

## NEW GHOSTS IN OLD TOWNS

By ALAN HENSHER



IN 1953, English archaeologist Austen Layard reprinted the following letter from a Turkish official in his book on Mesopotamia: "...although I have passed all my days in this place, I have neither counted the houses nor have I inquired into the number of inhabitants;...Seek not after the things which concern thee not. Thou camest unto us and we welcomed thee; go in peace."

I have been more fortunate than Layard. A year ago, I began writing my first edition of Ghost Towns of the Central Mojave, which I published last May. Above all, I needed to know the populations of the 16 ghost towns I planned to profile; all in San Bernardino County.

I began by comparing the number of registered voters (later, the number of elementary school pupils) in each community to the populations listed in census or other authoritative reports. With the percentage of students thus calculated, I was able to extrapolate community populations in other years by referring to various Annual Reports that have been compiled by county superintendents of schools from 1868 to the present. (County clerks in California also published lists of registered voters in their Great Registers from 1867 to 1909.) My method comes clear in this table:

<u>Area</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>No. Students</u>	<u>Population</u>	<u>% Students of Popul.</u>
Atolia	1915	51	*800	6.4%
Atolia Precinct	1920	18	150	12.0%
Calico Precinct	1890	40	431	9.3%
Calico Mines & Camp Cady	1900	4	50	8.0%
Vanderbilt Precinct	1900	21	329	6.3%
<u>Other counties:</u>				
Darwin	1880	7	85	8.2%
Ballarat	1900	*8-10	172	4.6 to 5.7%
Garlock Town	1900	13	84	15.6%
Llane	1917	225	900	25.0%

\* - Estimated

Let us look at Lanfair, which flourished as a farm colony in the eastern Mojave from 1912 to the late 1920's. In 1917, it had 17 students and 130 registered voters. From the chart we can see that the population probably ranged from about 180 (9% students) to about 290 (6% students).

This method has its drawbacks. Only the better established towns had schools, and since the Annual Reports went unpublished, they remain less accessible than the Great Registers, which by state law had to be printed.

The Reports are especially valuable to historians since a school district corresponded (more or less) to a community's sphere of influence, containing statistics on school finance, annual censuses of all minors, and breakdowns of enrollment by sex, age, and race, these bulky ledgers recorded not just one activity of one part of an area's populace (as the Great Registers did), but of the world of women, children, blacks, Indians and others. In California, education was so much a secular religion that communities would build schools even before they would build churches.

In the face of present cutbacks, the greatest challenge to local historians will be to develop meaning out of the facts and figures that are being mined with such patience and determination. A lively lumber camp dies; a dying coal town revives: history, we find is a dynamic process that demands to be understood. Perhaps the search itself is our goal.