

Of Mines and Mules: A History of Daggett

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The quiet, unassuming town of Daggett, California, nestled in the desert south of the Calico Mountains near Barstow, has a big history to tell. From silver rushes to borate refining, Daggett's economy depended on mining. While historians disagree about when the former boom town was first settled, there is no doubt that its real beginning came in 1882 with the arrival of the railroad. For decades, the cluster of buildings with cottonwood and pepper trees would be a sight for the sore eyes of travelers crossing the inhospitable desert.

The Road to Daggett

Daggett owes its beginnings to two interrelated historical developments: mining and transportation. It was established in the late nineteenth century under the name Calico Junction as a supply depot for the various mining operations in the surrounding desert and hills. The roads, trails, and railroads that would pass through Daggett were part of an expansive transportation network that had begun decades earlier.

The first such route through the desert region was the Old Spanish Trail, established in 1829 as a trade route between Santa Fe and the southern California coastal missions. By 1841, both Americans and Mexicans were using the trail to reach California. After 1846, Mormons traveling to and from Salt Lake City used the trail to such an extent that the section between their settlement of San Bernardino and southern Utah became known as the Mormon Trail.

After the discovery of gold in California in 1848, thousands more joined the route heading west. Few lingered in the hostile desert, however, until the discovery of local mineral deposits led to an opening of the area and an expansion of the transportation system.

The Rush to Silver

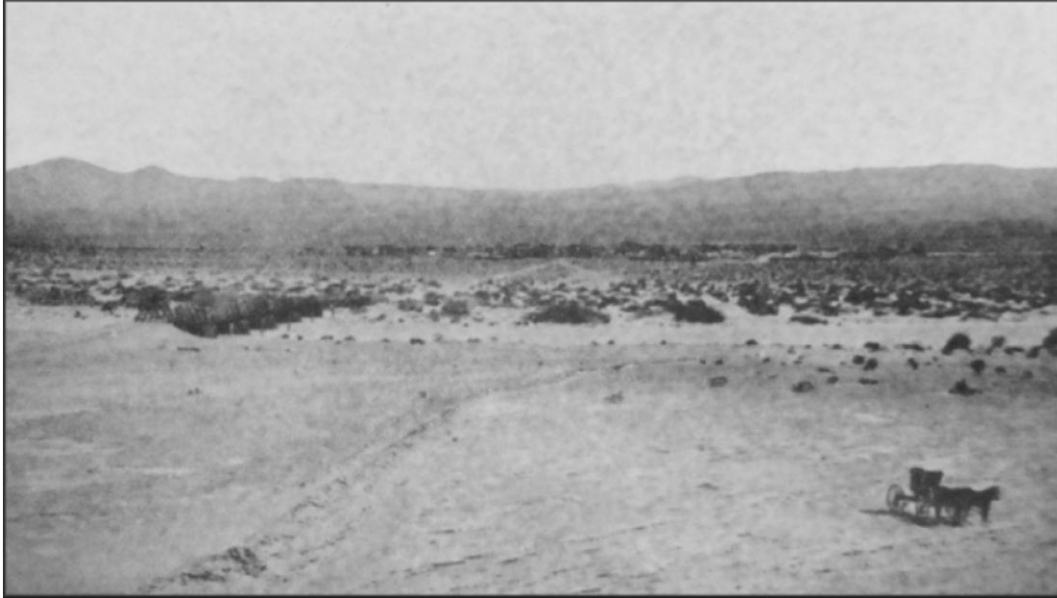
The real boom came to the California desert region in the 1870s with a series of silver strikes. The first of these was at Panamint City, to the north of Daggett, in 1873. In their prime, the Panamint City mines accumulated so much bullion that the freighters could not keep up with the stamp mill production.

The new mining boom spurred the development of transportation in the region. While lone prospectors scoured the hills and gullies on foot and horseback, large-scale mining required better roads for the transport of heavy mining equipment needed to extract and process ore in the remote camps. The chief mining interests sought out freight companies to link their operations with supply centers in San Francisco, San Bernardino, and Los Angeles.

Soon cities west of the Sierra Nevada were vying to become the new supply centers. Merchants lobbied hard for the construction of railroads east into the ore-rich desert mountains, and newspaper editors reported on the importance of these roads to their communities and the progress of their competitor towns' roads, warning that a lack of funding would cause them to lose the race. Farmers in Inyo County also pushed for the creation of new roads that would take their surplus hay, grain, and vegetables into the mining camps.

Very soon, some intrepid individuals introduced desert stage lines along the fastest supply routes. With goods and people now flowing into the mining camps, the camps quickly developed into boom towns. These towns needed all the supplies and services typically found in other communities, including food, dry goods, lumber, alcohol, mail delivery, and stage service. The roads that had been established to transport heavy mining equipment and ore could also serve stages and wagons. With each new mining discovery, new roads branched off the old, creating ever-larger networks.

