

'Goodbye God, I'm going to Bodie'

Feeling of forboding still haunts California ghost town

Story and photos by Denise Seith



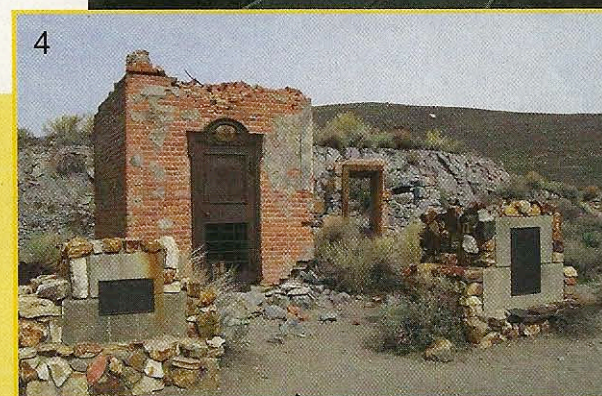
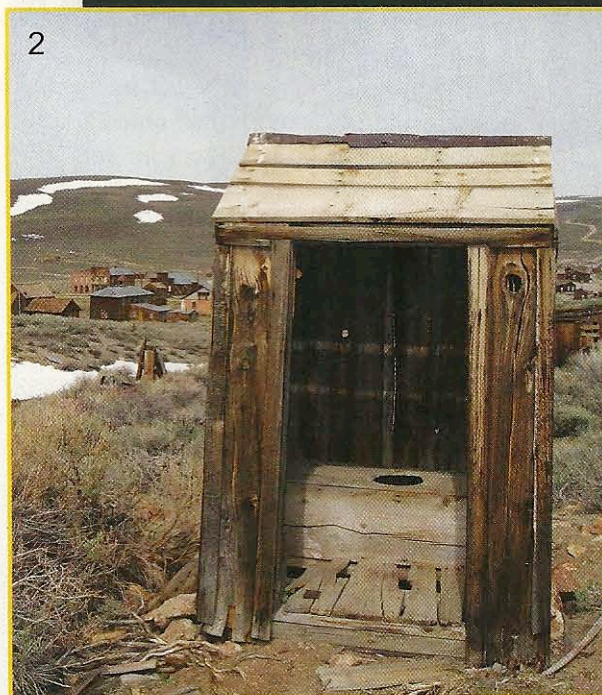
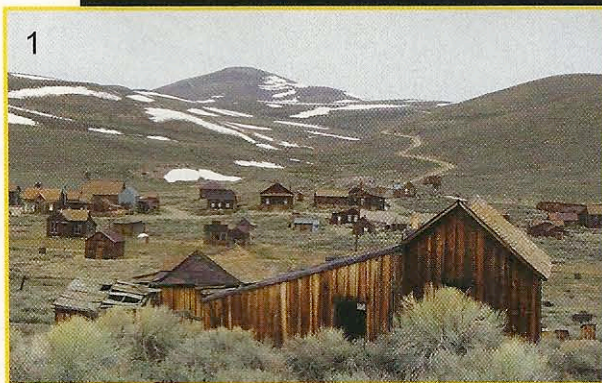
The school house, built in 1879, was originally the Bon Ton Lodging House. The first school was located two blocks up the street, but was burned down by a juvenile delinquent. Belle Moore was Bodie's first school teacher.

When a little girl writes in her diary “Goodbye God, I’m going to Bodie,” you know her destination isn’t a pleasant one — not in the 1880s anyway when she penned that entry. The child’s name is unknown, but her words have become famous throughout the West to describe her family’s move to Bodie, California — once known as the Wildest Mining Camp in the West. Today, the lawlessness is long gone. Now a State Historic Park, Bodie is the nation’s biggest unreconstructed ghost town, and provides an authentic look back into California’s mining history.

