



W O N D E R V A L L E Y

YOU MIGHT HAVE PASSED THROUGH HERE, MAYBE. OUT FOR A DRIVE WITH TIME ON YOUR HANDS, YOU MIGHT HAVE TAKEN THE LONG-CUT TO THE CASINOS OF LAUGHLIN, NEVADA FROM THE SOULLESS SPRAWL OF LOS ANGELES.

by William Hillyard
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You'd have driven way beyond the outer reaches of suburbia, beyond its neglected fringe of citrus groves, past the outlet malls and the Indian casino, past remote Joshua Tree National Park and the Twentynine Palms Desert Combat Center, past the Next Services 100 Miles sign and any reason anybody really drives out this way. You'd have blown through here at 60 miles an hour, probably, along a forgotten remnant of the old Route 66, its potholed and corrugated tarmac the only asphalt for miles. If you were messing with your radio, fiddling with your phone, you might not have even noticed the grid of washboard tracks scraped from the sparse hardscrabble of greasewood shrubs in this nowhere corner of the Mojave Desert.

You can turn off of the pavement, of course; turn onto any one of the bumpy dirt roads. These are public rights of way, county maintained easements between dry homestead parcels. You probably didn't, though. Few people do. And that's the way the people who live out here like it.

If you had passed that way on July 23, 2006, if you'd turned off the pavement onto dusty Steeg Road, driven north through the miles of stunted scrub, past the empty shells of homestead cabins, you'd have come to the dilapidated cabin outside which Ricka McGuire lay nude in the old cream-

colored school bus that was her home.

Of course, the old 1950 Wayne school bus isn't parked there any more. Her son, Torry, towed it to his place; then Ned Bray bought it. It's another mile up the road, now, past Willie Mitchell's place, and the old circus elephant trailer and the rusty Volvo once owned by one of the Beach Boys. It's parked on Ned's five acre parcel next to what's left of his homestead cabin way up there at the northern edge of Wonder Valley.

Wonder Valley. This patch of desert gets its incongruous name from a joke, really, a sign along the highway marking an old homestead. It just as easily could have been called "Calloused Palms" or "Withering Heights," names of other old homesteads in the area. Back in those days anyone could get a homestead spread out here for the cost of the filing fee; make a claim under the Small Tract Homestead Act of 1938. Congress passed the Small Tract Homestead Act to give land to veterans of the Great War, land in this dry desert climate, a climate thought recuperative to mustard gas-scorched lungs.

Anyone could apply for a parcel; but until the 1950s, few did. Then Hollywood Westerns sparked a nostalgia for simpler times. Out in the desert the old West lived—the purple mountains majesty, the changing colors of the desert sunset, the wide-open skies, the limitless stars. And in Wonder Valley, people discovered, you could get your very own home on the range, claim your own personal piece of the wild wild West. Soon, lines trailed out of the government land office; thousands registered homesteads. Even movie cowboy Ronald Reagan staked a Wonder Valley claim.

Your homestead had to be "proved-up," of course; you had to clear the land, build a cabin. Ronald Reagan didn't "prove-up" his parcel. Neither did most people. Few could stand the scorching months of triple-digit heat or the icy winter chill, the snow and the flash floods, or the constant wind that blasts like a furnace in the summer and bites to the bone in the winter. Most drove the three hours out here from

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L.A. and took a look at the dry, scruffy land blistering in the summer heat—no roads, no water—and they got right back into their cars and drove right back home. Those folks lost their homesteads, gave up their claim. Eventually, however, the flat valley filled up with cookie-cutter cabins, ten feet by twelve feet, an outhouse out back. Over the years, some cabins grew into houses; rooms were added, water wells drilled, flush toilets and indoor plumbing installed. Most sagged into disrepair.

After the homestead blip of the fifties, this corner of the Mojave became a blank space on the map once again. The interstate freeways had bypassed the area; any tinge of a town died on Route 66's withered vine. Homesteaders passed properties to heirs with no interest in their Grandpas' wasteland clapboard shacks.

Squatters squatted in the old, forgotten cabins. L.A.'s downtrodden, drifting east from town to town chasing cheaper and cheaper rent, occupied others. Mental institutions resettled patients out here, prisons dumped inmates out on early release. Those cabins still vacant had their windows scrapped, their metal scavenged, the shacks stripped to bare shells, doors and chairs and siding and walls hauled away and burned to heat the newcomers' homes in the freezing high-desert winter. Open squatters' fires built on bare concrete floors sometimes spread to the walls, the roof. "Improvement fires" the fire department calls them. They let them burn, let them "prove-up" Wonder Valley by removing another run-down shanty. Today, few of the 4,000 original cabins remain.

