



■ Pioneering spirit still alive at 1930s homesteads

■ Too hot to garden?

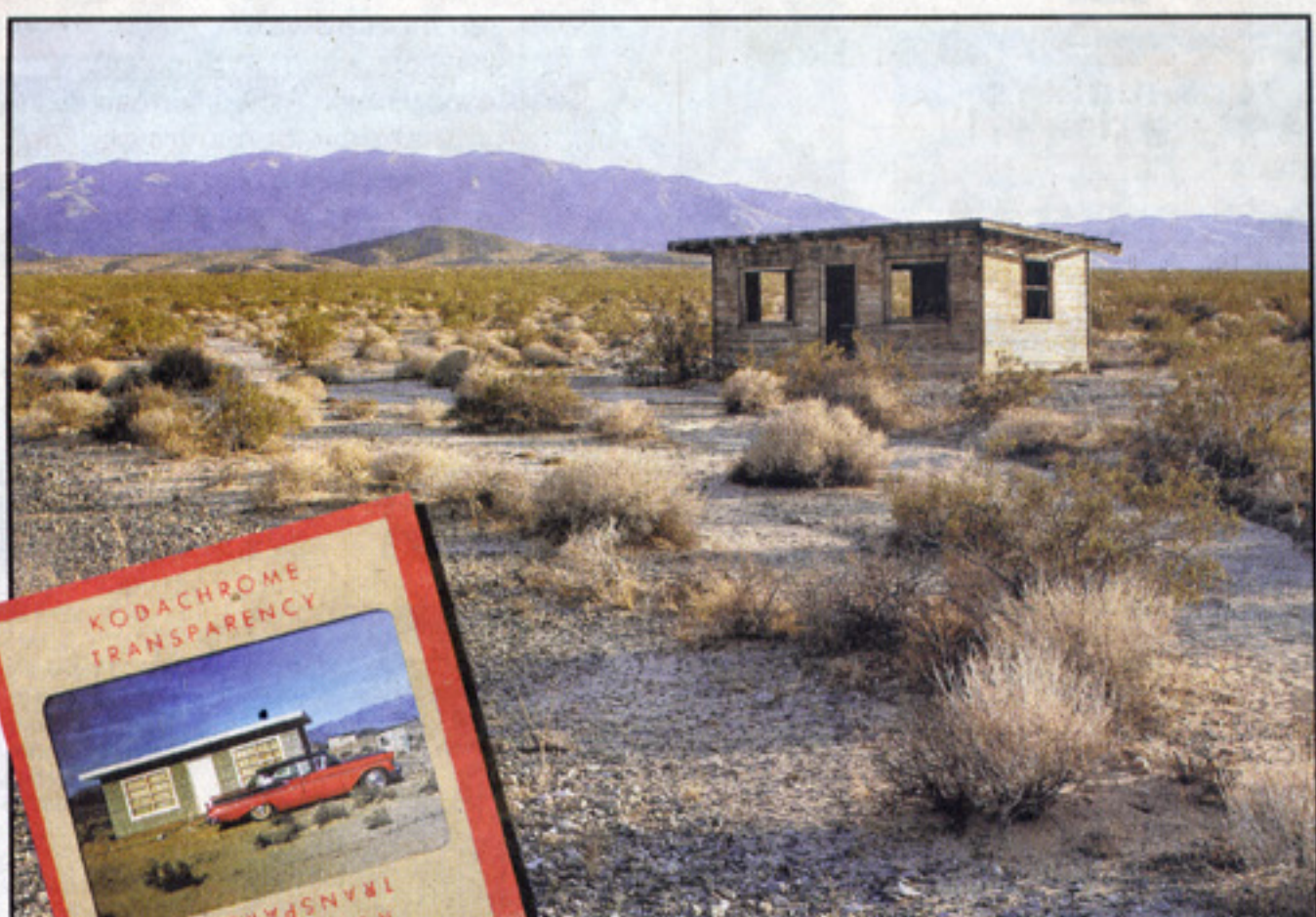


Take time indoors to make plans for fall planting



The Desert Sun

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF KIM STRINGFELLOW AND CHRIS CARRAHER

Above: Brewer Homestead, U.S. Patent No. 1146096

At left: The 1950s bungalow that Wonder Valley resident Chris Carraher now uses as an art studio is seen here in an undated slide she found at the home after purchasing the property.

