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Death Valley Roots  
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U.S. Borax is deeply rooted in California's Death Valley, where teams of 20 mules once hauled great wagon loads of borate ore across 165 miles (265 kilometers) of desert. The company began mining borates – amazingly useful minerals based on the element boron – in Death Valley in 1882.



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The Death Valley region contains almost half of the known borate ore in North America, thanks to the same tectonic forces that produce California's infamous earthquakes. Death Valley was created millions of years ago as the Pacific plate of the Earth's crust began sliding inexorably past the North American plate. Volcanoes erupted along the boundary of those two plates, which we now call the San Andreas Fault, and borates crystallized in lakes fed by volcanic hot springs. When the lakes dried up, they left behind great deposits of borate.

Most people associate borax with a powder that cleans just about everything from dirty clothes to bathtub rings. Borate minerals are still used in soaps and detergents, but they're also key ingredients for products as diverse as wood preservatives, fiberglass, ceramics and nutrients that increase crop yields.

In the early days, borate ore sat right on the surface of Death Valley's dry lakebed. All the miners had to do was shovel it up, dissolve the ore in boiling water, decant the clear liquid into another tank and wait for morning to find pure borax crystallized on the bottom of the tank. When the surface ores began running out, however, miners had to go underground.

Pacific Coast Borax, a predecessor of U.S. Borax, began underground mining on the edge of Death Valley in 1907 at the Lila C Mine, which grew to more than 2,000 feet (600 meters) at depths of up to 300 feet (90 meters). The company mined borates in several mines in Death Valley until 1927, when an enormous deposit was discovered at what's now Boron, California.

During those heady days around the turn of the century, Stephen Mather joined Pacific Coast Borax and quickly became director of advertising. Among many innovations, he introduced the famed Twenty Mule Team brand. Mather retired at age 37 and began traveling around the American West. Appalled by conditions at national parks of the time, he wrote a scathing letter to U.S. Interior Secretary Franklin Lane, describing them as a "federal disgrace." Lane suggested that Mather come to Washington and run the parks himself.

Mather did just that in 1916, becoming the first director of the new National Park Service and beginning a process that led to Death Valley being declared a National Monument in 1933. Thus did a graduate of the borax business become the father of America's national parks system.

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