

Ghost Town Guardian

Mark Langner keeps watch over Old West history

By Audrey T. Hingley • PHOTOS BY DAVID CALVERT

MARK LANGNER stands atop Bodie Bluff in California's Bodie State Historic Park, hand shading his eyes from the sun's glare while surveying the remains of the once lawless gold-mining town.

"The whole town is at your feet," says Langner, 51, the park's supervising ranger. "This is one of the best views of the Sierras."

Langner embraces the quiet, desolate scenery and the solitude of the once-thriving town whose last residents departed more than 50 years ago.

And it's a good thing, too. For the last 13 years, he and his wife, Lynn, 51, have been among a handful of resident rangers who live year-round in several of the park's retrofitted historic homes, even during the wintertime when temperatures drop below zero and snow piles so high that Langner can climb up and peer into the second-floor windows of Bodie's abandoned buildings.

"This is the best backyard in California, with great outdoor recreation opportunities," explains Langner, whose early ranger work included stints at several California beaches. "I always wanted to live in a place where the elevation was higher than the population."

At an elevation of nearly 8,400 feet and spanning a thousand acres, Bodie is nestled in the Bodie Hills east of the Sierra Nevada. The area is the

essence of remoteness, subject to high winds and brutal winters, with the nearest town—Bridgeport (pop. 818)—20 miles away.

During its gold rush heyday in the 1880s, Bodie boasted 2,000 buildings, including stores, brothels and 65 saloons, and a population of 10,000, making the town the third largest in California at the time. Gunfights, robberies and murders contributed to its reputation for wickedness.

The gold eventually ran out and two fires destroyed many of its structures so that, by the 1940s, Bodie had faded into history. In 1962, what remained of the town was designated a state historic park and a National Historic Landmark, with 200 buildings preserved in a state of "arrested decay"—meaning that the interiors are maintained just as they were left, furnished and stocked with goods—all serving as a living time capsule of life in the Old West.

"We keep the windows and roofs up and keep the foundations level. It's a struggle to keep these buildings from falling down," Langner says.

Neville Baxter of San Luis Obispo, Calif., who loves visiting ghost towns "for the history," calls Bodie "the gem of ghost towns."

"But I don't think I could live here in winter," adds Neville, 81, who toured Bodie with his wife,

Rosemary, last fall before the first snowfall.

No matter the season, the state requires Langner to live on-site to provide law enforcement, fire protection and emergency maintenance.

Langner has closed the park only once in 13 winters when strong winds blew out windows and toppled a water tower in 2007. He's responded to four plane crashes, and several years ago rescued a group of skiers who got lost amid a fast-moving storm.

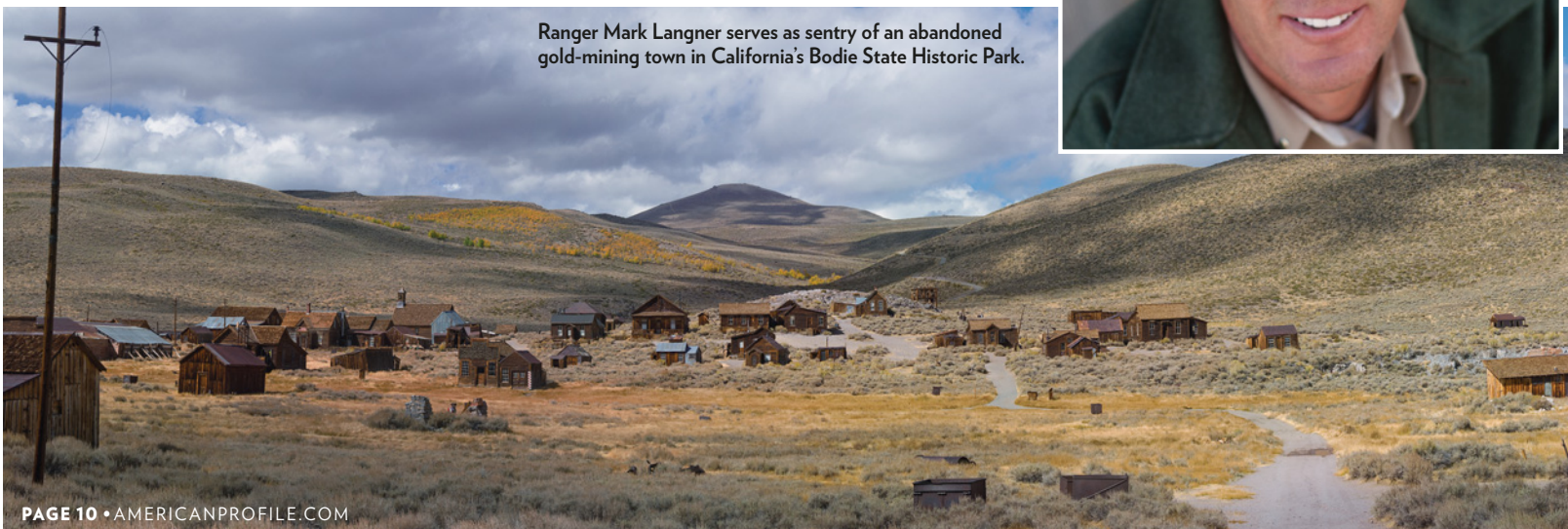
Fortunately for the ranger, his wife has an adventuresome spirit, too, and their 10-year-old cat, Willy, doesn't seem to mind the chilly temperatures or isolation.

