



SLAB CITY REVISITED

Free rent draws travelers to the California desert

We first heard about Slab City more than 10 years ago from Mike, an alley neighbor in the Whit. Mike, a retired man of 60-something, had been wintering annually at Slab City for many seasons. Mike's tales of a community of travelers enjoying free camping in the California desert near the Salton Sea intrigued us. A few months later, in November 2003, my husband, Dan, and I set out pulling "Big Al," our 30-foot 1982 silver Avion trailer (Airstream's lesser-known cousin), for a year's trip around North America. Our curiosity dictated that our first stop was Slab City.

Slab City is a former Marine training base, about 600 acres in the Mojave Desert. The buildings were demolished after WWII, leaving the slab foundations — hence the name. Over time, people started camping there and continue to do so to this day. Opinions differ as to the exact owner of the land, but all agree it is an agency of the state of California. Slab City sports a church, an outdoor library, a hot spring, sometimes a newsletter, an outdoor community center named "The Range" featuring surprisingly good music on Saturday nights, a singles camping area termed "Loners on Wheels," a rudimentary internet café complete with wi-fi and coffee and, I'm told, a nude camping area.

What Slab City does *not* have is electricity, water, sewer system, paved roads, police department or formal government. The few children who live in Slab City are picked up by the local school district bus and trucked to Niland, and the local sheriff makes calls as needed to keep the peace.

A cadre of regulars (or renegades as they are sometimes known) live there year-round. As summer temps reach 100-plus degrees, this is quite an accomplishment sans air conditioning and often even a generator for a fan. The year-round population is about 200, and as a rule, the hardy regulars don't live high on the hog and most of their vehicle dwellings are makeshift.

I find it fascinating that this group of renegades lives peacefully with a very different group. The snowbirds arrive in early winter, swelling the population to about 2,000, and leave the following spring. Their vehicles tend to be larger, fancier motor homes, most with generators, bathrooms and some solar panels and satellite dishes.

I believe Slab City has been allowed to continue for these 60-some-odd years due to the presence of the snowbirds. If the community consisted only of the regulars it would have been shut down long ago. The ability of these two disparate groups to successfully live together is impressive and admirable, and due mainly to the efforts of the community leaders. Some residents have drug, alcohol and mental health problems, but enough folks with clear heads are around that the community seemed successful.

It had been 10 years since our earlier visit. Dan and I arrived in our tiny camper van in search of warmth this past January. We ditched soggy, foggy Eugene; our aim was sunny Arizona by way of sunny Southern California. I was eager to see if Slab City had changed.

We found that Slab City's existence is now in jeopardy.

According to Merle, one of the regulars, the California EPA had tested the soil in the area and determined the site is contaminated. None of the residents seemed to know what caused the contamination. The state had concluded the land must be sold so the state would not be liable for problems resulting from contamination. Merle observed two factions of residents: The first believes if they do nothing, nothing will change. The second believes Slab City must incorporate, buy the site for \$1, clean it up a bit and manage it.

Most of us tend to believe customs will continue and wild places will forever remain open to us. For me, this notion was disproved this last summer when the Lane County Commission closed walk-in access to our naked beach on the Willamette River. Dan and I enjoyed the river for 20 summers and I taught three of our grandchildren to swim there; now it's gone. In addition, sadly, this past summer, the owners of the majorly cool hot springs on the Alvord Desert in the Steens Mountains literally "paved paradise and put in a parking lot" and now charge \$20 for a soak. This was another wild spot that Dan and I, along with untold others, had respectfully and gratefully enjoyed for close to 30 years.

At the time of our January visit to Slab City, the realistic thinkers were busily trying to convince the others that action was necessary in order to keep their adopted home.

