



Welcome ye sinners to Salvation Mountain where God-fearing tourists and the deity-curious come to



WORDS Mark Jacobs

gawp at the paint-daubed altars – the work of one man who devoted his life to praising his maker



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he art attraction in the California desert south east of Los Angeles, is a giant love cake frosted with blue ribbon waterfalls that flow into the Sea of Galilee, a patchwork of greenery studded with flowers, and a yellow brick road that climbs to the peak. It is filled with adobe (a local clay) and hay bales; piped with overscaled religious scripture, like the Sinner's Prayer that covers its big red heart ('Jesus I'm a sinner please come upon my body, and into my heart'); and topped with pop-up God

letters and a tall white cross. There is also a hogan, a traditional Navajo dome, that's decorated with bluebirds of happiness, and a museum, where found branches climb the high ceiling and reclaimed car windows are born again. They are all slathered in thick coats of donated paint that fade to a muted Technicolor in the unrelenting sun.

Without knowledge of its back story, Salvation Mountain could be construed as high concept: Marfa, Texas, as imagined by the painter Nolan Hendrickson; a very



The Mountain could be construed as a collaboration between the fashion designers Meadham Kirchoff and the masterminds of *Teletubbies*

Salvation Mountain by Leonard Knight, Niland, California

grand set for the fashion photographer Tim Walker; a collaboration between the fashion designers Meadham Kirchoff and *Teletubbies* masterminds Anne Wood and Andrew Davenport; or just a castle for Vanellope von Schweetz, princess of the candy-themed video game 'Sugar Rush' in the animated movie *Wreck-It Ralph*. Instead, it is a simple message of God's love by Leonard Knight, an accidental artist who lived on a pension out of a truck under a tree at the base of the Mountain for over a quarter

of a century, always working, always greeting visitors, and always willing to tell his story.

After feeling misunderstood by his local churches in the afterglow of a literal come-to-Jesus moment, Leonard spent four years in Nebraska patching together a home-made hot-air balloon that would spell out 'God Is Love'. In 1984, he was driving across the country when he found himself outside Niland, California, where he unsuccessfully attempted to fly it. (Step back from the museum and it reveals itself

as a representation of the balloon, built in the footprint of where Leonard tried to inflate it.) He immediately began the small monument that became Salvation Mountain, recognised in 2000 as a National Folk Art Site by the Folk Art Society of America.

Tourism soared after Leonard was featured at Salvation Mountain in *Into The Wild*, Sean Penn's 2007 feature adaptation of Jon Krakauer's non-fiction bestseller. The Mountain, which is not mentioned in the book, is used as a backdrop for a brief ►

► methods – no newer, more resilient materials or architecture – which maintains a madcap Sisyphean loop, as the mud, straw and paint break down and are replaced with the same flawed methods, over and over, forever. (Welcome donations include latex paint in bright colours, large brushes and rollers, and food for the site's 11 cats.) She explains that Leonard was always adamant that the Mountain was not in the service of organised religion; in fact, recent requests to hold revivals and church services at the site have been denied. 'Leonard wanted everyone to know about the Mountain,' she says. 'He loved the visitors and the talking. He wanted the information out there. And I'm willing to talk to anybody who is able to get that information out there.'

'At least a few of them come up the hill to see what else is here,' Bill Ammon says of those gathering down the road at Salvation Mountain. Bill is seated at a table in the indoor-outdoor dining area of the Oasis Club in Slab City, the small, mostly transient, respect-your-neighbour mind-your-business constellation of communities commonly described as 'the last free place in America'. Slab City's

Mountain after Leonard moved away. So is Lynne Bright, who shares the table, a retired lawyer from British Columbia, who says she happened upon Slab City five years ago after reconsidering a sailing vacation in Florida. (They both have cell phones.)

Lynne met her husband in Slab City and travels elsewhere for several months of the year. She is the first to mention 'living in the beast', which is local jargon for the system beyond The Slabs – what others call 'the default world'. 'There are people who live here because this is the most comfortable place for them. Even though it's off the grid, even though it's difficult, even though it has harsh conditions, this is the place where they feel a connection,' Lynne says. 'And Leonard was one of those people. This was where he belonged, where he felt comfortable.' Lynne mentions that the military jets that drop live bombs over the Chocolate Mountain Aerial Gunnery Range in Slab City's backyard use Salvation Mountain as a beacon.