But when Joshua Tree became a national park in 1994, others began to venture out this way. Snowbirds' motor homes retraced the corrugated pavement of old Route 66. Retirees discovered the quaint little cabins—the rustic charm! Writers found solitude in the lonely desert; artists, inspiration. The artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees look at the mountains, this is the real purple mountains majesty, they say, the changing colors of the

desert sunset, the wide-open skies, the limitless stars—it's like living in a painting.

These days, maybe a thousand artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees, drifters and squatters, mental patients and ex-cons people the ninety square miles of Wonder Valley, each on a vestige of a homestead. They live in a chessboard grid of contrast and contradiction, a little nowhere in the Mojave reverberating with the hollow echo of the promise of America.

Out here, you know the artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees by their satellite dishes, their raked-sand, Zen-garden yards, their manicured desert landscaping carefully sculpted and formed—nature, "proved-up." You know them by their cars: how few of them there are, none of them on blocks, all of them running. They live in houses, proper houses, with windows and walls and rooms, kitchens with running water, garages. Pride of ownership. Can you believe the way some people live? they ask one another. Just look at those sagging shacks and single-family slums, those ramshackle cabins, the refuse and rubbish. The empty shells of homestead cabins are historic,

they tell themselves, quaint reminders of a bygone era—little ghost towns now trashed by indolent little ghosts.

Ned Bray lives on five acres out at the northern edge of the valley. Some anonymous artist or writer or snowbird or retiree had called the county, reported Ned—his place is an eyesore; his place needs to be cleaned up, the junk everywhere, the mounds of wood and stucco, the piles of parts, the wind-blown trash that flaps from the greasewood shrubs like withered fruit.

Ned's parcel had been "proved-up;" at one time it had a cabin on it, indoor plumbing even, and a big mesquite tree out front near the road. His folks bought the place fifteen or so years ago, sight unseen; then they packed him up and shipped him out here. Figured he couldn't harm anyone way out here in the middle of nowhere.

Ned used to live in the cabin on his property. That was back when Cindy McCullom and her son Danny lived there, too. Cindy had lost her home in town and Ned invited her to share his Wonder Valley cabin with him. But that damn tree out front, that big mesquite tree had spread its roots like tentacles under the house, into the walls, and would give him



FORTY YEARS LATER, SHE WAS BACK IN THE BUS.



Top: Ricka McGuire's old Wayne school bus, now gutted at Ned's place
Above: Ned Bray

no peace with its constant talking—five different voices from the walls, the swamp cooler, the toilet. Ned had to keep the toilet sealed tightly to keep that demon thing from getting out into the house. He'd crouch in the corner waiting for it; even caught it once, caught it running back to the bathroom. He beat and beat the little bastard with a baseball bat, tried to kill it. He tore the walls out looking for the voices, destroyed the cabin, chopped down the tree and dug out the stump. He climbed into the septic tank and flung the muck out, disgusting work, man, until he got that thing out and the voices were gone.

The artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees complained about Ricka McGuire, too, when she lived in that old cream-colored school bus parked in front of that dilapidated Wonder Valley cabin, dumping trash everywhere, ripping off electricity. Of course, Ricka hadn't always lived in that bus. She'd lived in Oregon, a single mother on welfare, picking beans and berries to get by. But after her kids had grown and gone a heavy weight lifted and she floated free. In that old school bus she set out south, an old hippy bumping down the coast, drifting to the edge of town after town until the towns ran out and the road opened to Wonder Valley.

She lived in the bus for a while out here; she came to love the night skies and wide open spaces. When the wind wasn't blowing and the heat wasn't so bad, the ear-ringing quiet was more calming than lonely. After a while, she found a place, an old homestead cabin on ten acres, a pretty spot nestled in the rocks up on Pioneer Road. Mary Richardson agreed to sell it to her—\$15,000—she'd make payments, a couple of hundred a month. She could see her son Torry's cluttered cabin from it. She had no well, no water, but that didn't matter. You can't drink the well water out here anyway, too full of salt and minerals. And it comes out of the pipe hot in this part of the valley besides, 140 degrees straight out of the ground. No, but she could get water delivered like most everyone else; her cabin had a 2000 gallon tank—that'd last her about a month.