On a Sunday afternoon, I walked up to the community outdoor area and found democracy in action complete with arguments. I loved it. I stayed for the vote count and spoke with several residents. Merle, a 60ish, rather stylish, well groomed, retired Marine, former Eugenean, full-time RVer and part-time resident, was counting the vote with lots of oversight. A 30-something, heavily tattooed woman, sporting wildly colored make-up and knee socks, appeared to be the parliamentarian. She answered all queries regarding voting and procedures with confidence and skill while seated in her wheelchair.

I first heard "Jack Two-Horses" drunkenly yelling various election-related complaints. Jack was 40ish, tall, slender, shirtless with dreadlocks. Jack was running for one of the board positions. One of the women who appeared to be organizing the election, Lynne, said Jack was a good man and she had voted for him. When the votes were later tallied, Jack got one vote from himself, one from Lynne and one from an unknown fan. Lynne said Jack had, unfortunately, started celebrating early and was just "a little drunk." Further, it had been a tough last two weeks, according to Lynne. The community meeting about the election drew 150 participants, and Lynn said most of them had a thought or two and expressed them at length.

Dan said he'd love it if we had that level of community participation at our condo board meetings!

Four new board members were elected: Lynne, sporting a silver pony tail, a mid-60s Canadian, and according to Merle, a woman who "gets things done around here"; Builder Bill, a late 60ish man, creator of The Range and the weekly Saturday night music jams; Preacher Dave; and

Christina. I didn't find out anything about the last two candidates, but they sure got lots of votes!

I spoke with Merle, Lynne and others about changes in Slab City. I had noticed the increase in garbage and seemingly abandoned RVs and ramshackle huts. Lynne said a recent dump closure had forced residents to travel 20 miles to the nearest garbage transfer station and that many folks did not have a working vehicle and/or gas money. Lynne also noted an increase in young travelers caused, at least in part, by the inclusion of Slab City in the 2007 movie *Into the Wild*. In the film, based on a true story by Jon Krakauer, a young man stops by Slab City on his way to Alaska, where he dies alone in the wilderness.

Lynne said these young travelers brought the kinds of problems young people with little resources and plenty of "party spirit" can bring with them. Lately, she said there had been an influx of middle-aged women who expected others to provide everything from free electricity to toilet paper. Lynne offered no opinion as to what had attracted the middle-aged women — middle-aged men, perhaps?

We met three young travelers who were camping near us. Chubs (not at all chubby), a 20-something young man with a sweet face, was traveling in a small sedan with three friends. Chubs and his friends had left cold Indiana to follow motorized pedal bike shows and stopped by to visit Slab City. Other neighbors were Heather and AJ who said they were former "ski bums" from Colorado. Heather was decked out in a hippie dress and hair similar to my 1970s attire; AJ was more contemporary with a spiked hair-do. I spotted a small tent at their campsite; their bathroom arrangements were anyone's guess. I didn't meet any middle-aged women seeking electricity or toilet paper; perhaps they had all moved on.

I have hope that Slab City will continue as a viable community. The changes planned by the elected leaders are sound, and it appeared the plans have a good chance to succeed. I wish them well.

Moving on, Dan and I next visited our friend Sue at the Howling Coyote RV Campground in tiny Why, Ariz. The campground started out many years ago as a free camping place in the desert. Similar to Slab City, years ago the government agency owner insisted on incorporation and management. Today, The Howling Coyote offers a modest, but nice, club house with many, many books, free computer use and wi-fi, a kitchen and restrooms and multiple activities. It is inexpensive. Sue's sweetie Steve has rented his ultra-huge lot there for 20 years for the sum of \$550 a year. As travelers, we paid \$9 a night. The Howling Coyote was very clean, organized, had laundry and indoor plumbing and was still very cheap. Perhaps this is the future of Slab City? ■

Susan Connolly of Eugene is a semi-retired former legal investigator, attorney, co-owner of The Children's Hour Nursery and Preschool and child welfare social worker. She lives with her husband and tends her terrace garden high above downtown Eugene with her daughters and five grandchildren living nearby. Her earlier story about her travels can be found on our website.