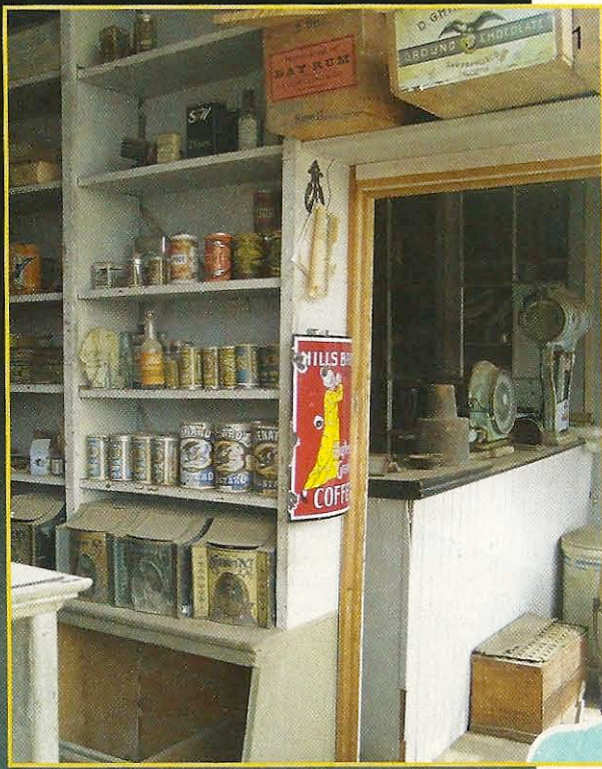
Founded in 1859, the town was named for Waterman S. Bodey (also known as William S. Bodey) who first discovered gold in the area. Well off the beaten path, Bodie offered an opportunity for hardrock miners to strike it rich. The chance to make a fortune was so appealing to so many, that gold seekers rushed here in the late 1870s despite the notorious robberies, murders and street fights that occurred nearly every day. Legend has it that the fire bell tolled the ages of the deceased when they were buried; this town’s bell rang often and long!

The weather in Bodie was just as bad as the crime. In fact, the weather killed the town’s namesake. While returning with supplies, Mr. Bodey died in a snowstorm the same year the town was established. The winters here haven’t changed much and are still beyond inhospitable. With winds up to 100 miles per hour, temperatures dropping to 30 degrees below zero and snow 20 feet deep, Bodie is the coldest spot in the United States outside of Alaska. Because it is perched at an elevation of 8,379 feet, it’s often cold and windy in summer, too. Be prepared for any weather when you visit.

From about 1877 through the 1880s, this gold mining town was booming and bustling. The population of miners, merchants, gamblers, entrepreneurs and their families exceeded 10,000. Some people got rich. From the onset of mining through about 1941, the 30 different mining companies that operated in



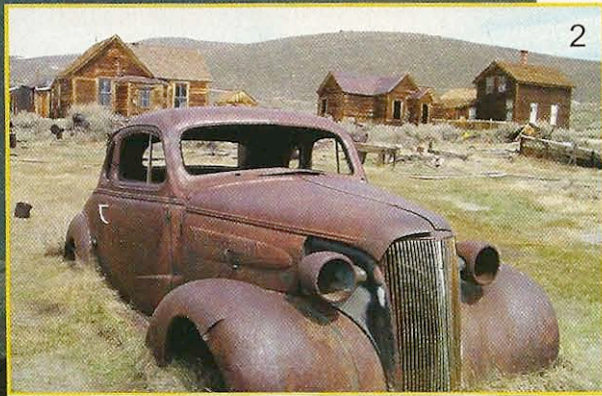
1. Looking down at the ghost town of Bodie. 2. Outhouse. 3. The Methodist Church was erected in 1882 and is the only church still standing in Bodie. It is located on the corner of Green and Fuller Streets. The last service was held here in 1932. 4. This is the site of the Bodie Bank which James Cain bought from E.L. Benedict in 1890. The bank escaped the fire of 1892, but was destroyed in the fire of 1932. All that remains is the vault. Bodie Bank was robbed only once, on Sept. 1, 1916, by four men who got away with \$4,000 in money and jewelry.



the Bodie Mining District produced close to \$100 million in gold and silver. Gold was then about \$20 an ounce; silver was less than a dollar an ounce. The Standard Mine was the most profitable, yielding nearly \$15 million over 25 years. It was this mine's success that caused the 1878 rush to Bodie.

What's left of Bodie — about 170 buildings and the Standard Mill — represents just five percent of what was standing in its heyday. There are no recreations or restorations here. Everything is officially in a state of “arrested decay,” meaning only minimal repairs are made on the remaining structures. Some are literally falling down. Bodie has been left pretty much the way it was when the residents left — which would have been anytime up through the 1940s, when the last stragglers pulled up stakes. The town's cemetery is still in use though, as the last of the old-time miners settle into their final resting places.

