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Snowbirds' Gift Economy in the Arizona Desert

David Frati

Each year, 200,000 retired people spend the winter in and around the small town of Quartzsite, Arizona, in the Sonoran desert. Some 50,000 of them live in informal housing: campers, tents, cars and trucks, and self-constructed cabins. In the field with the most economically marginal of these “desert snowbirds,” David Frati observes the complex gift economy that structures their social lives.

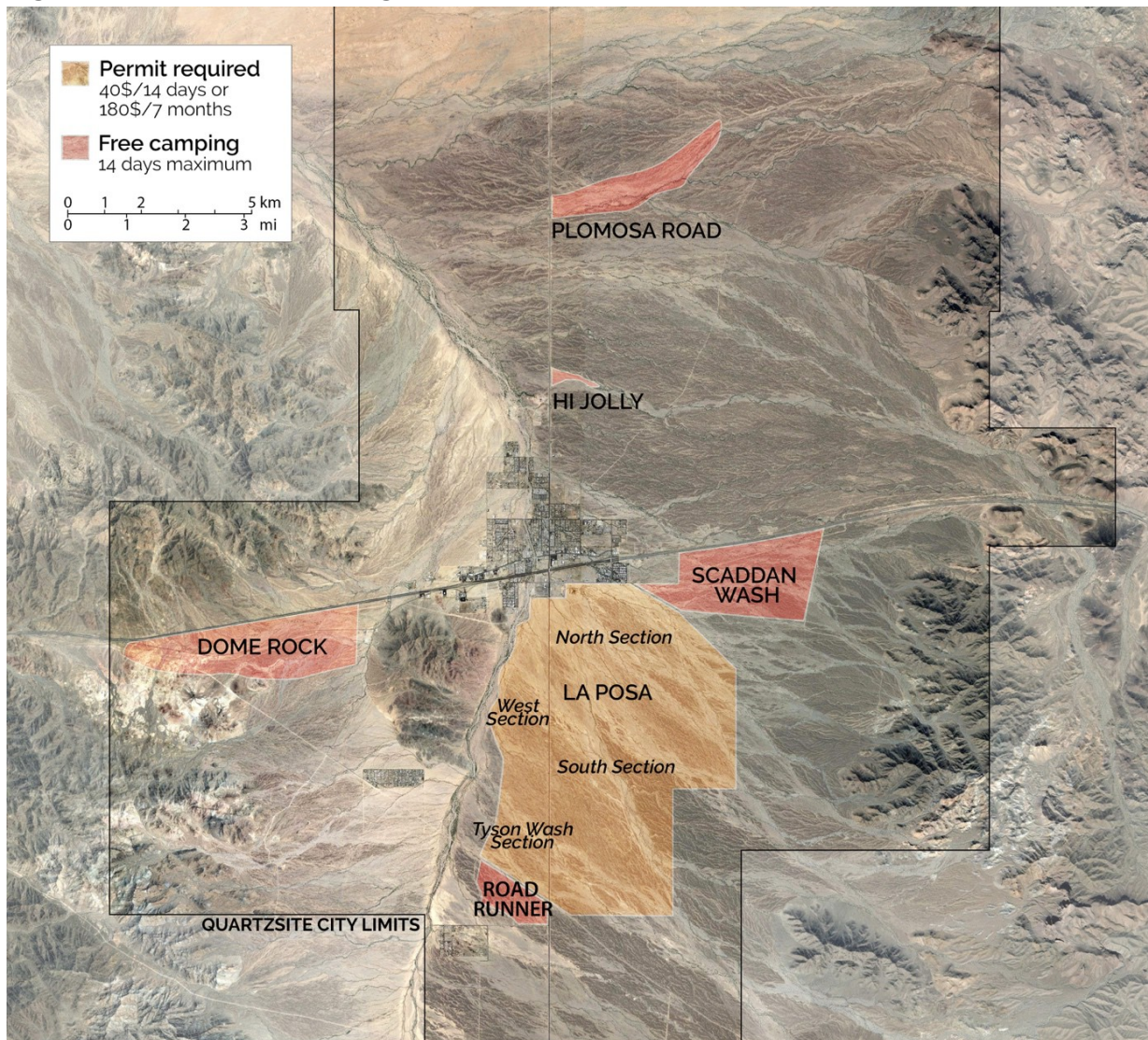
Every winter, retired snowbirds reach the small town of Quartzsite, Arizona, one of the few places in the USA where days can be warm and sunny during the winter. According to the mayor, 200,000 of them come to Quartzsite every winter, parking their RVs either in one of the many RV parks inside the city or in the surrounding desert. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM)¹ administers the desert areas, where it is possible to park from September 15 to April 15 for \$180. This is such a low rent, compared to RV parks² and regular housing in cities, that around 50,000 snowbirds come into the desert annually with *non-ordinary housing*. (Bernardot *et al.* 2014). These can be fifth-wheel campers, motor homes, tents, trucks, converted cars, and even on-site built cabins. Some of these snowbirds have been coming to Quartzsite for 20 years, and a lot camp at the very same spot every year, although there are no rules regarding placement in the BLM lands.