The boom was short-lived, however. By 1880 these towns were little more than shadows of their former selves, as prospectors and mining companies headed out for new discoveries elsewhere. Daggett was fortunate to depend on transportation and supply to the mines, rather than on mining itself. As prospecting continued, the little crossroads along the Mojave River waited for the next big discovery. It would not have to wait for long.



In the 1880s, Daggett must have seemed like an oasis to desert-weary travelers and hardworking miners ready to relax in town. (Photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum.)

The Calico Mining District

Daggett lies in the shadow of the Calico Mountains, the site of another huge silver strike in 1881. The Calico Mining District was quickly formed, and overnight the boom town of Calico sprang up at the site of the largest silver discovery in California history. The bustling town, carved out of a canyon in the barren hills, soon had more than 500 active mines – including the giant Silver King Mine – that would produce more than \$20 million over the next 12 years. Within two years of its founding, 1,200 people lived in Calico, all completely depended on supplies from outside.

The rich silver discovery in the Calico Mountains motivated the Southern Pacific Railroad to extend a line east from Mojave to Calico Junction (also known as Calico Station) and on to Needles and the Colorado River. Southern Pacific may have been trying to stop a competing line being considered by the Santa Fe Railroad. The new station was soon renamed Daggett to avoid confusion with the town of Calico in the nearby mountains. The new name honored John Daggett, then Lieutenant Governor of California and an early owner of one of the Calico Mountains mines.

The new rail terminus, along the banks of the Mojave River, provided the infrastructure necessary for the town to develop. The railroad company sold lots and installed a well that provided much-needed water to the inhabitants of Daggett. As homes and other buildings were constructed, a water main along each street piped water to barrels kept at every house. The Southern Pacific's water tank soon became a vital component of the new station.

In late 1884, Southern Pacific began leasing their line to the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad, an offshoot of the Santa Fe Railroad Company. The new company built a beautiful two-story depot with freight house in Daggett, which would stand for the next 79 years. The new building gave residents hope for a bright and prosperous future, leading to more local investment.

Daggett Prospers

Seymour Alf, from one of Daggett's pioneering and longest-lived families, is reported to have arrived in the area in 1882, opening a butcher shop to service the mines. George Toenni and George Mier started a general merchandise store in town, and Alexander Falconer opened a well-known saloon. Scott's Market, built in 1882, also supplied the Calico mines. Within a year of the railroad's arrival, much of Daggett's business district stood facing the tracks.



Hopes for a prosperous future. Here the Mudgett family poses in the yard of their Daggett home with a thriving young tree. This circa 1890 photo was taken at a time when Daggett was enjoying the height of its prosperity. *(Photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum)*

By 1885, Daggett was flourishing. New businesses were opening and existing ones were growing. The town organized a school district for the growing population of children, and residents were enlarging, remodeling, and painting their homes and businesses. Trees were being planted at numerous buildings in town. Seymour Alf expanded from butcher to mechanic and built a blacksmith shop on 1st Street that today is one of Daggett's most important historic sites. Alf's shop was known for building the borax wagons made famous by the Death Valley 20-Mule-Team freighters.



Borax Handling Wagon. This sturdy wagon is the kind made by the Alfs and includes a water tank on the rear. *(Photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum.)*

Two daily stage lines now operated between Daggett and Calico, and prosperity seemed certain. Nearly \$100,000 in bullion from Calico passed through town each month. It had also become the last bit of civilization for travelers heading toward Death Valley.



Daggett's Main Street, circa 1890. *(Photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum)*



All that remains of Daggett's old Main Street is Scott's Market (left), the Capital Saloon (middle) and the Stone Hotel (right).

The Stone Hotel on Santa Fe Street, one of the town's most notable buildings, was completed in 1882 by Victor Van Briesen, who together with George McKenzie built the Capitol Saloon next door a few years later. The first-floor stone walls of the hotel were built two feet thick, keeping the place cool in the heat of summer. A balcony off of the wood-framed second floor provided a view of Daggett's main street below.

