



Silver City and the Outside World

Firefighters govern a unique little town in Jenney Gulch

Story and photography by Bernie Hunhoff

SOUTH DAKOTA'S MOST democratic community might be Silver City, a small Black Hills town governed by the volunteer fire department. Proposals and problems are hashed out at monthly potlucks. Everybody gets a vote, and then everybody helps to wash the dishes.

"Even little things go to a vote," says John Gomez, a software engineer from Miami who moved here with his wife and two daughters. "We debated the pros and cons of installing a water heater in the schoolhouse for six months, and then finally someone volunteered a water heater and someone volunteered the labor and we moved on to something else."



As for Gomez, he volunteered to paint the bridge over Rapid Creek and that's where we met him. He said he and his wife, Tonya (a Rapid City native), were raising their two young daughters in Miami when they bought a Silver City summer cabin six years ago.

Silver City has about 70 homes and more than a hundred summer residents, but the population dips to a few dozen in the winter. Located 23 miles west of Rapid City, at the end of a county road, the town is unincorporated —

meaning it is not an official town with the power to elect a council and tax its homeowners. Social institutions that otherwise might help to create a feeling of community have abandoned Silver City; the schools,

A few new homes exist in Silver City, but most of the cabins and houses are old and rustic.



Clockwise from top left: Rita and Tally Chapman rent cabins in Silver City; monthly potlucks and town meetings are held in the old school at the edge of town; the fire department now owns the church; log homes are commonplace.

churches, post office, gas stations and stores have all been closed for many years. It may be the only town in South Dakota without a neon orange Budweiser pheasant sign lighting the window of a downtown pub. The only commercial operation in town is Happy Trails Cabins, run by Tally and Rita Chapman.

But have the firefighters unintentionally designed the ideal democracy? "There's a sense of community here that we like," Gomez said, as he brushed red paint on the steel bridge and kept an eye on Sam, his 6-year-old nephew.

Silver City's potlucks show that spirit. They are held in a very old one-room schoolhouse on the east edge of town. The townspeople and rural neighbors who live in the fire district fill their plates and then sit together at long, narrow tables. Harvey Dunn's prairie scenes hang on the wall and an old upright piano sits in the corner. A huge American flag hangs over the blackboard, beneath Palmer writing samples.

As president of the Silver City Volunteer Fire Department, Todd Tobin presides over meetings that follow every other potluck. This is where the town's business is conducted: where the people decide on the virtues of hot water, whether squirrels

should be chased out of the church and whether the town should ignore the Sturgis Bike Rally.

"One of our biggest controversies was over whether we should have a town Web site," Tobin says. "That was a four-year project. Being in the technology field myself, I thought it was a no-brainer, but a lot of people were just opposed to having a conduit to the outside world. They were concerned that it might bring people here."

The "outside world" controversy also applies to the Sturgis Bike Rally: some citizens thought the town should set up a luncheon at the schoolhouse to raise money from the thousands of leather-clad motorcyclists who wander the back roads of the Black Hills; others worry that a food stand would just raise more dust and noise. Most towns in the Black Hills are waving welcome flags at bikers, hikers and anybody on legs or wheels. Some Silver Citizens wish the state would erase their town from the official road map, and take down the small, green "Silver City 5" sign on Highway 385.

Is this what happens when volunteer firefighters run the town rather than the politicians and the business community? Is a cit-

izenry more content when the leaders don't measure success by votes or by economic statistics? When such a town is surrounded by some of America's prettiest scenery, the effect is probably doubled. Even the most hospitable people know that if they share paradise with too many others, they risk losing the very atmosphere that attracted them.

So the schoolhouse debates and discussions aren't only about water heaters and Web sites, but actually about the outside world that such conveniences represent. Anyone in town could have afforded to donate a water heater, but change is measured cautiously here. Such conveniences are not shunned, but neither accepted as necessities. And no matter how good hot dishwater might feel on the hands, it wouldn't be neighborly to rush a decision until the community was ready.

"If I have something to say at the meetings, I usually try to have someone else say it," laughs Gomez, the Floridian who quickly developed not just an understanding, but an appreciation for Silver City governance. "It's not a matter of how many years you've lived here, but how many generations," he says with respect.

Tobin, the fire department president, is third generation. His grandfather came to the Black Hills from Mitchell in the 1920s and soon bought a cabin in town. Tobin spent many summer days here as a youth, fly fishing and exploring the hills. Then he left South Dakota to work with electronics in Silicon Valley.

"I went to a seminar one day in California where they were doing an exercise called creating a Serenity Bubble," he says. "We were supposed to picture something relaxing in our minds. I pictured Jenney Gulch and Silver City, and I realized everything I pictured was right here."

