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Slab City becomes a respite for victims of recession

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NCR Today

Out in the far reaches of California's piece of the Mojave Desert is a place that has long been "off the grid," a gathering spot for people looking to drop out, hide out or just be left alone. But now the area known as "Slab City" -- near a shrinking lake called the Salton Sea -- finds itself growing in population as the recession drives more and more families out of their homes.

A report from CBS News, lays out what is going on, along with a more detailed follow-up this weekend by the *Los Angeles Times*.

A little history: Slab City is just that, about 600 acres of concrete slabs and rutted roads, the remaining foundations of what once was Camp Dunlap, a Marine artillery training base during World War II. Ownership passed to the state of California in the 1950s, and since the late 1960s, Slab City has drawn people from the margins who pull up trailers and RVs, find a slab and set up a life of sorts. There is no town government, no official services like electricity, street repair and clean water.

Over the years, the place has taken on something of a romantic quality, portrayed in movies as a modern Wild West, with a combination of crime, characters and fierce independence.

It is now something more. Although no one drops by to take a census, indications are Slab City is attracting people dispossessed by the housing crisis and the Great Recession. These are not the loners from years gone by; they are formerly solid working-class families who have run out of options. According to Lt. Charles Lucas with the Imperial County Sheriff's Office, the expanding community poses no real threat to other areas.

"They're just trying to live out there. They're a mirror of what goes on in other places," he said.

Many are trying to rebuild what they once lost. Slab City has weekend talent shows, a small library and a church that sits in a pre-fabricated building left over from the military era. The local school system sends a bus to pick up Slab City's children. FedEx will deliver packages there; the U.S. Postal Service will not.

It is the last stop for some desperate families trying hard to hold on as they mix in with the fringe folks who have long called this place home. Tracy Moss, 73, came here after losing her house in Texas.

"A lot of us," she tells the *Times*, "just have no place else to go."

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