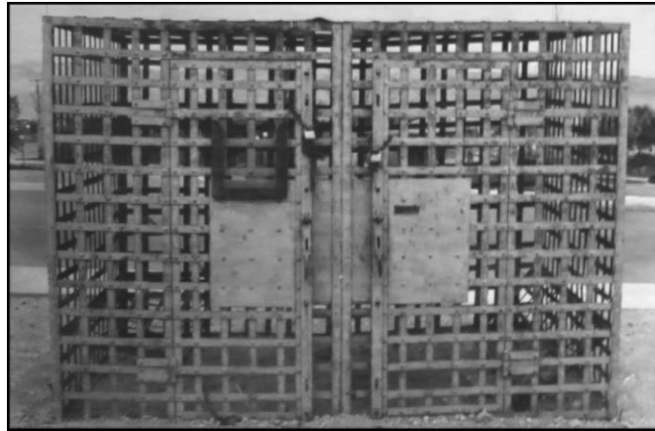
The two-story building had a large glass dome above the open lobby, an impressive and welcome sign of civilization for desert-weary travelers. Many famous visitors stayed at the hotel, including John Muir, Francis Marion "Borax" Smith, Lt. Governor John Daggett, and Walter "Death Valley Scotty" Scott. Scotty, in fact, kept a standing reservation for Room 7, just off the lobby and with a private entrance. The Stone Hotel survived three fires, including one in 1908 that resulted in its present one-story height.



Stone Hall in 2015

Also in 1885, partners Quinn and Sutcliffe built a two-story addition to their brewery in Daggett after experiencing strong demand for their beer in the winter and anticipating an even busier summer. They also added awnings downstairs for summer visitors to enjoy a foaming beer on the porch – perhaps to set it apart from the 20 saloons lining Daggett's sandy streets.

At Christmastime, miners from Calico streamed into town to celebrate. The railroad hotel held a lavish ball and dance, serving up large fruitcakes and pastries into the early morning hours. On the 4th of July, the residents held a picnic along the river about nine miles from Daggett, with a dancing pavilion at Hawley's Station put on by the women's literary society. They entertained the crowd by reading poetry and the Declaration of Independence, and by providing music, dancing, refreshments, and games.



Daggett's Jail. Daggett was a small town with a lively weekend population of visiting miners and teamsters. *(Photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum)*

Saloons, which also served as restaurants, became a central attraction for miners and teamsters coming in from the desert to relax and blow off some steam. The town became infamous as a tough spot, with plentiful saloons, brothels and violence. When things got a bit rowdy in town, men who had a little too much to drink at neighboring saloons were sobered up with a dunking in the horse trough in front of the hotel. In one often-told tale, crowds were so thick that a fatally stabbed man was held upright and no one could guess his assailant.

The Borax Boom

Silver was not the only important mineral found in the Calico Mining District. As early as 1882, rich deposits of colemanite (calcium borate) had been discovered there. At that time, it took wagons three days and two nights to haul a full load of borate ore 12 miles from Calico to Daggett, its main supply town. Adding to the town's prosperity (and ultimately its fame), new trails were established between the borax mines in Death Valley and the railroad terminal at Daggett. Freighters simply took off from the borax camps and headed west across the desert. There is no indication that they did any road surveys or filed any rights-of-way: they made trails and set up camps at will. This was the period of the 20-Mule-Team borax wagons, later glamorized and made famous by the borax companies as a marketing strategy. Today these wagon teams, the roads they traveled, and the men who worked them are legends in Western American history.



20-Mule-Team borax wagon leaving Death Valley. (*Photo courtesy of Mojave River Valley Museum.*)

Two such men were famed freighters Remi Nadeau and Ed Stiles. For a time these two operated the 20-Mule Teams between Death Valley and Daggett, altering their routes as the rail lines were extended and new connections were established at the rail termini. Nadeau's last big headquarters was at Mojave, which became the terminus for the Bullion Trail and other routes coming in from Panamint Valley and the North Range. As the railroads reached farther east from Los Angeles, the connecting wagon roads grew shorter, until finally they became obsolete.

Ed Stiles provides a particularly good example of how these roads were established and how rigorous they were for the men who rode them. He started his first run at the Eagle Borax Works in Death Valley, loaded two wagons and began breaking a new road from Death Valley southwest to the railroad terminal at Daggett. From the south end of Death Valley, Stiles headed up the slow, boulder-strewn alluvial fan to Wingate Pass, the most grueling section of the route. Next he headed southwest to Lone Willow Spring, where he connected his improvised trail with the old Panamint City-San Bernardino freight route established in 1874. From there Stiles headed south, skirting the northwest end of the Calico Mountains. By the time he brought his first load of ore into Daggett, it had taken 11 days to cover 164 miles.



20-Mule Team on Daggett's main street. (Photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum.)

Stiles had, in essence, laid out one of the most famous trails in Western American history. He is credited (or perhaps credited himself) with establishing the most celebrated of the mule team trails. It was in use for five years starting in 1883, when the last mule teams from the Harmony Borax Works left Death Valley for good.