'Salvation Mountain is about Leonard, and Leonard was a very positive man,' says Sue Whitmire, another board member. 'He just loved everybody.' An elementary school teacher whose primary residence

The inherent conflict is obvious – even with an understanding that Sean Penn is more engaged in social politics than many of his industry peers, and that he created a portrait of Leonard so poetic that it receives the approval of both Bill and Lynne, the inherent conflict is obvious – if you don't want the attention, don't be in a mainstream Hollywood movie. 'We're not under the radar any more. We're done now. We're out there,' she says, matter-of-factly. 'So we kind of have to adjust our message – and who we are as Slab City. It will happen. It's an organic thing that will develop.'

Slab City's relative openness to outside media is part of that renegotiation. Bill and Lynne have spoken to the press many times and essentially qualify as media trained. 'Journalists are looking for something new, something people haven't seen before. And this has been a pretty isolated community,' Bill says. 'So over the 15 years I've been here, I've developed some skill with my interviews.'

Lynne is gracious but tougher, drawing breaths before carefully responding to queries, often with answers she has prepared for visiting media. 'The reason

Leonard was adamant that the Mountain wasn't part of organised religion; recent requests to hold church services have been denied

population, which unofficially fluctuates from more than 1,000 inhabitants in the peak winter season to a hardcore crew of around 200 in the oppressive summer months, encompasses squatters, searchers, artists, middle-class libertarians, the disenfranchised, and snowbirds with deluxe motor homes. It is famously off the grid, which means there is no government, no taxation, no power, no plumbing, no waste removal, no street lights, nor any other comparable services. It takes its name from the cement foundations that remain from Camp Dunlap, the decommissioned World War II Marine training base it has occupied since the Sixties.

Bill, who manages the Range outdoor stage that is popular for its live music on Saturday nights and its yearly prom, got to know Leonard when he moved to The Slabs in the late Nineties from San Diego. He was working in construction when he 'started getting a little less motivated and a little less employable' until he was living out of a van. 'It occurs to me since I've been here that every county should have a Slab City,' he says, strumming a guitar that has a faded alien on its strap. 'Those people who aren't making it in conventional life need somewhere to go.'

Bill is a member of the nine-person board of directors that began overseeing Salvation

Mountain two hours' away, Sue has a semi-permanent 'second home' in the Slab City art community of East Jesus, which she notes has nothing to do with Jesus (the Urban Dictionary defines it as 'way the fuck out there'). Sue first visited several years ago while 'looking for a nice place to camp'. 'For me, it's a place to get away from the society out there where it's a rat race,' she says. 'A lot of people just come for the Mountain and then they leave. But some people will venture on into Slab City. It is an attraction.' Like many others, Whitmire, who wears a pressed pair of jeans and a holiday sweatshirt, has become a skilled docent.

The state of California owns the land under Slab City and so there is an incentive to be cooperative and cultivate artistic credibility. 'The only reason that we get to be here is they ignore it,' Lynne says. 'It's far more work for them to get rid of us than it is to just turn their back. And so long as we don't give them a black eye, they're going to leave us alone. That has been the way that it's worked for the last 25 years.'

This led to the prominence of Slab City itself in *Into The Wild*. 'The movie was the turning point when more people became aware of what Slab City is and began coming to find out about what goes on here, and about this kind of living.'

that I agree to talk to the media (like you),' she writes in her standard 'media spiel' email, 'is because I think it is important for you to understand what Slab City is and what it is not.'

It's tricky when disengagement from the beast becomes a lifestyle attraction for the beast. Then again, some could argue that notoriety offers an opportunity to broadcast a radical, imperfect example that might resonate, particularly during a moment of extreme economic inequality when even Pope Francis is somehow critical of capitalism. And then there is the natural tension of living off the grid while harbouring Leonard's giant totem – Bill refers to it as 'Slab City's front door' – which bears a message for the world. 'I believe in Leonard and I believe in the 28 years he spent giving that to us,' he says.

But more than anything, it's hard to find life off the grid when the grid is so hungry. 'Google has a very clear picture of Salvation Mountain,' Bill says, and then he laughs a slow, friendly laugh.

Leonard Knight died two months after my visit to Salvation Mountain, at 82 years of age. I feel that he will have been happy to meet his maker at last. **Q&S**

Salvation Mountain and Slab City, Niland, California. For more information visit: salvationmountaininc.org

Clockwise from top: The truck that was Leonard's home; Leonard at work; the Stars and Stripes amidst the religious iconography; 'trees' holding up the museum

Salvation Mountain