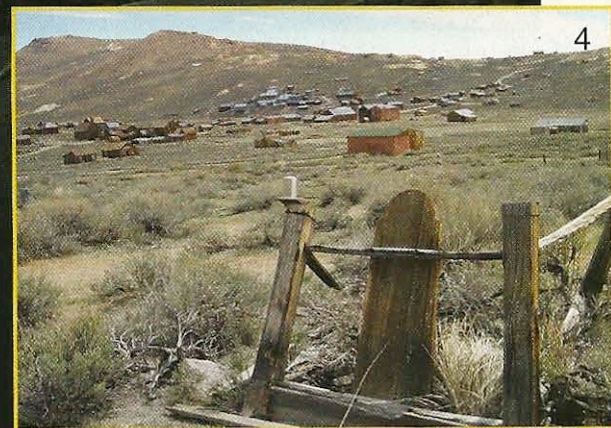
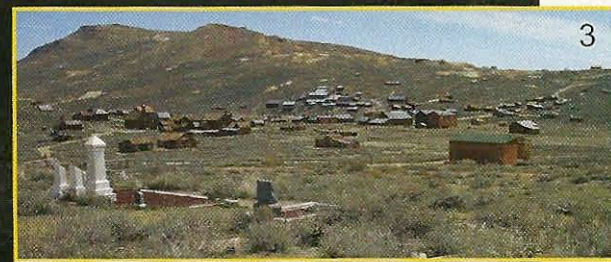
Touring Bodie today is mostly self-guided. You're free to wander and get an up-close look at how the ravages of time and Mother Nature have affected one of the most renowned and rowdy hardrock mining settlements of the Eastern Sierras.



Pick up a walking map/brochure for \$2 in the parking lot. The numbered paragraphs in the brochure correspond to numbered posts (that haven't blown or fallen down) along the streets, and to numbers on the map.

The brochure is filled with interesting stories about some of the town's citizens and points out where they lived:

- ❖ James Cain came to Bodie when he was just 25, got rich in the lumber business, then recovered \$90,000 worth of



Background: The Boone General Store was erected in 1879 on Main Street and was owned by Harvey Boone, a direct descendant of Daniel Boone. Harvey also owned the Boone Stable and Livery business. Kerosene and gasoline had to be hauled to Bodie from Hawthorne and Carson City. **1.** Inside the Boone General Store. **2.** An old car and buildings in Bodie. **3 & 4.** There are actually four cemeteries on one plot of land. Only those accepted as “respectable” were buried inside the fence. Others were buried at “Boot Hill” outside of the fences and, in most cases, without markers.

gold in just 90 days. He eventually ended up owning the Standard Mill.

❖ Theodore Hoover, brother of President Herbert Hoover, lived in Bodie. He was the general manager of the Standard Consolidated Mining Company and later became director of the School of Mines at Stanford University.

❖ Lottie Johl was a former “lady of the night” who achieved respectability as a painter, and became the wife of a local butcher Pat Reddy was a one-armed lawyer with a considerable reputation for defending criminals.

As you stroll through the streets, be sure to peek in the windows of the buildings, but leave every rustic relic as you find it. It’s against the law to remove “souvenirs,” so keep your metal detector in the car. Everywhere you look are reminders of yesteryear — tin cans, weathered wood, skeletons of cars and pieces of mining equipment. The contents of many homes and shops are still in their rightful places, but under layers of dust and dirt. The windows of the Boone Store still display toiletries, patterns for dressmaking and faded cans of coffee and spices. Bottles still line bars in saloons and the dinner tables in some homes are still set with dishes — just as if the owners were expected back any time. But, they aren’t.



Only a few park service employees live here during the summer months.

The one area in Bodie you cannot wander through on your own is the Standard Mill. But, if you'd like to spend about an hour gaining insight into hardrock mining and see what Bodie was really about, join a free Mill tour led by a park ranger. Group size is limited to 20, so be sure to sign up at the museum on Main Street when you arrive in town (no phone reservations). Tours are conducted several times a day during the summer. The Standard Mill building is pretty much intact, so you'll see a mother

lode of original mining relics.