She could live pretty good on the \$750 Supplemental Security Income she got every month from the government. And Ricka was smart; she learned the system, the way things worked. Once she got a real address, became settled, she could take advantage of county services.

It was Ricka who finally got Cindy McCullom out of Ned's place, took her and her son Danny to a friend's to stay. Ned had been ranting on about the voices, that damn tree, its roots! He kept the toilet tightly wrapped with a plastic trash bag to keep the demon at bay. Ned would sit in the corner waiting for it, rocking back and forth waiting for the demon in his mind. Finally, one night Ned had been crouching in the corner when four-year-old Danny stumbled sleepy-eyed to the bathroom. Ned freaked. He beat and beat Danny until the child passed out. Danny woke up vomiting blood. The police were called; they wouldn't come. It was too far, it was a domestic dispute. Ricka came and got Cindy and Danny out of Ned's house. There was no ambulance, no hospital. Children heal.

If you had driven out this way on July 23, 2006, you'd have found Ricka McGuire back in her old Wayne school bus, parked in front of that dilapidated cabin down by her son Torry's ramshackle shack. She had moved back into it a year or so before, had it towed off the Pioneer Road property, the property that was no longer hers. Congress had voted to purge fugitive felons off the SSI roles; they matched old arrest warrants with Social Security records, tracked down the aged and infirm, revoked their benefits. That's how Ricka lost hers. She got a letter in the mail: "We are writing to let you know that we have paid you \$17,323.00 too much Supplemental Security Income (SSI) money. You were overpaid because our records show that you have an outstanding arrest warrant." Her SSI payments abruptly ended. And the government wanted its seventeen thousand dollars back.

Back in 1965, Ricka had done something dumb. She was raising three children on welfare when she found some woman's checkbook. As another mother drove her around town, Ricka wrote bad checks. Busted and booked, she did time—five months. But she never completed her probation.

Now, forty years later, she was back in the bus. It no longer ran; she towed it place to place, connecting to power at vacant shacks until the power company caught on. She was smart, she knew the system. But without a fixed address, she lost other benefits, too, the Meals On Wheels, the county in-home service worker. The artists and writers and snowbirds and retirees watched her through their tinted windows; can you believe the way she lives? they asked one another. She was alone in the desert. Her son Torry had moved to an apartment in town and left his place to a crew of low-lives. He had gotten into meth; his wife had left him.

The heat peaked at 118 degrees the day Ned Bray stopped by to check on Ricka and found her lying naked on the bed of her bus. Ned had been worried about her—she'd run out of water, she wasn't tolerating the heat so well. Ned had convinced her to go to town the day before, to get out of the record heat, to go to the library where there was air conditioning. Wonder Valley has a community center—it's on the paved road next door to the fire station. The county runs it, residents pay for it with their taxes. The community center is supposed to be a sanctuary from the heat. It's supposed to be air conditioned; it's supposed to be open to the public on days when it's really



NED WAS ORGANIZING, MOVING CARBURETORS TO THE CARBURETOR PILE, THE REARVIEW MIRRORS TO THE REARVIEW MIRROR PILE, THE BICYCLE WHEELS, TOILET SEATS.

hot. But it's never open. It's never open because the plumbing is bad, or the floors need work, or because the last time someone used it they didn't keep it clean. So Ricka and Ned drove the washboard dirt roads through the miles of stunted scrub to town. She had no air conditioning in that van of hers; the heat was unbearable.

They never made it to town. On the way, she had a seizure or something, right in the middle of the road. She just stopped. Ned got the van over to the side. Sheriffs came by: move that damn thing or you'll be ticketed or towed. But they just sat there, four hours. As the sun set and the day cooled, Ricka recovered; she drove herself home. Ned brought her a couple of jugs of water. When he returned the next afternoon, July 23, 2006, walked the mile from his place to hers, past Willie Mitchell's place and the circus elephant trailer and the sun-baked Volvo once owned by one of the Beach Boys, he found the water untouched.

In the stifling heat, Ned ran back to Willie's; Willie Mitchell had a phone; he called 911. It took the paramedics thirty-seven minutes to drive out the forgotten remnant of Route 66, up the washboard dirt road, past the remains of old homestead cabins, cross over the wash, past Torry's ramshackle shack to the dilapidated cabin where Ricka had parked her bus. It didn't matter. Ricka McGuire, lying in the bed of her bus, had long been dead.

