy—that of con man Walter Scott, known as “Death Valley Scotty.” Scott convinced Chicago millionaire Albert Johnson to invest in a mysterious gold mine. Johnson, taken with the scenery and the larger-than-life character, built a sprawling mansion high in the cool remove of Grapevine Canyon. The Spanish colonial extravagance is a page from a storybook (see *Common Ground* summer 2004). “You think you’re in the Alhambra, you think you’re in Seville or Granada,” says Paul Dolinsky, who led a team documenting the place for the Historic American Buildings Survey.

Johnson immersed himself in this alternate existence, dressing as a Hollywood cowboy while enjoying the atmosphere he spent millions to create. Environmentally, the house was ahead of its time, with hollow-block masonry filled with Insulite—a type of early in-



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plenty of ghost towns, places like Chloride City, Greenwater, and Skidoo, where the rough-and-tumble Old West was no myth.

In the 1870s, prospectors discovered borax, a mineral used to make soap and cosmetics—so profitable it was eventually dubbed “white gold,” the catalyst for long-term development and the tourist industry. In 1883, the Harmony Borax Works opened at Furnace Creek, remnants of which remain at the park. Borax deposits were gathered from the desert floor, purified, and shipped to the railhead at Mojave via the 20-mule teams made famous in television commercials for Borax.

The exhibit features a wide collection of items from this era, including vintage advertisements and various containers of products made from the mineral. The operation only lasted five years. The miners left the artifacts of their presence, and many are featured in the exhibit.

Mining continued sporadically through the early 20th century. By this time, Death Valley was a popular tourist attraction. A scenic toll road was built in 1926 to bring visitors to a new resort at Stovepipe Wells. The Pacific Coast Borax Company built a campground and cabins for visitors to its works, followed by the Furnace Creek Inn and the Death Valley View Hotel to meet the growing demand.

sulation that kept it cool—and the water for a decorative fountain recycled through the walls, a form of air conditioning. While the promise of gold went unfulfilled, Scott remained a presence at “his” castle, abetting his reputation as a deep-pocket player. The Johnsons, around only during vacations, didn’t seem to mind.

By the time Death Valley became a national monument in 1933, it had been supporting a tourist industry for a decade. The exhibit depicts the era in postcards, advertisements, souvenirs, and other artifacts. The Civilian Conservation Corps improved roads, water lines, and other elements of the park’s infrastructure. In 1994, it was declared a national park and expanded by nearly 1.3 million acres.

From the earliest impressions of the first pioneers to critical contemporary issues, the online exhibit provides an in-depth look at this iconic Western park.

LEFT: Chicago millionaire Albert Johnson, who built the storybook Scotty’s Castle high in the valley hills, was enamored of Old West accoutrements like these ornamental chaps. ABOVE LEFT: Pocket watch from Death Valley’s mining era. ABOVE: Another Scotty’s Castle confection.