Tours begin in the metal shop where huge lathes and other metal working tools were used to repair the stamps and rods. The Standard was a 20-stamp mill that ran around the clock, six days a week. It was one of nine stamp mills in town, so the noise must have been deafening. Even on Sunday when the stamp mill didn't run, people's ears were probably still ringing! You'll also see massive generators on the tour. For years, energy for the town's mills was derived from steam generated by wood-fired boilers, but in 1892, hydroelectric power generated by a plant 13 miles away replaced the wood fuel. The enterprise

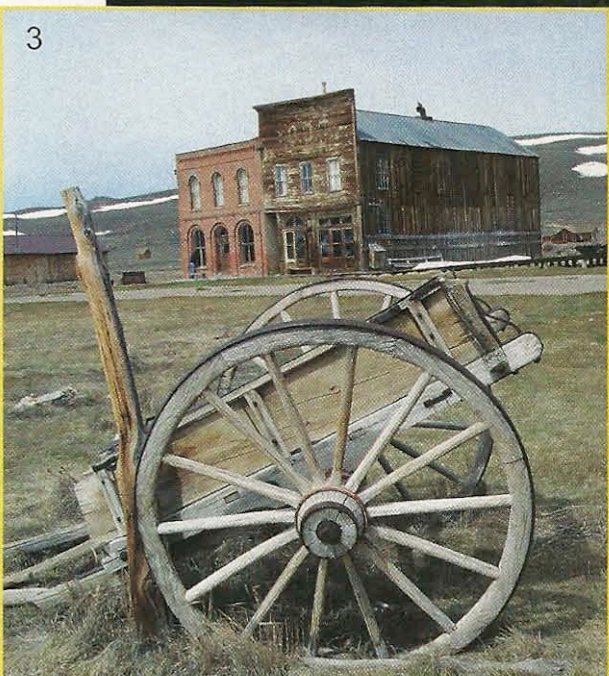
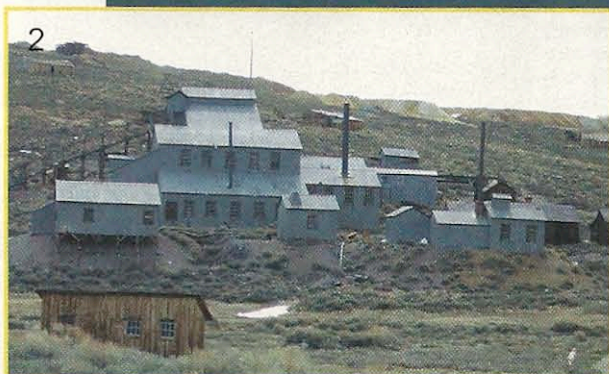
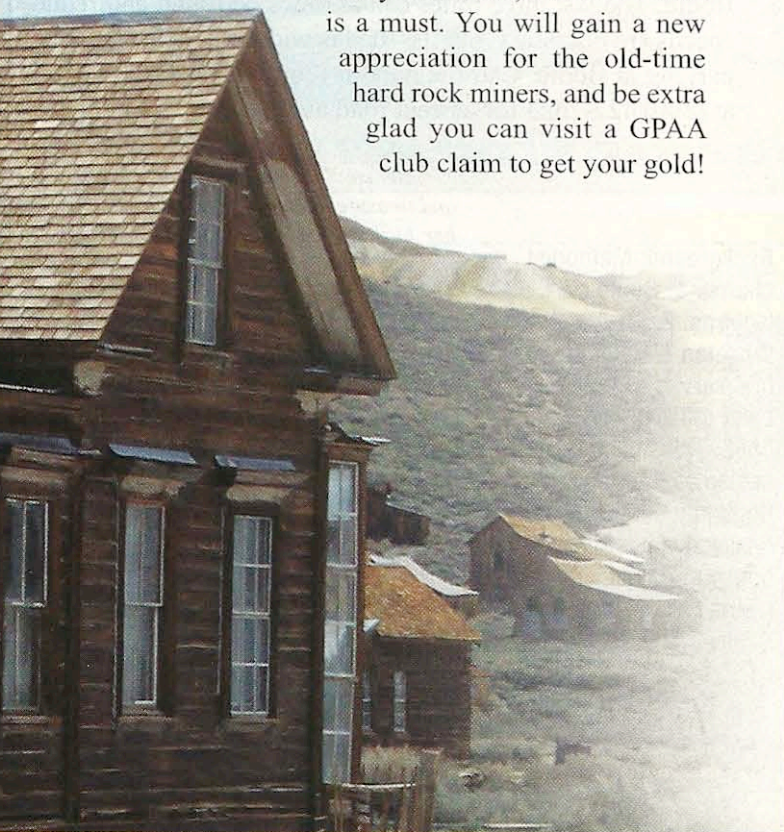


Miller residence is on the left and the Cain Residence is on the corner of Green and Park streets. Tom Miller worked for the Mono Lake Railway & Lumber Co. at Mono Mills, south of Mono Lake. Much of the Jeffrey pine lumber used in the construction of Bodie came from Mono Mills. James and Martha Cain lived in Bodie. James became the town's principal property owner.