The booming economy did not come without its troubles, however. One example was the documented lynching of William Pitt, a 20-Mule-Team driver for the Pacific Coast Borax Company in 1884. John Spears, a freighter, wrote of it in his famous 1892 history of Death Valley:

Daggett's only lynching was due to the murder of a teamster. This "swamper," for some fancied wrong, was moping around the village, drowning his care in liquor. Another teamster advised him to kill the offender. Early next morning someone passing the blacksmith shop heard groans behind it, and there was the offending teamster alive, but with his skull crushed. Beside him lay one of the huge spoke used in building wheels for desert wagons. One end was covered with blood and the hair of the dying teamster. Two nights later, when it appeared that the Justice was about to turn the swamper loose for want of direct evidence of guilt, a masked mob took both the swamper and the teamster who had advised the crime from the lock-up. Two ropes were thrown over one of these arms and nooses in the ends were put about the necks of the two prisoners. Both men had until this time thought the movement a bluff to frighten them into confession. Now they would have begged for mercy, but before the trembling lips could gasp half a sentence the tightening ropes lifted them from the ground. However, it was really but a bluff on the teamster. He was soon lowered to the ground and advised to leave town. He left. The swamper now holds down a six-foot claim on the mesa, just beyond the village limits.

Some believe the murder and ill-will between competing freight lines led the Pacific Borax Company to move its terminus away from town and to the depot at Mojave. The company did not stay away for long.

The Pacific Coast Borax Years

Daggett's economic vitality came in part from the Pacific Coast Borax works. In 1890, owner William Tell Coleman sold his borate holdings in the Calico Mountains to Francis Marion Smith, also known as the Borax King. Smith soon moved his operations from the Harmony Borax Works in Death Valley to Daggett. He also set up mining operations at Borate, about three miles east of the old silver mines at Calico, employing nearly 200 men. While he used the famous 20-Mule-Teams to haul his borax from the mines to the processing works at Daggett, Smith soon replaced the mules with the Borate and Daggett Railroad, built in 1896.

Smith's Pacific Coast Borax mine near Daggett became one of the top three producers in California. The mine shipped out 7 to 8 cars of ore each day, each weighing 15 tons. These had to be freighted to the only borax refinery plant on the coast, at Alameda in San Francisco County. The ore was shipped through Daggett and then by rail to the southern California coast, where it was placed on schooners bound for San Francisco Bay.

During the peak years of borax production, 1890 to 1894, the depot at Daggett was a hub of shipping and transfer activity. Business in the town reflected the bustling: during the 1890s, Daggett boasted three stores, two restaurants, three saloons, three hotels, and a lumberyard. There was also a post office, a large railroad depot with restaurant, and a telegraph, telephone, and express office. The Daggett School had a student body of 26 students in 1898. There were even enough women in town to support a seamstress, who made her living sewing dresses.

The American Borax Company

The large borax processing mill of the American Borax Company was constructed in Daggett in 1894 just south of the river and west of the Daggett-Yermo Road. The 20-acre mill site had a large crushing building for pulverizing the borate, with large vats and evaporation (settling) ponds for drying the borax into boric acid before shipping. The company also drilled a substantial well that would supply water for those ponds and later provided domestic water for the town after the railroad's well failed.

Borax in California was marketed in three forms: crude shale, refined borax, and boric acid. It was used as a preservative and medicine, for manufacturing borax, and for use as a flux in glazing enameling. The mill was originally started by the Columbia Mining and Chemical Company in 1894. At that time, the Columbia operation hauled their raw borax shale from their mine seven miles to the north. They processed it at their borax works in Daggett, operated under the direction of Dr. F. Howard Humphries. Humphries oversaw the company plant, which included boiling tanks, a filter press, and evaporating and crystalizing tanks. The ore was ground and heated in water, then drained into ponds where the borax would eventually crystalize on the top of the dried pond. Workers would then bag and ship the material to a refinery to finish the product for market. The remains of the ponds are still visible today between the Daggett Ditch and the Mojave River on the west side of Daggett-Yermo Road.

The Daggett Ditch



Today, remnants of Daggett's concrete water system provide silent testimony to the efforts to develop the desert community.

Water is essential to life in the desert, and as the population of non-miners grew, locals began thinking of diversifying into agriculture to keep the area alive. In anticipation, they began a program to carry water from the Mojave River toward Daggett through a dam and ditch system. Today the Daggett Ditch, also known as the Minneola Canal, is one of the oldest historic irrigation projects on the Mojave River.

The Mojave River is largely an underground waterway, with water flowing beneath the sand and rarely visible at the surface; it is sometimes referred to as the "Upside-Down River." In 1893, a company was formed to try to build a submerged dam that would impound and then divert water into an irrigation ditch. Stock for the new company was issued, on the premise that water would generate electricity to sell to the mines and mills at Calico and pay for the ditch, thereby providing the farmers and citizens of Daggett with a free supply of water. Homesteading claims for over 1,800 acres of land were filed with the federal government in anticipation of the new water system. Even though the dam was built, the project failed, creating less than three percent of what was needed to realize those high hopes.

