

EAST OREGONIAN

LIFESTYLES

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A building slowly shifts on its foundation in the gold mining ghost town of Cornucopia in the Eagle Mountains. Gold was discovered here in the 1880s and Cornucopia was born from the ensuing rush in 1884.



A newer looking sink sits idle on the back porch of a structure in the ghost town of Homestead on the Snake River north of Oxbow.



A solitary one-room homestead build of volcanic tuff stands off Sparta Lane just outside of the town of Sparta.



A weathered old mattress frame emerges from the dark corner of a room in an abandoned structure in the gold mining ghost town of Cornucopia.

Visiting ghosts

I love traveling back in time. Not in the science fiction sense, where I would use a time machine to actually go back and see past events with my own eyes (because let's face facts, that's not an option). I love to travel back in time with my mind, and my time machines are a Nikon D800e camera and my 2010 Honda Insight.

Two summers ago I took a day trip to southern Baker County to visit four of Oregon's numerous ghost towns. Last weekend I revisited this idea and took another trip to three ghost towns in northern part of the same county.

This year I took a new friend along with me. His name is Peter Lindstrom, and he was vacationing across the U.S. from Sweden. While Peter and I were traveling east along Highway 86 on our way to visit the ghost towns of Sparta, Cornucopia and Homestead, he made the comment that it looked like the real "Wild West" out here. I looked back at him and said that this is real Wild West. I then went on to tell him tales of Til Taylor's death in a jail break, the Whitman Mission and the Indian Wars, and the massacre of Chinese gold miners in Hells Canyon. We spent a lot of time delving into the area's history while racing down the sagebrush-lined roads of northeastern Baker County.

First we stopped at Sparta. Sparta is a former gold mining community northwest of Richland, and there is not much left of the original buildings. There is one single-room homestead on Sparta Lane before you get to town, and an old mercantile building where the town used to exist. We only stayed for about half-an-hour chatting up a local about the history of the town before heading off to Cornucopia.

The road to Cornucopia winds up into the forest-covered hills of Pine Valley and deep into the foothills of the Eagle Mountains. Cornucopia is aptly named, offering a stark contrast to Sparta's sparseness. There are more than a dozen original structures scattered amongst the towering firs and pine trees that have grown up in



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Comment

the years since the gold town's demise.

Peter and I spend more than an hour wandering around the derelict buildings trying to figure out the original purpose of each structure. Then there were the numerous stone foundations of buildings that offered no clues as to what they once were. They simply remained like moss-covered tombstones marking the graves of the ambitions of the

town's founding fathers who built them more than one hundred years ago. I am certain that with more exploring the ghost of Cornucopia would have many more secrets to share.

Last on the list was Homestead. This unassuming ghost town is tucked away on the Oregon side of the Snake River at the southern end of Hells Canyon. A good portion of the town was inundated with water after the completion of the Hells Canyon Dam in 1967. At first glance this small collection of houses and outbuildings did not resemble a ghost town at all. The grounds were littered with refuse from times much more recent than one might expect. The structures all had newer siding and were strewn with furniture and other items that suggested people had been there as recently as the 1970s.

Upon further investigation, the true age of some of the structures came into view as Peter and I looked at the old stone foundations on the main house and an old cold storage pantry in the complex. Homestead had the air of an aging diva desperately trying to conceal her age with plastic surgery and makeup from all of the travelers that pass her by.

On the way back to Haines, were I was staying with friends, I felt a little desperate thinking about how with every passing second these old sentinels from our history are fading away into the landscape. It seems tragically beautiful to know that everything humanity leaves behind, Mother Nature takes back for herself. It is merely a matter of time.

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