I observed a gift economy tacitly set up among these retired snowbirds gathering in the desert. Beyond functioning as mutual assistance among people in need, the gift economy seems to structure the whole group's social life. It may also be restrictive, because as it is frowned upon for group members to seek a service in town that they could have found in the desert within the group: they are *expected* (Karsenti 1994) to take part in the gift-giving process. The gift economy is a process of giving–receiving–reciprocating (Mauss 2010) that requires people to share time and space. This winter gift economy seems to be specific to the collective occupation of the desert.

¹ The Bureau of Land Management is an agency within the US Department of Interior that administers over 247 million acres (1,000,000 km²) of public spaces, mainly in western states.

² Some RV parks in town offer the possibility to stay from October to April for \$1,200. The cheapest monthly rates are usually around \$300.

Figure 1. Bureau of Land Management recreation areas around Quartzsite, Arizona



Source: satellite image, Google Earth, 2017.

At Guppy's camp

Some days before Christmas 2016, I went for the first time to North La Posa, one of the BLM's desert areas located south of Quartzsite. I parked my motor home by the dirt road I had been following for a few miles in the arid landscape. Two men sitting in the sun in front of a pop-up trailer waved at me and invited me to sit with them. They were drinking strong beers while a phone was playing old blues music. One of them offered me a beer before I could introduce myself. Howard was wearing a dirty jean jacket, and his hands were black with grime. The other man introduced himself as Guppy. He was wearing a tracksuit under a vest and slippers full of sand. They both were 64 years old. Soon after, an old woman sat with us. Mary, 67, who looked very thin in her torn pants, was living alone with her three dogs in a tent on the other side of the road. Then Dennis, a man with dirty hands, face, and clothes, appeared on a road bicycle. They had all met each other this winter.

Figure 2. Guppy’s camp, a typical camp of North La Posa: a few chairs around a fire pit, in front of a trailer placed close to vegetation



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Big Harry, a man who was living three miles away in South La Posa, another BLM area, then arrived driving a big van. He sat down and put a fancy bottle of tequila on the table. One hour later, the bottle was empty and Big Harry left, leaving everybody drunk, except for Mary, who did not drink, and me, still drinking my first beer. Dennis and Guppy were continuously offering me cigarettes they were rolling themselves.

Then alcohol ended the party. I had to bring home one of them who had fallen into the fire pit, while another had a fight with her girlfriend who showed up late, and a third simply vanished. When Guppy and I were the last two left around the fire pit, he apologized for the damage done by the alcohol. Despite sharing alcohol that night, Guppy was particularly annoyed with Big Harry: “After all, this is Big Harry’s fault... again! This man got \$5,000 of army retirement pension every month, and every time he shows up, he offers alcohol to everybody and the evening ends like this... When someone gives us alcohol, of course we drink it!” Indeed, after a life of wandering in the USA and Europe, working off the books here and there, Guppy only had a \$450 retirement pension plus \$150 of food stamps, and he could certainly not afford fancy tequila. But more than resulting from the difference in their standards of living, the relationship between Big Harry and everybody else was so particular because he was not living in North La Posa. Coming and leaving at will, Big Harry was not sharing everyday life with the rest of the group. He was interrupting the process of give–receive–reciprocate that constitutes the gift economy.

At Betty’s camp

Five days later, Dennis, Guppy, and I were sitting at the home of Betty, a woman they had introduced me to three days before, in her house made of pallets and tarpaulins. She was standing before the stove, which was plugged into a tank lying on the ground, scratching a pan with salt to clean it. Once the pan was clean, she turned around and asked if somebody wanted a sandwich.

Nobody did. “Ha! So why did I turn my stove on?” She turned the stove off, grabbed her drink of amaretto, and sat in a camping chair.

Figure 3. Betty in her kitchen



© David Frati, December 2016.

Her house was made of two rooms, a living room and a “guest room,” built in one day with Dennis’s help at the beginning of the winter. Betty planned to dismantle it in April. She was sleeping in a tiny trailer parked in front of the house with a fire pit on the other side. For the past three days, I had been spending most of my time at Betty’s, watching her host parties around the fire pit, where she provided firewood and hot dogs. More regularly, she fixed dinner for guests and gave away alcohol, especially to Dennis. At 59, Dennis was not getting a social-security disability check despite an accident in a ranch that broke his back and made physical labor impossible. He was living on \$150 of food stamps and was calling himself “the most unwanted man in America.” He had to get by with what people were willing to give him until he was old enough to receive a social-security check. “Even this beer is coming from Betty!”

