

# Abandoned

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## NOT FORGOTTEN



There's more to  
high desert homesteads  
than meets the eye.

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Stand in the middle of an abandoned high desert homestead. Go on, do it. Notice that heavy kind of silence like a warm embrace? Walk over to a wall, look out at the desert through the cracks in the wooden slats.

Feel the floorboards creak beneath your feet?

There is mystery here in the rawness, in the wild history – the storm before the calm. Soon, they may come with concrete pours and drywall to fix up these small sanctuaries. Thing is, faith is often forged in the unknown.

Those crooked beams, this door – they were born of the Small Tract Act of 1938. Cabins built on 5-acre plots deemed “disposable” by the Bureau of Land Management. It’s funny: The homesteads’ birth eliminated the word used to describe their confines – *disposable*. It’s the same one used to call for their death and resurrection now.



Some were wiped out in the '90s: Using a federal grant, San Bernardino County demolished those considered “dangerous structures.” At present, one might be purchased for as low as \$15,000. A cottage Airbnb industry both preserves and threatens to make them – in their original form – disappear.

And yet, a few remain.

Though scattered across the desert, their naked bones continue to be salvaged – unrefined beacons in a society built on constructs of beauty. “I used to go up there and just stand in the cabin,” says Rancho Mirage playwright Jill Kroesen. “There’s something so wonderful about the [fact] that you’re sort of sheltered, but you’re not.”

Peer past the beams and feel your eyes relax into the horizon; stare up through the holes in the roof and watch stars rain down. Kroesen lived in New York for nearly three decades and rode her bike to George Washington Bridge to get away from the chaos of the city. She found the same solace in two decrepit rooms on the outskirts of town.

She toyed with renovations. Thought about putting the Landers property up for rent. Ultimately, Kroesen says, she decided against it. “It’s kind of wonderful the way it is.”

Drive down her dirt road around 6:30, watch as light filters through the fractured back wall at dusk. The sun refracts a wild beauty that emanates off the nails peeking out of hardwood; inside, you’re as much a part of the landscape as it is in your periphery.

“It’s unspeakably stunning – the Bighorn Wilderness mountain range back there at sunset,” says Dana Desselle, who buys and sells homesteads through her company, DesertLand.com. “It’s just something to behold. In fact, at [my renovated Wonder Valley homestead], Wonderama Ranch, I was looking to get a pew to put on the front porch. I really felt like it was a very spiritual view.”

Stand on the deck and revel in the panorama, or take a moment to walk the grounds and scour the skeleton up close. You might notice a shoe or two left on the premises; watch your step in sand littered with wild gourds and hidden ropes.





# It's kind of wonderful the way it is.

— LANDERS HOMESTEAD  
OWNER JILL KROESEN

"Sometimes you come across a cabin that is a still life from 1968, with all of Aunt Harriet's furniture," says Desselle, who still has the original 1953 deed to her grandfather's Johnson Valley land. "Her glass ashtrays, her lazy Susan's – dozens of *National Geographic's* that have 50 years of dust on them. It's in those windows of discovery that a homestead really speaks to you. You can tell how it was loved, and by who. Often, extended families would buy parcels right next to each other."

Look at an overhead satellite map, she says, and you can see the worn path that they took between the two.

What is it about a homestead's history that makes us more aware of our own identity, makes it imperative to assert? Or is it simply the sense of freedom found in structures stripped down to just wood and dirt?

"There's a lesson to learn when you're standing in front of the cabin that's a skeletal image of its former self," Desselle says. "It's a lesson of the desert. It accelerates time and it accelerates decay, and you have to have the fortitude to stand up to it. It just shows you, I think, in many ways how perishable life is."

Inside these homesteads, there are no secrets – both light and dark can filter through. There's the sound of silence, yes, but there's also the sound of resilience. It's what the desert teaches you. 🌱







## INSIDE THE IMAGES

After purchasing a Joshua Tree homestead earlier this year, photographer **Kimberly Utley** began to document it and others around the high desert. We sat down with the artist to learn more about her inspiration.

### WHY DID YOU START THIS PROJECT?

What initially caught my attention was that I was buying one and felt it necessary to have a grasp of what these little cabins were about. Once I began to understand their history, why they were scattered about and their purpose, my mind ran wild. What were these people planning on doing with their 5 acres and 200 square feet? Did they have a plan or just jump at the opportunity to own inexpensive land? That's what started it all for me – the curiosity and wonder – the chance to create my own narrative for these cabins.

### WHAT DO YOU FEEL WHILE PHOTOGRAPHING THEM?

I am overcome with a feeling of freedom. I'm free to mentally disassociate myself from my daily norms, and from what I thought I knew about myself. I'm not an outdoorsy type, not at all. Camping to me is a day on the beach,

hiking is dusty and hot – I can invent a million reasons to turn my nose up to the idea of these homesteads and land, but none yet seem to be able to outweigh the fact that I just really like them.

### WHY CAPTURE MORE THAN YOUR OWN?

I like paying attention to things that otherwise would be ignored or forgotten. There's so many bizarre correlations between them, for example. Most of them have an old sun-rotted shoe – not a pair but a shoe. Depending on the elevation, some have wild gourds growing around them. Mine happens to have a microwave, but there isn't any electricity on the property. It's these odd little things that keep my interest peaked.

I feel like I'm almost taking their portrait. Giving them the deserved time and attention needed to present them in the best light possible. We tend to look away from things like this – they

aren't taken care of, they are ugly to some, and are pretty void of purpose at this point. I try and capture the respect that they deserve. They weren't created to just then be abandoned. There was a purpose for these cabins – time and circumstances just weren't able to uphold the initial intentions.

### WHY DOCUMENT THEIR RAW STATE?

It's real. They represent the effects of passing time. We can all be fixed and masked (rehabilitated) to become what we want others to see, but what lies beneath is what really exists. Our core is who we really are. Whatever anyone chooses to do to these cabins, whether it be fix them up or tear them down, the current state they are in is honest and true to what they are. My little wooden souls.