

PLACES

DEATH VALLEY PROSPECTS: NO MINERS ALLOWED

BY GARY RICHARDSON

The National Park Service is proposing that Congress designate as "wilderness" over three-fourths of Death Valley National Monument—an area more than twice the size of Rhode Island. The proposal is a result of the Wilderness Act of 1964, which requires federal land management agencies to determine which lands may be suitable for inclusion in the national wilderness preservation system. Scheduled for inclusion in this system are 16 areas in Death Valley, ranging in size from 17,400 to 348,800 acres. Ironically, besides legislatively declaring the obvious, the major effect of a Death Valley Wilderness will be to end prospecting and phase out mining in an area given national recognition largely because of those activities.

Death Valley has occupied an important place in the mining lore of the West since its discovery by a wayward band of Forty-Niners during the California Gold Rush. Legends of lost gold and silver mines told by men who barely survived the rigors of the desert spurred searches which continue into the present. The "white gold of the desert"—"20-mule-team" borax—was discovered in the 1880's and is still being profitably mined. Over the years, busts have probably absorbed more wealth than booms have produced, but that has done little to discourage that vanishing representative of cussed individualism, the small-time miner-pro prospector.

Typical of such men is Tommy Rokita, who left his job as a maitre de in Las Vegas ten years ago to become a

Death Valley prospector. Tommy, whose Jubilee Mine produces some of the finest lead-silver ore you're likely to see anywhere, points to an inconsistency in the Park Service attitude toward mining: "It's curious that most of the monument's attractions hinge on mining. They've made all of these old mines that never produced into historical sites, but if you go there and mine

productively, it's debris."

The proclamation of national monument status for Death Valley in 1933 was one of the last acts of lame-duck president Herbert Hoover, who had himself been a mining engineer. Hoover had in mind a monument to mining, set in a vast geological museum. At the time, National Parks Director Horace Albright, a native of the area, noted that the proclamation would close Death Valley to mineral entry. "In recommending the establishment of this area as a National Monument, however," he stated at the time, "it was not the desire to prevent prospecting and mining within the area, as such activities would in no way interfere with the preservation

Prospector Jim Standing



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