Figure 4. Betty's camp during an afternoon of December



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Yet Betty's finances were always on the edge. This 61-year-old woman was getting a social-security disability check and was always lacking a few hundred dollars every month. Indeed, even those who had worked all their lives were not necessarily destined for comfortable days of leisure (Frayssé 2015), so a lot of these snowbirds living in the desert around Quartzsite during the winter have to improvise. Betty was making wool dolls that she was selling for between \$80 and \$150, and she told me she sold about two of them every month. These days, she was making a doll for Big Harry that she had to finish quickly. He had already paid half the cost a long time ago, which was embarrassing Betty, and she needed the other half to pay her phone bill to avoid being cut off.

Looking at the bottle of amaretto standing on the table, Guppy asked: "Hey Betty, can I get a drink of your amaretto?" She grumbled and said: "I know you guys! You come asking a li'l bit of a drink and I end up with an empty bottle!" She stood up and went to her car to get another bottle of alcohol to give to Guppy and Dennis in order to preserve her precious amaretto. Guppy pulled out and counted some bills from his pocket. When Betty came back, Guppy handed her everything he had: "Here Betty, I'd like to put eight dollars in the donation box." Betty took all the bills without saying a word.

Figure 5. “Here Betty, I’d like to put eight dollars in the donation box”



© David Frati, December 2016.

At Mary’s camp

The week after, Guppy was telling me about his previous day: Mary had spent a few days for Christmas at her sister’s in Los Angeles and her car broke down on the way back to Quartzsite. She had called Howard to pick her up. Guppy had gone with him to give him company during the three-hour ride. James, another member of this group of friends, lent money for the gas.

Later, while we were all sitting around the fire in front of Mary’s tent, Howard told us that his car had broken down as well. Mary could not stop saying how sorry she was, lamenting that it would not have happened if Howard had not come to pick her up the day before. But he did not hold her responsible. Betty invited Howard to let Dennis, a former mechanic, look at the car, but Howard did not want to and said he would rather send the car to a garage in town for \$400. Howard’s concern was the lack of tools here in the desert.

Mary seemed concerned about the money and asked Howard several times if he had the four hundred dollars to spend, and he always answered yes. Later, Mary told me she was embarrassed that Howard would not share the bill with her, and she could not understand how it was possible that Howard had such money. Then, Dennis told me how insulted he felt about Howard not letting him take a look at the car: how was it possible he would rather spend money in town than handle this problem together, as they always do?

Regarding the gift, the group, and the place

During an interview, I asked Betty if the only *raison d’être* of her doll business was to cover all the money she spent on alcohol for Dennis and Guppy. To this practical question, she gave me a practical answer: Dennis was helping with dishes, shopping, and household tasks she could not do

by herself. Both of them seemed to have an interest in this gift-giving relationship, even if neither would have framed it as such. Betty and Dennis seemed to enjoy a sincere friendship. Moreover, Betty told me she was not keeping any track of how much she was giving and receiving: “I don’t like to cook just for myself and... I like to entertain people.” However, goods and favors given, received, and reciprocated between Betty and Guppy were clearly not evenly balanced as they could be with Dennis. Guppy seemed to lack a reciprocation that seemed to be a “duty” (Caillé 2000). Even without being material and quantifiable, this strong lack of reciprocation often led to arguments between Betty and Guppy, without actually compromising their friendship. Speaking of the eight dollars he had given her, she replied, “Ha! He wanted me to buy some liquor, I’m sure! But... eight bucks doesn’t really cover what I’d buy for liquor!” However, Betty dismissed these practical considerations: “I don’t count... I kinda feel like it comes back around, I don’t usually get taken... I do get taken advantage [of] sometimes but I get it back. It comes back to me. There’re always people helping me out.”

When she finally finished the doll for Big Harry and gave it to him, he took it and paid the second half without saying a word. Once again, Big Harry broke the give–receive–reciprocate process. He hurt Betty’s feeling by transforming this exchange into a simple commercial trade, despite the fact that it had been more significant to Betty. The real value of a good in the gift economy may exist in the link it maintains between two people (Caillé 2005).

In these desert areas around Quartzsite where snowbirds gather and make camps every winter, money seems mainly to come from elsewhere—another place and another time. It may be coming from a social-security check or from wages saved up during the summer.³ These sources of income may be extremely different from one retiree to another. It seems that the gift economy not only allows them to take care of each other and provide a decent living to everybody, despite the financial and material difficulties of everyday life, but also to perceive themselves as a group living together in the desert. I have been able to observe this in both everyday life and important gatherings in North La Posas’s most important camps such as the Potluck & Karaoke Camp and the Bible Study Camp, where gift-based parties are very important for the group’s social life: one gives, receives, and reciprocates not only goods but also personal involvement by singing, dancing, or praying. Mary summarized these relationships in two short sentences: “We’re a community here. We like to look after each other.” For these desert snowbirds, the gift economy has both a material and a social purpose: more than just helping each other by giving food, cigarettes, and alcohol, it affects every aspect of their social interactions. Observing a gift economy in these circumstances helps illuminate the significance of places—even temporary settlements—in social organization.

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³ A third of the 18 retired people I interviewed had a job during the summer.

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