In 1901, four individuals, including Theodore Strong Van Dyke and his son Dix Van Dyke, formed a new company and started to improve the old dam and line the old Daggett Ditch. Through their efforts, they were able to bring irrigation to 320 acres of new farm land east of Daggett (including the Van Dykes' ranch) by 1902. This was the first large area to be irrigated in the Mojave Desert. The dam was located in the Mojave River northeast of the Marine Corps Logistics Base today. The earthen ditch delivered water ten miles from the dam and its associated artesian wells to irrigate orchards and alfalfa fields in the six miles between Minneola and Daggett. With the addition of water, the Van Dyke ranch became the first place in California after leaving the Colorado River to find hay and alfalfa for teams of horses and a popular stop for travelers.



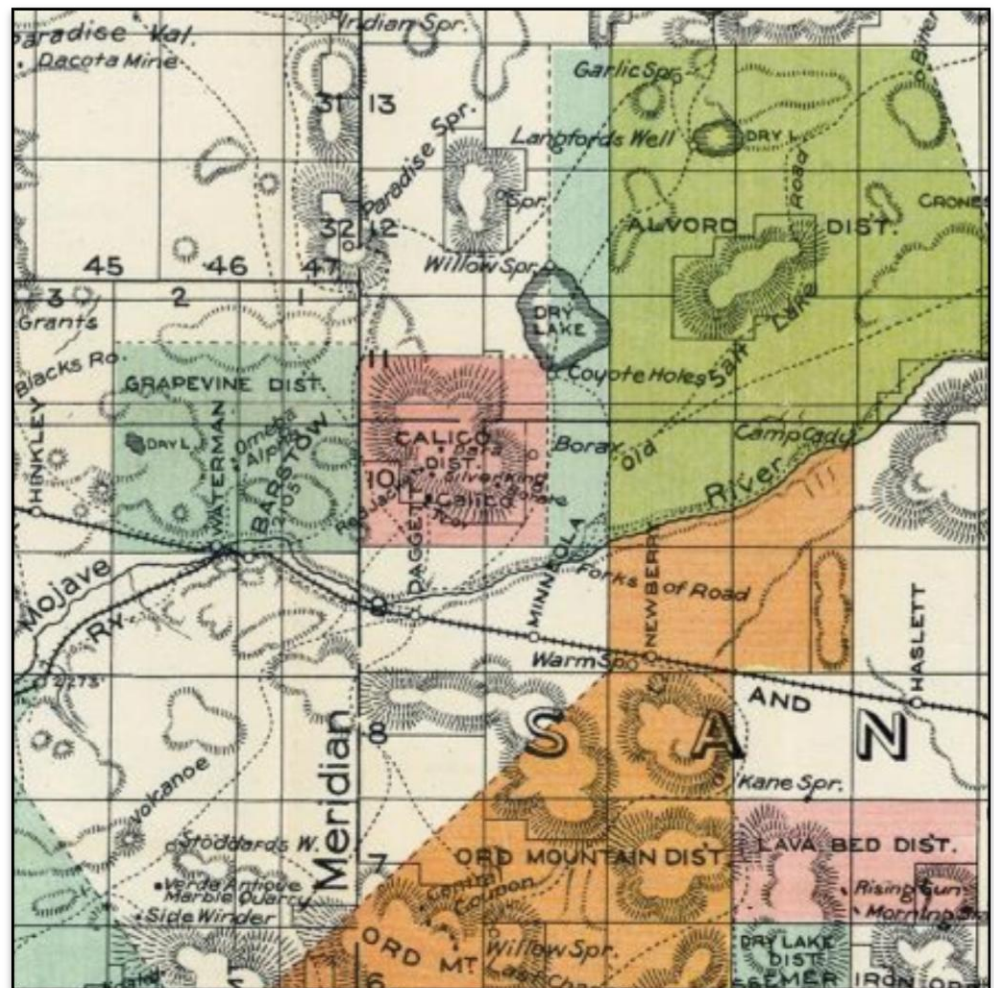
Daggett School, circa 1900. Here students pose with their teacher and boxes of produce, possibly locally grown after the completion of the Daggett Ditch in 1902. (Photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum.)



Then & Now. Top: Borax settling ponds in Daggett, circa 1890. *(Photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum.)*

Bottom: Borax settling pond remains showing the wood posts and frame structure that defined each individual pond, 2015.

