

Backfill

Ghosts of the Gold Rush

Tell Charley Spiller that his roofs look like they've been cobbled together from tin cans, and he'll thank you for the compliment. Spiller, a maintenance mechanic for California's Bodie State Historic Park, works in the ghost town of Bodie, Calif., on buildings that haven't been inhabited for a half century or more, and he wants them to keep looking that way.

At its peak in 1880, Bodie was one of the state's largest cities, a notoriously lawless gold-mining community with nearly 10,000 residents and more than 2,000 buildings. When the gold and silver mining boom collapsed, Bodie's population plummeted. A Depression-era fire that destroyed 90 percent of the town sealed its fate; by the end of World War II, it was abandoned by everyone except an optimistic local banker who bought up the

remaining foreclosed properties in hopes of finding more gold. Eventually his descendants sold the town to the state; in the early 1960s, it was designated a national historic landmark.

Of course, even a ghost town requires preventive maintenance, especially when it's located in the harsh high desert of the eastern Sierra Nevada. Park manager Brad Sturdivant and his staff focus on roofs and foundations as they stabilize the town's abandoned homes, warehouses, hotels, saloons, and other buildings. Their techniques evolved during the park's underfunded early days, when they recycled original materials — flattened tin-can roofing, weathered siding, square-headed nails salvaged from old piles of lumber — to make needed repairs. Today's budget occasionally allows for luxuries like replica siding, full-dimension lumber custom-cut by local sawmills, and imported hand-poured glass that duplicates the look of the town's original wavy glazing.

Still, if Sturdivant and staff members like Charley Spiller have done their jobs well, the improvements should be hard to spot. — *Andrew Wormer*



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