Don't fence me in

Artists embrace harsh desert in creating their own wide open gallery spaces

BY JUDITH SALKIN
The Desert Sun

It's hard not to hear the Eagles' "Hotel California" in your head as you drive through Wonder Valley seeing the remains of the Jackrabbit Homesteads.

The homesteads, the result of the Small Tract Act of 1938, are a part of desert history that reminds us of the pioneering spirit of the post-World War II years when Americans yearned for the open spaces and freedoms of the Old West.

And the government yearned to populate the vast stretches of open land.

After completing a project on the quirky structures of the Salton Sea, photographer Kim Stringfellow began exploring the stories behind the tiny desert buildings.

In September, the Center for American Places will publish Stringfellow's "Jackrabbit Homestead: Tracing the Small Tract in the Southern California Landscape," a slim (144-page) history of the homestead structures.

"I got interested in the hinterland fringe communities a long time ago," she said by phone from Los Angeles. "They are so close to major cities, but they're worlds apart from civilization."

Stringfellow's explorations brought her back to the Small Tract Homestead Act of 1938, an idea from the Bureau of Land Management that sold 2½-5 acres tracts of land, called patents, to people willing to brave the harsh desert environment. Landowners were then required to erect a minimum 12-foot by 16-foot cabin, many of which went without electricity or fresh water.

Many used the cabins as weekend retreats from the metropolis of Los Angeles. "They wanted someplace where they could



CRYSTAL CHATHAM THE DESERT SUN

Wonder Valley resident Chris Carraher talks about rural life and area history while standing in the living area of her Homestead bungalow home.



CRYSTAL CHATHAM THE DESERT SUN

Chris Carraher's 1960s Homestead bungalow home features one bedroom, another converted into a home office, as well as a living area and full kitchen. Behind the home, Carraher has a second bungalow for use as an art studio.

breathe," Stringfellow said.

In addition to the book, she has a Web site, jackrabbithomestead.com, that includes audio tracks on the homestead history, a downloadable audio tour and driving map of the area.

She became so enamored of the region during her research, Stringfellow has decided to move to the high desert in the fall. "I'm waiting for it to cool off a bit," she said.

Please see HOMESTEADS, D3



Phillips Homestead, U.S. Patent No. 1197717

KIM STRINGFELLOW

Jackrabbit Homesteads car tour

Directions: Take Highway 62 up to the Morongo Basin. The audio tour begins approximately 3 miles east of Twentynine Palms at the "palm" cell tower, which is the tallest structure along the highway.

Download: The half-hour driving tour is meant to complement the audio tour, which can be downloaded at jackrabbithomestead.com.

Note: Since at least part of the tour is on unpaved roads, a four-wheel-drive vehicle is recommended.

Open range

See more photos of the Jackrabbit Homesteads in the high desert at mydesert.com/photos

HOMESTEADS: 'Jackrabbit' cabins getting a new lease on life

Continued from D1

A homestead of her own

Today, some of the surviving homestead cabins are inhabited by artists like Wonder Valley resident Chris Carraher, who see the openness of the high desert not as desolation, but as a place that encourages self-sufficiency and creativity.

"People here allow themselves to exercise their own unique creativity," said Carraher. "On one level, they live a life of reduced resources, but that also allows them to come up with inventive solutions."

Carraher purchased the five-acre property from the heirs of its original owner for \$7,000 in 1999.

The property features the original 192-square-foot cabin built in the mid-1950s, a separate 850-square-foot bedroom unit installed in 1963 and a working well.

Many of the furnishings in the house are "obtainium,"



CRYSTAL CHATHAM THE DESERT SUN

A tray of pastels are set out in Wonder Valley resident Chris Carraher's 1950s bungalow art studio. She uses a separate detached bungalow structure for her living quarters.

objects found in the desert and repurposed, like the former ammo boxes that make up her bookcase and office shelving.

"You need to be resourceful to live here," she said.

Carraher has also made a few changes. To capture more of the 360-degree view, she replaced windows with sliding

glass doors. "That took a little getting used to," she said.

As more people move into the Morongo Basin, Carraher sees civilization encroaching on the land of the Jackrabbit Homesteads and eventually changing the very character of the open desert she calls home. "Paradise," she lamented, "is never permanent."