In 1901, Columbia Mining was purchased by American Borax Works, which was a subsidiary of the Standard Sanitary Company. They added a seven-mile-long narrow-gauge railroad to replace the wagon teams hauling the ore to Daggett. In 1903, the American Borax Company bought the locomotive of the Waterloo Mining Company's railroad as that company ended their operations. By 1902, the surrounding borax mines employed 200 men in the area, and Daggett benefited as the shipping point for their products. By then Daggett boasted three borax mines, three stores, three saloons, two Chinese restaurants, a drug store, a lumber yard, and the hotel. By 1905, the American Borax Works was one of three companies producing the majority of the borax and boric acid in the United States.



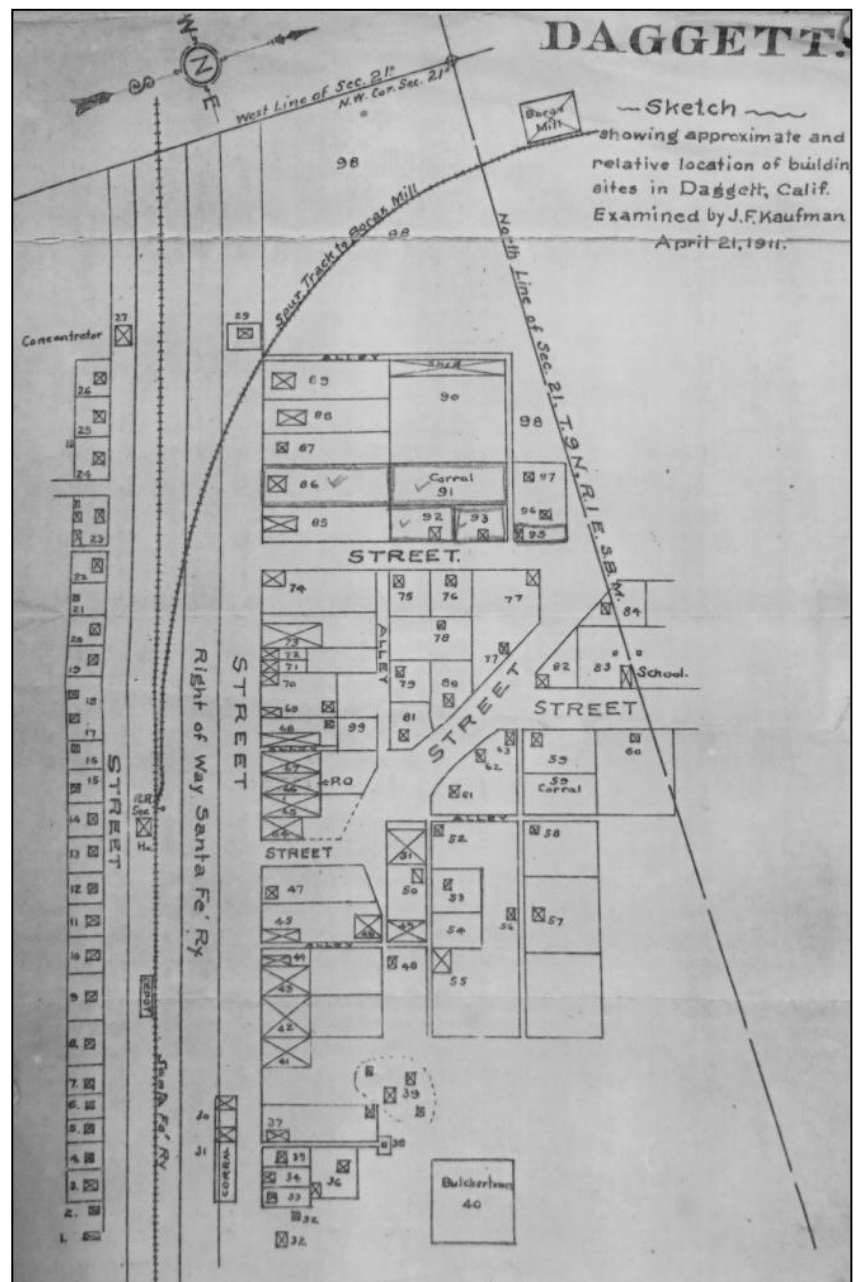
A portion of Perris' Miners Map of the Desert Region of California, 1896, depicting railroads, roads, and mines around Daggett. (Courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum.)

Daggett was less of a rough and rowdy miners' town during this period and more of a community. Locals organized horse races, baseball games, town dances in one of the feed houses, and clay pigeon shoots at the gravel pit. The citizenry also enjoyed hikes and picnics in the nearby Calico Mountains, visiting and posing for photographs by the spring waterfalls.

End of an Era:

In 1903, the San Pedro, Los Angeles & Salt Lake Railroad (later owned by the Union Pacific Railroad) built their line from Las Vegas through Daggett to Los Angeles and East San Pedro. Local businessman Seymour Alf was one of the first contractors on the line, grading the 6.2 miles from Daggett to Yermo, as well as the Yermo yard. He hired laborers who often stayed in Daggett and frequented the saloons, creating another period of rowdy behavior in town. When the railroad built its round house and maintenance yards at Barstow rather than Daggett, many of the local businesses went with it. As a result, Daggett began a nearly fatal decline.