I drove out there, out to Wonder Valley. Out past the Next Services 100 Miles sign, I turned off the corrugated pavement and rattled north through the miles of stunted scrub, billows of dust roiling behind my car. It was hot. Ahead, a dust devil stumbled like a drunk across the sandy road, ripping wind-blown trash from the greasewood shrubs and flinging them into the air, up and over the dilapidated shack where Ned Bray found Ricka McGuire dead.

The county coroner's report concluded that "Probable Heat Stroke" was a "significant condition" contributing to Ricka McGuire's death. But not the cause. Ned had tried to explain to the officials that Ricka hadn't been well. She had run out of water; the week of record high temperatures had taken its toll. But they had found some pot in the bus, a pipe, determined she had a "history of smoking cigarettes and marijuana," and listed the cause of her death as "Chronic Drug Abuse." These days, the coroner's people just shrug,

agree it makes no sense, there is nothing in the report to justify those conclusions. They'd have to look into it. Pull the file. Call down to archives and have it brought up. They'll have to talk to so-and-so when she gets back from wherever.

I parked my car in front of the dilapidated cabin where Ricka had parked her bus, the spot where Ned had found her. The lonely silence made my ears buzz. You can see Torry's ramshackle shack from the place where Ricka died. From there, it looked like a pile, a swept together pile that no one ever bothered to pick up. Jill Davis, one of the neighbors, wants to buy it, buy it just to clean it up. Can you believe people live like that? she said to me.

Up close, Torry's house looked like it had exploded. The doors were flung open, the windows smashed out, the insides thrown outside, scattered everywhere—household items, children's clothes, books and papers. Cars left where they died. A bible standing on end blocked the dirt drive, its pages swollen thick in the heat. A couple of pit-bulls bounded at me from under a ten foot travel trailer parked behind the house.

"You looking for Nutty Ned?" a woman answered me through the window of the trailer, her short blond hair and bare shoulders visible through the ragged curtains. She didn't seem too used to visitors. Popping out of the trailer, she pulled an oversized shirt over her body; her heavy pale breasts squished out through the cut-off arm holes as she pointed the direction to Ned's. She's been living out here for a couple of years, she said, waiting for her SSI to come through, then she's moving, gonna get an apartment somewhere out of the dirt and the heat.

I drove the mile up the road, to the northern edge of Wonder Valley. Ned lives in Ricka's old 1950 Wayne school bus now; he towed it up there and parked it next to the ruins of his homestead shack. He tore the cabinets out of the bus and the bed and the floors, stripping it down to a shell. People are too attached to things, he thinks, you got to simplify your life, man.

As I walked up, Ned was organizing, moving carburetors to the carburetor pile, the rearview mirrors to the rearview mirror pile, the bicycle wheels, toilet seats. He stacks and restacks his stuff with swift jerky movements, winding his way through an elaborate maze of things. "It's not right what the county's doing, man," he said. He had received a notice of violation from the county; they insist he clean the place up. "I use everything here once a year, man."

Behind me, a water truck lumbered up the road, turned and backed onto Ned's place, sinking into the soft sand. Ned threaded his way through the maze to a group of blue plastic barrels. He rolled them close to the belly of the truck as the driver, Moose, a burly guy with a grizzly beard, unwound a section of canvas hose, sticking the end into one of the drums. Moose opened the valve and water began to flow, droning into the hollow of the barrel, drumming its sides. Ned moved the hose from barrel to barrel, filling half a dozen, 55 gallons each, splashing water over his dirty feet and tattered flip-flops as he stepped around white flags of toilet paper waving surrender from desiccated clumps of human shit. As the last barrel filled he dug his hands into the water. Reaching up with arms full, the water cascaded over his tanned face, through his stubble of hair, his shadow of whiskers, and over his thin, leathery body, darkening the waist band of his frayed shorts.

"I'm gonna put the rest of this water in that hole there," he shouted to Moose, gesturing to a broken ring of concrete where the outhouse used to be. "I dug a well down there, I'm gonna fill it up."

Ned dragged the hose to the hole. Moose shot me a hesitant look, then opened the valve on the truck. We stood with our hands in our pockets and watched the water gush forth from the open end of the canvas hose.

"You gotta have water, man," Ned said as the remaining thousand gallons of water sank into the thirsty desert sand. "You can't live out here without water."