

FESTIVAL IGNITES CREATIVE SPIRIT

Every summer, Leroy Fletcher makes the trek to Nevada's Black Rock Desert.

The Empire, Nev., native rides his rusty gray bicycle across the desert floor. Three white ferrets peer out from a carrier perched on the bike's handlebars.

With his sun-weathered face and cowboy hat, Fletcher looks like he could be out panning for gold.

Instead, Fletcher was one of 28,000 people who migrated to the Nevada Desert to see a 50-foot-tall wooden icon burnt to the ground in a festival called Burning Man.

The festival ran from Aug. 25 to Sept. 3.

Fletcher has attended the event for the past eight years and is now a staff member with the Burning Man project.

Fletcher can't easily describe the event. When asked to, he simply smiles, rubs the ears of one of the ferrets and looks to the sky.

"I don't know ... I don't know what Burning Man is, but whatever it's about, it's certainly something special."

The Burning Man tradition began in 1986 when California resident Larry Harvey organized a group of friends at San Francisco's Baker Beach.

What started 14 years ago as a small annual party has become an international event, held every August in the Black Rock Desert north of Reno, Nev.

University of Nebraska-Lincoln senior English major Mark Baldrige agrees the festival is special. He attended Burning Man in 1998 and made a second trip in 2000.

"Instant Disneyland, Brigadoon on crystal meth, a doomed post-apocalyptic party that you stagger home from with dust in your hair," Baldrige said.

For the members of the temporary community, the event is a place where they come to view art, to create art and to see the namesake of the festival go up into flames.

Burning Man is an enigmatic event, a cultural phenomenon that does not advertise or have corporate sponsors. It is a gathering proliferated by word of mouth and the power of the Internet.

Some describe it as a cult; others say it's a carnival. The various radio stations that spring up within the experimental city describe the festival as "everything that Woodstock wishes it could be."

The focal point of the event—the man—towers 50 feet above the barren desert floor, a wooden effigy standing upon a platform of plywood and straw bales.

For one week this wooden structure exists as a vertical landmark for the residents of Black Rock City. The man is the center of the encampment and art installations that radiate around him.

In preparation for the "burn," Harvey and his group spend months organizing the infrastructure of this temporary village.

The building project resembles a real-life version of the computer game "Sim City," where the player builds a simulated city from scratch. The Black Rock City engineers design an ephemeral city, complete with roads, a power grid and enough Port-a-Potties to accommodate 28,000 incoming residents.

This is a community for artists and musicians—a village for self-proclaimed weirdos and eccentrics, a place where the constraints of society are set aside.

At Burning Man, creativity and invention are encouraged. Costumes replace corporate dress codes, and decorated golf carts are more common than SUVs. Traffic jams do not exist in Black Rock City, but large living rooms on wheels do.

One such structure, resembling a parade float, creeps slowly past the assembled tents and RVs.

The large, motorized vehicle with a disco ball, barstools and overstuffed couches drives lazily past the fire dancers, the stilt walkers playing soccer and makes a left turn at the fire breathing dragon.

Here the mobile lounge makes a stop, picks up a rider, hands out a drink and wheels itself across the alkali basin moving slowly toward the man.



A 50-foot-tall wooden form of a man burns while a crowd of 28,000 looks on. The bonfire was the culmination of the weeklong celebration known as Burning Man.



LEFT: A Burning Man participant dishes food from a can while standing in front of one of the many "art cars" seen in Black Rock City.



FAR LEFT: A winged bicyclist makes a stop while peddling across the open desert. Bicycles were the most popular form of transportation within the Burning Man community.

LEFT: UNL senior English major Mark Baldrige sets up camp in Black Rock City at the intersection of the roads "6 o'clock" and "Sex Drive." Each year the streets of the temporary city are laid out according to a particular theme. This year's theme was "the body," which gave rise to street names such as "Gut Alley" and "Head Way." Baldrige made his first trip to the event in 1998 and returned again this August to participate in the seven-day art event.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY SHARON KOLBET