In 1907, the Pacific Coast Borax Company finished building the Tonopah and Tidewater Railway and moved its operations to the Funeral Mountains. That same year, a large colemanite discovery was made just 30 miles from Los Angeles. This prompted American Borax to move its entire operation there, along with the old locomotive and their narrow-gauge railroad line. With that move, the borax works at Daggett were abandoned and the town's decline continued. Soon the little town had only one store, one restaurant, one saloon, and a post office. Half the town was abandoned, and some of the structures were burned in a large fire that swept the commercial district in 1908.



Map of Daggett 1911. This map shows the town's orientation to the railroad, the source of its prosperity while it lasted. (Photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum)

The ghost town feel that spread over Daggett and would make it a prime movie set for the Westerns that were becoming popular in Hollywood at the time. Film star Wallace Berry, for instance, bought two borax wagons from the Alfs for use in his motion pictures, three of which were filmed in the Alfs' house and blacksmith shop. In 1912, the regional news reported that "about a dozen city picture shows are making 'stirring scenes' around Daggett and Calico. City chaps in Indian feathers and cowboy girls in heroic costumes are making wild west pictures, which a little later will awe the picture show bench warmers."

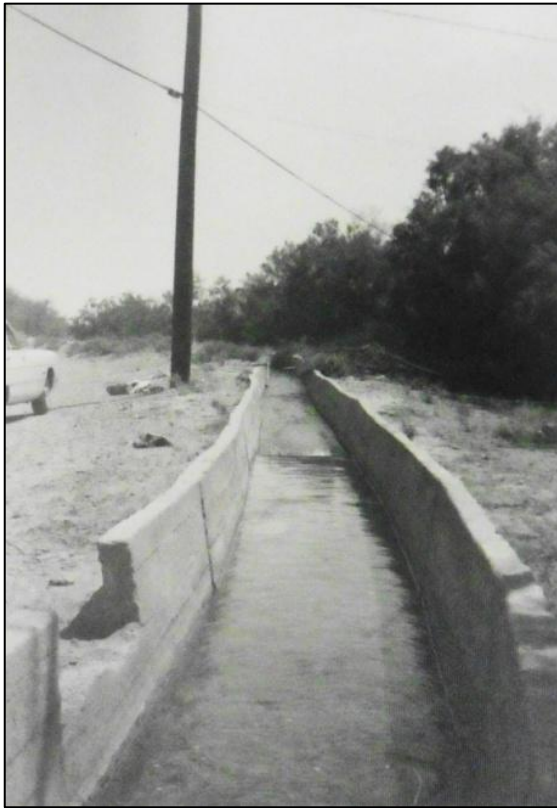
As the mining interests moved on, the old freight roads were abandoned and the markets dissolved. Towns that had developed at railroad terminals tended to survive into the twentieth century – towns like Randsburg, Mojave, Barstow, Daggett and Indian Wells. Others, like Brown and Freeman, were deserted when new roads bypassed the old and commercial development moved on.

Private automobile traffic began to appear on the roads in the 1910s, as visitors from the Los Angeles area began to stop in Daggett on their way to Death Valley or to sight-seeing in the desert. These travelers brought a small revival in wayside businesses. Homesteaders, ranchers and small-scale miners also followed their way to Daggett in the early twentieth century.

Health seekers began arriving during this period. In 1916, Helen Muir, the daughter of famous naturalist John Muir, moved to Daggett seeking a desert cure for an ailment. Helen lived at first in the Alfs' old adobe, and eventually her brothers would settle on a ranch nearby. Helen met and married Buel Funk, and together they built a beautiful 7,000-square-foot, 17-room home on Santa Fe Street in Daggett. Its 14-inch-thick concrete walls were no doubt intended to keep the house cool in summer. The house later became a sanitarium for patients with lung ailments, and then a chicken farm. Today it houses a rare book collection.

Land and Water

In 1917, the Southern California Improvement Company began installing a concrete liner and redwood board cover over the old Daggett Ditch, to reduce water loss through seepage and evaporation. Within two years, the ditch has been extended to within two miles of the town. In 1919 a geologist examining the ditch described it as 3.3 miles of concrete conduit and 1,720 feet of redwood-lined head tunnel, with a submerged dam built of heavy planks about three feet downstream of the tunnel. In time, the ditch stretched all the way to Daggett itself, bringing water not just for domestic use, but for borax milling use as well. The Daggett Ditch continued to bring water to town and local ranches until 1973. While nothing remains of the dam, much of the three-mile-long canal can still be found north of the Santa Fe Railroad tracks east of Daggett.