Tobin soon returned to South Dakota, and now lives with his wife, Judy, at Silver City year-round on the property his grandfather owned 80 years ago. He has the look of a big city mayor on vacation, but he doesn't try to run the schoolhouse meetings like a mayor. He says he has learned from issues like the four-year effort to start a community Web site that one shouldn't force opinions on neighbors they care about. "It was a very humbling and enlightening experience," he says. Today there is a Web site, but it is purely an online bulletin board for current residents.

At an autumn potluck, Tobin guided the discussion from one agenda item to the next. When there was no consensus, he suggested that they talk about it next month. At a recent meeting, he invited those present to share their memories of Cecelia Hoffman, an elderly woman who once ran a store in Silver City. Hoffman took her shoes off one day during a March blizzard, walked across the creek into the trees, laid down and died. For 10 minutes, the potluck became a belated wake service.

"Cecelia was very quiet," said a young woman. "I remember when she first spoke to me."

"I remember when she got plumbing in her house," said an older fellow.

After a respectful silence, the Silver Citians discussed the best way to evict the squirrels from the ceiling of the old church, which the Catholic diocese had recently sold to the fire depart-

ment for \$1. The department also owns and manages the schoolhouse and fire hall. Those are the only public buildings in town.

Tobin says he enjoys the diversity of the Silver City population. It includes people of all ages, professions and interests. "We have different values and philosophies — conservatives and liberals and independents, I'm sure — but none of that overshadows what unites us. This is really a place where the town hall meeting still exists, where everybody who pays the \$20 fire department dues has an equal voice."

"If we're different from other towns, it's not by design," he says. "We've talked about this. We want to be one of the last volunteer fire departments that can be self-supporting. We like our independence."



The Gorman cabin is open to the public.

Named in a Fight

SILVER CITY DATES TO 1876, when two brothers from Quebec, John and Tom Gorman, struck gold in a mine called the Diana Lode. The indentation of their mine is still visible in the mountain, and nearby is their log cabin.

The Gormans were prominent and colorful residents of the city for nearly a half century. Within two years, 200 roughnecks joined them in Jenney Gulch. A lumber mill, sluices, saloons, schools, hotels and other establishments were constructed.

Originally called Gorman's Camp, the town name later changed to Nebraska Bar. Some locals think the current name was the result of a fistfight. They say the winner was a cowboy from Silver City, N.M., who decided to honor his hometown.

Silver City is surrounded by Forest Service land, so there's no room for growth even if the town's citizens wanted to expand. Rapid Creek flows through town, and the headwaters of Pactola Reservoir are just below the city.



John Gomez, a fan of Silver City democracy, volunteered to paint the bridge over Rapid Creek, with help from his nephew Sam Phillips. Below, longtime residents Todd Tobin (left) and Maurice McLinn visit by an ore cart rescued from the mines.

He believes a “spiritual peace” in Jenney Gulch also unites the populace. People usually choose their town based on work, school or health care, he notes. But since Silver City has none of those, it’s safe to say that “Everybody is here because they want to be here,” Tobin explains.

Maurice McLinn is an example. For years, he rented cabins at Silver City and enjoyed fishing in Rapid Creek. “I always thought it would be a pretty place to live, but I never found out about the houses that came up for sale until a day or two after they sold,” he says.

McLinn was living in Platte, and he was determined to get his own place, so he subscribed to the *Rapid City Journal*. Every night after working on the farm he read the paper’s real estate ads. One summer day 25 years ago, after a particularly tiring day on the farm, he finally looked at the ads about 10 p.m., and saw a rarity — a house for sale in Silver City.

McLinn set his alarm for 3 a.m., and arrived at the realtor’s office just as it opened in the morning. He wrote a check, signed the papers, and was back at work on the farm by 3 p.m. that same day.

Now an 80-year-old widower, McLinn says one of the nice

things about Silver City is the activity — not the normal goings-on of a town with restaurants and shops, but that of a retired farmer fussing with his old green John Deere tractor, and teenagers strolling down a dirt street with tubes they’ll use to float in the creek. Someone is fixing a cabin, and someone else is hauling firewood. Old-timers and kids often motor across town on high-humming ATVs.

And there’s non-human activity. Deer visit often, even though most people let their dogs run free. Big horn sheep sometimes descend the steep, granite gulch north of town. “They say there are only about 180 big horns in the entire Black Hills, and we saw 18 last week,” said Gomez, as he painted the bridge. “We saw three babies with them, and one

was still wet from birth. Rocks are sliding down and they seem to be slipping, and you just wonder how they don’t get hurt but they don’t.”

There are other questions to ponder in Silver City, deeper questions. How does a town survive without elections or a main street, or even a beer joint? How do Catholics and Lutherans pray together on Sundays? Would it be legal for firefighters to govern Sioux Falls or Rapid City? Things like that.