"The place has really grown on me. It's a one-of-a-kind experience living here," says Lynn, a senior park aide who also works as a massage

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Ranger Mark Langner serves as sentry of an abandoned gold-mining town in California's Bodie State Historic Park.



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therapist in Bridgeport, weather permitting.

Given the stark living conditions, the Langners have learned to adapt. He grew up in the conservation-conscious East Bay area of San Francisco, but notes that “you have to leave your water running in winter here or your plumbing freezes.”

An 800-megahertz radio keeps the line of communication open with other park officials, and a landline telephone and satellite Internet work except during storms.

Because the historic town appears frozen in time, Langner often thinks about the prospectors who once lived and worked in Bodie. “It amazes me that guys could be working underground, with mines up to 1,200 feet deep, and come out to three feet of new snow,” he says.

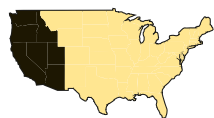
Today, an appetite for history is common among most visitors, along with a mutual desire to protect the park for future generations—all of which make Langner’s job rewarding.

“Each day is different—search and rescue, law enforcement, park interpretation, talking to visitors,” he says. “I can honestly say I enjoy going to work every day.” ★

Visit parks.ca.gov/bodie for more information.



Langner polices deserted buildings dating from the 1880s and preserved as a National Historic Landmark.



TIDBITS

Did You Know...

ARIZONA—Medal of Honor recipient Nick Bacon grew up in Arizona where he joined the U.S. Army at age 17. He received the nation’s highest military decoration for actions during his service in Vietnam. He also was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the Legion of Merit, two Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart. After leaving the military, he worked for John McCain’s U.S. Senate campaign and served as city manager in the town of Surprise (pop. 30,848). He died last year at age 64.

CALIFORNIA—The **San Francisco earthquake of April 18, 1906**, together with the fire that followed, was one of the most damaging disasters in U.S. earthquake history. Although contemporary accounts estimated a death toll of around 700, modern research puts the number closer to 3,000. Some 28,000 buildings were destroyed or badly damaged by the combined effects of the quake and the fire.

IDAHO—North America has 19 species of owls, and 14 of those can be found in varying habitats of Idaho. Those species include the common barn

owl, the Western screech owl, the great horned owl, the burrowing owl, the Northern pygmy owl, and both the long- and short-eared owls.

NEVADA—Named after the 36th state, the battleship USS *Nevada* (BB-36) was commissioned in 1916. After seeing service during World War I, the *Nevada* was badly damaged at Pearl Harbor but later saw service both in the Atlantic and Pacific during World War II, including assisting in the invasions of Normandy, Iwo Jima and Okinawa. The famous naval warrior was decommissioned in 1946. Today, the name USS *Nevada* is assigned to a nuclear submarine.

OREGON—The small coastal town of Otter Rock, seven miles north of Newport (pop. 9,532), derives its name from a rock off its coastline that once was a

haven for otters. Today, the offshore rocks are part of the Oregon Islands National Wildlife Refuge and serve as a nesting area for a variety of marine birds. A popular spot for kayakers and surfers, the area also is home to Devils Punch Bowl State Natural Area.

UTAH—Sculptor Edward J. Fraughton, born in Park City (pop. 7,371) in 1939, is best known for his sculptures depicting themes of the Old West. Fraughton’s works range in size from medallions to monuments, including portraiture, bas-reliefs, narrative bronzes, medals and plaques. Major commissions include The Mormon Battalion Monument, Presidio Park, San Diego, Calif.; The Spirit of Wyoming, Cheyenne, Wyo.; All is Well, Salt Lake City; Winter Quarters, Florence, Neb.; and The Cadet, Randolph-Macon Academy, Front Royal, Va.

WASHINGTON—The Pangborn Memorial Airport in East Wenatchee (pop. 5,757) is named after barnstorming pilot Clyde “Upside-Down” Pangborn. Born in Bridgeport (pop. 2,059), Pangborn became an aerial stunt pilot in the early days of aviation and went on to join with co-pilot Hugh Herndon Jr. in 1931 to make the first nonstop flight between Japan and the United States. After flying across the Pacific from Japan, Pangborn landed his plane at East Wenatchee, thereby becoming the airport’s namesake.