

ARIZONA

Old mining town of Hayden sees its last days

Since 2000, the population has decreased by almost 38 percent.

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It's not a ghost town, but it feels like one.

The streets of Hayden, Ariz., are lined with boarded-up businesses — Grimebusters Laundry, Casa Rivera Restaurant, an appliance store — and abandoned schools. Crumbling churches have "for sale" signs nailed to the doors, their crosses still beckoning worshipers for prayer. Traffic signs, symbols and road markings are rare.

The Rex Theater hasn't shown a movie since 1979. The foundations of former homes are charred pits, burned to the dusty ground with nothing salvageable to find in the rubble.

If the wind could carry whispers from the past, what would Hayden have sounded like?

Today, Hayden is quiet. Noises from the copper smelter chink and clang in the distance.

Hayden: An American story

Founded in 1911, Hayden was a company town owned by the Kennecott Copper Corporation for employees working in operations and extraction of high-grade copper ore. The smokestacks, part of a \$40 million Kennecott expansion, once symbolized economic prosperity and job growth. This plant is still only one of three operating copper smelters in the United States.

The story of Hayden is an American story of strong work ethic and resilience, and opportunities for chasing the American dream. It is also a story of devastating economic failures and a cautionary tale of what happens to rural America when the government, businesses and younger generations turn their backs.

HAYDEN HISTORY: Hayden Police officer killed on way to work

Since 2000, the population has decreased by almost 38 percent. The median household income of Hayden residents was \$38,167 in 2015, with a third of Hayden residents living in poverty.

“The majority of the population is over 50,” Mayor Bobby Smith said. “The 2010 census put Hayden at a population of 644. It will be much less this next time around.”

Brightening up the town

Smith has to wear a lot of hats in Hayden. He is the mayor and town manager, captain of the Hayden Fire Department, an employee at the ASARCO copper mine and a retired respiratory therapist. He has three children and multiple grandchildren.

He turned 48 in March.

“Some of my goals include giving back to the community,” Smith said. “We used to have festivals and parties, and I want to be able to do that again.”

MORE: ADOT having a blast on state highway between Globe, Winkelman

He also wants to work on abandoned building clean-up to brighten up the atmosphere in town.

“Houses go abandoned when old people die, and we’ve had an arsonist strike about every month or so each summer for the past few years,” Smith said.

The increasing number of crumbling foundations are daily reminders of a rising crime rate, the highest in the area of small surrounding communities in Gila County.

“There are 911 calls for break-ins every single day,” Smith said.

Scandals and bankruptcy

Aside from the alarming crime rate, a steady stream of scandals in recent years has made life even more difficult in Hayden.

The former mayor of Hayden, Charles Vega, resigned after pleading guilty to attempted fraudulent schemes and practices. When Smith began his term, he was saddled with over two years’ worth of unpaid bills due to misplaced money and incorrect bookkeeping. Errors by

the former town manager and accountant that caused administrative employees to be put on a three-day pay schedule.

“We’re good now,” explained Smith. “We can start spending a little money, and I want to get everybody in the administrative office on eight hours of pay daily.”

On top of administrative issues, The American Smelting and Refining Company, ASARCO, which owns and operates the former Kennecott Copper Corporation smelter in Hayden, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in 2005.

GILA COUNTY NEWS: Family of 4 dead after plane bound for Telluride from Scottsdale crashes north of Payson

As part of the bankruptcy settlement, ASARCO paid \$2 billion to settle claims for hazardous waste pollution at many of their sites. Even just last year, ASARCO was involved in a \$150 million settlement with the Department of Justice and Environmental Protection Agency due to violations of the Clean Air Act.

An EPA investigation found that inadequate emission controls over a long period of time at the plant polluted Hayden’s air with arsenic and lead.

Joseph Wilhelm, the general manager of the Hayden ASARCO plant, blames the EPA’s Clean Air Act for more than just economic strife, but also for the extensive job loss in the late 1980s.

According to Wilhelm, replacing the furnaces in the plant with more environmentally friendly systems resulted in the cutback on manual labor employment.

Dwindling population

Residents were forced to relocate as everything around them began to disappear. High-grade copper ore became more difficult to extract and refine. Available jobs evaporated into thin air. Businesses began boarding up their doors, and Hayden High School was moved to a neighboring town.

Drugs began to appear in the vacuum created by the departure of everything else.

Smith explained that one of his biggest problems is dealing with the young, unemployed residents of Hayden who struggle with drug addiction and do not pay taxes.

MORE GILA COUNTY: Arizona wilderness survivor's journey: Anger and frustration, but also hope

For being a seemingly disregarded town, the police presence is overwhelming. The Hayden Police Department is the only operating building on Hayden Avenue, with seven shiny new police sedans and SUVs parked outside the disintegrating store fronts, solidifying the quiet chaos of Hayden.

“We actually have more police vehicles than we do officers,” Smith said.

Protection begins to feel arbitrary when the only thing left to guard is the further destruction of an already ruined town.

Despite the stacks of lawsuits and complaints on Smith’s desk and his general lack of free time, he maintains a friendly and relatable attitude.

“I grew up here and lived here for most of my life,” he explained. “These are my people.”

Life in Hayden is not easy. The closest grocery store is about 8 miles away in Kearny. One restaurant, Maria’s, still operates. Gila Furniture stocks discount mattresses and other home furnishings, but is the only home décor store in the tri-town area.

The smokestacks rising above the rocky hills of Gila County are vestiges of a more virile Hayden, grave markers that might catch the eye of drivers on Arizona Highway 77 while they pass by on their way to somewhere else.

The Arizona Sonora News Service is run by the University of Arizona Journalism School.