Views of Daggett Ditch, 1930 (left) and 2015 (right)
(1930 photo courtesy of the Mojave River Valley Museum)

The water company also led the organization of the Minneola Land Development Company. In the early 1920s, this group built what is known as the “Ski Lodge” building in Daggett to use as a sales office and information center where they could show prospective buyers from Los Angeles their land development plans. Today, this building is a private home and one of the most unique structures in town.

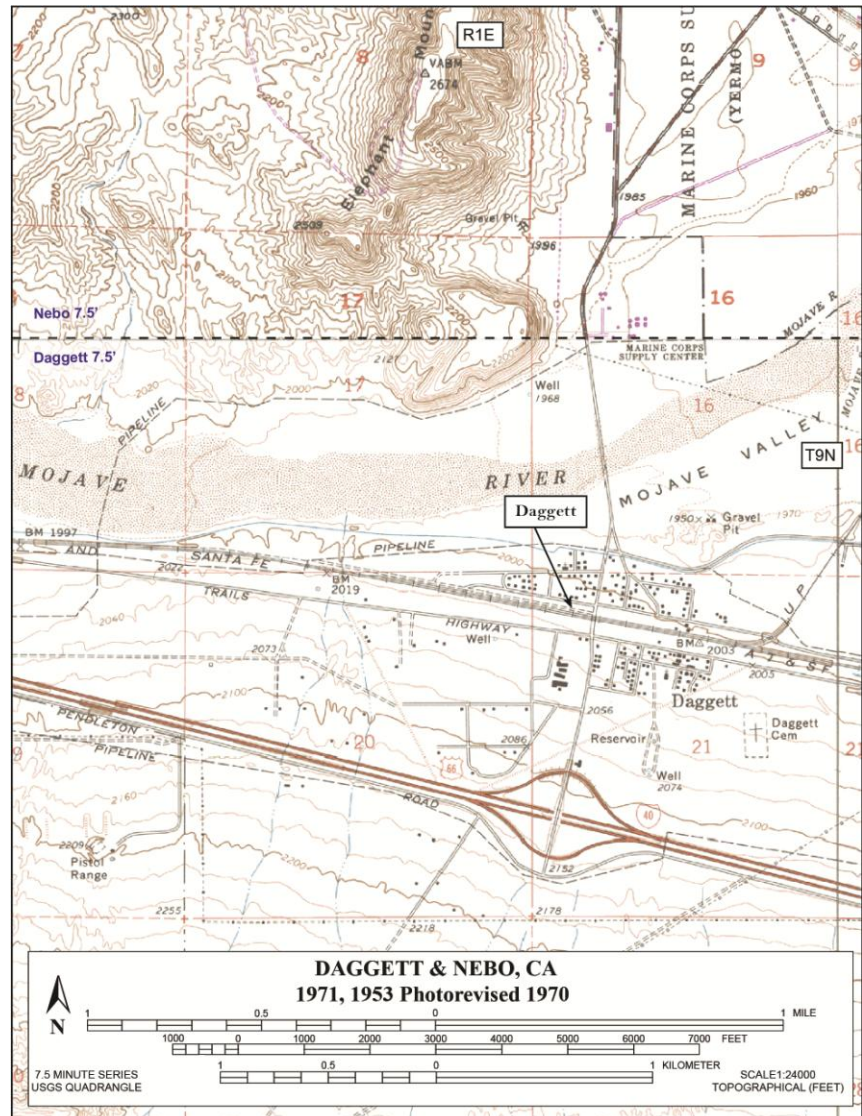
Minneola Land Development Office, 2015. This unusual building was meant to attract the attention of prospective land buyers from Los Angeles and elsewhere.



In 1930, the Barstow-Daggett Airport and Beacon became an important site of air aviation in southern California. By 1943, in the early years of World War II, the Daggett tower, because of its proximity to military operations at the Victorville Army Air Base, increased its workload 400 to 500 percent. By 1955, it was among the top ten busiest stations in the nation. All this ended in 1961, however, when the airport was relocated.

In 1964, the citizens of Daggett gathered to celebrate their history by dedicating their cemetery. The desert plots, first located on land owned by the Southern Pacific Railroad, dated back to 1872. More than 150 former residents are buried there, of all occupations and nationalities: Chinese, Irish, Danish, English, German, Native Americans, and Euro-Americans.

Today Daggett has a population of about 200, with another 1,500 or so living in the surrounding area. Establishment of military bases and solar energy plants has helped the little town, but Daggett's claim to fame remains those colorful days of men, mules, and miners that ended over a century ago.



Daggett at the Crossroads. Daggett today is part of a network of roads, railroads and trails that all have historic ties to the region's rich mining history.