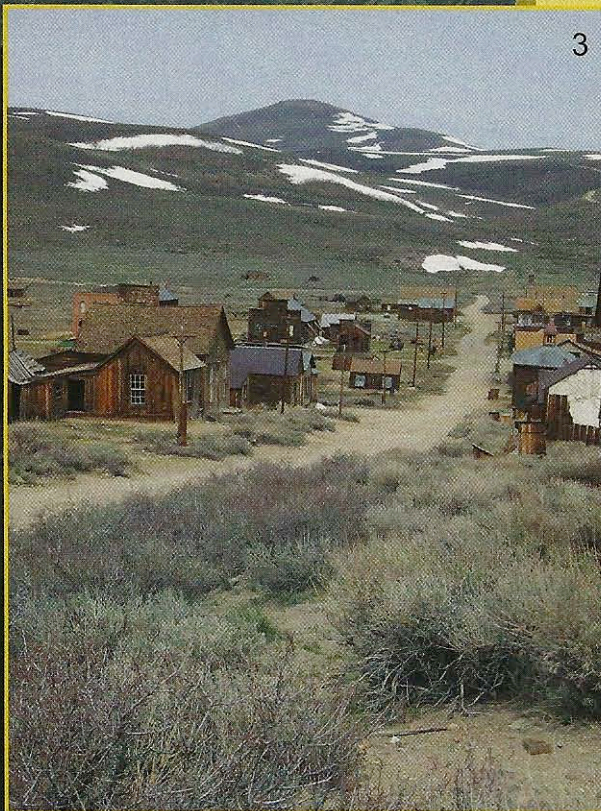
was a gamble. No one knew for sure if the idea of transmitting electricity over wires from a distance would work, but it did. Bodie made engineering history!

During the tour, you'll also learn about the amalgamation process of using mercury to extract gold and silver from the pulverized rock. The end result was 120-pound ingots that were a mixture of gold and silver. This type of ingot was unique to Bodie, making it easy to track its origin. After the ingots were transported to the mint in Carson City, they were re-melted and the gold and silver was then separated.

The streets of Bodie are quiet now, except for the howling wind and chatting tourists. The town's remaining residents cleared out in the 1940s when the last mine and post office closed. There is no longer a rush for gold or anything else. But, if you enjoy seeing America's mining history first-hand, a visit to Bodie is a must. You will gain a new appreciation for the old-time hard rock miners, and be extra glad you can visit a GPAA club claim to get your gold!



1. The interior of one of the houses in Bodie. **2.** The Standard Mine (originally known as the Bunker Hill Mine when registered in 1861) yielded nearly \$15 million over 25 years and its success caused the 1878 rush to Bodie. This mill last operated in 1938 and was the most successful of the 30 different mining companies that operated in the Bodie Mining District. **3.** This brick building on Main Street was erected in 1877 by Postmaster George Putnam, and not only served as the post office, but also Grandma Johnson's rooming house and later as the Dechambeau Hotel. Next door is Bodie Odd Fellows Lodge, No. 279.



IF YOU GO:

Entrance Fees:

- ❖ Ages 17 and over: \$7
- ❖ Ages 16 to 6: \$5
- ❖ Ages 5 and under: Free

No additional fee for park ranger guided tours of Standard Mine and Mill.

No camping, food, gas or commercial services available at Bodie State Historic Park.

Bodie State Historic Park is open year round, but hours vary with the seasons. Over-snow equipment such as snowmobiles and skis are necessary to reach the park during the winter. The park is closed during periods of inclement weather.

Dogs may accompany visitors into the townsite, but must be on a leash at all times.

www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=509

www.bodiefoundation.org

Driving directions: From U.S. 395 seven miles south of Bridgeport, CA, take State Route 270. Go east 10 miles to the end of the pavement and continue three miles on a dirt road to Bodie. The last three miles can at times be rough and reduced speeds are necessary, but the road is wide and there is plenty of parking at Bodie. Call the park at (760) 647-6445 or Caltrans at (800) 427-7623 for current road and weather conditions.

Denise Seith is a freelance travel writer and treasure hunter in Salem, Oregon. She and her husband Larry own www.GoldRushTradingPost.com, an online prospecting equipment and supply store.



Background: Methodist church. **1.** Some old lanterns. **2.** The Wheaton & Hollis Hotel first served as the U.S. Land office in 1885-1886. This building later served as the Power Company office and finally as a boarding house. **3.** Looking down a street going through Bodie.

