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MARY ELLEN GLASS

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Nevada's Census Taker: A Vignette

MARY ELLEN GLASS

Every 10 years, according to the command of the United States Constitution, the people of the United States are counted and certain vital information is gathered. The work is done by paid workers who are put on temporary payroll. When the information is marked on printed forms prepared by the Bureau of the Census, then the statisticians of the bureau make the accounting, submitting their information in a series of heavy, bound volumes. The work of the individual census taker was filed, and kept in vaults of confidential material for 80 years. At the end of the 80-year period, the census reports became available for perusal and research. The material for the vignette that follows was gathered from these 80-, 90-, and 100-year-old files of the census. The notebooks are on microfilm at the University of Nevada Library. The law has recently been changed so that further censuses will no longer be available.

The writer of this vignette gathered the information for the piece in the course of research for a master's thesis on German immigration, which explains the preponderance of German names in the article. The information in the article, however, is a sort of byproduct of the research, and represents an imaginative attempt to reconstruct the substance of methodology in census enumeration in frontier Nevada.

It is sometimes remarked that there is a scarcity of historical material to reconstruct the past in Nevada. While it is true that not a great deal has been written about the State, it is also fair to say that not every source has been fully used. One of the tools of the researcher in a reconstruction of Nevada's history should be the notebooks and compilations of the United States Census enumerator. This representative of bureaucracy on the frontier was certainly as interesting as many of the persons he counted, and the document he left allows researchers to give him some substance.

In every settlement and every canyon and every gully, the census taker could be found in 1860, 1870, and 1880, doing his assigned chore with varying degrees of efficiency and enthusiasm; finally returning his report to Washington in a form that reflected his other qualities. Then Washington's own bureaucrats began their job of trying to make the census a document of information. Some of the work was done, like the census taker's, with efficiency and enthusiasm; some of it was downright amusing in its warping and distortion.

The typical census enumerator was a man of under 30 years of age. His handwriting was pre-Spencerian, in a style popular in the middle of the 19th century when he would have attended school, or "learned his letters." He had very little schooling, however, and could hardly spell the words he needed to make the census document while visiting the people of Nevada. One such word was "Germany," which he spelled "jermany," or simply, "ger." Other words were "Ioway" or "Kentuck" and "chinee." The enumerator was probably active in politically important circles in his locality, since the census taker's job was a patronage "plum." He was willing to do small chores and had leisure for jobs that would bring him extra cash in a territory where times were often uncertain. As a product of his age and time, the census enumerator had Victorian attitudes on various social topics, believing, for example, that the value of real or personal property a man owned was his own business, in spite of the interest held in such matters by the Bureau of the Census. Beyond his Victorian attitudes the enumerator was unhesitating in making value judgments about the people he met, probably garrulous, somewhat lazy, and careless with his work to a degree that seems incredible today.*

According to his instructions, the census taker of 1860 and 1870 was to ask, and write in space provided on a printed form: the name, sex,

*This is actually a composite of several persons. In every county of the State, U.S. marshals and their deputies took the census. The fact that it is a composite, however, does not destroy the image of uniformity of performance in taking the enumeration.

age, occupation, value of real estate, value of personal estate, and nativity of each person he interviewed. He was to inquire whether males over 21 years of age were citizens, and whether adults could read and write. If there were children in a domicile, the enumerator was to ask whether they had been in school during the year, and for how many months. Finally, he was to ascertain whether any person was blind, deaf, or idiotic. Altogether, one might think, a job that ought not to be difficult, and might prove indeed rather entertaining.

The census taker of 1860 was handicapped by the fact that the territory was raw, and communication was difficult, and travel often hampered on the primitive roads of the day. Thus the document he left was somewhat sketchy, but still interesting. Nearly all the settlement in what would become Nevada was clustered, as might be expected, around Virginia City where the embryo mining strikes were being explored, and around Carson Valley where the first towns were built. There was a company of soldiers at Fort Churchill and another at Fort Ruby, but those places must have been lonely outposts at best. In Carson Valley, there was a fair number of farmers, many of them Germans newly arrived to build what would become Nevada's German center. Some of the farmers enumerated by the census taker that year included Frederick Frevert, Henry Luhman, and Fred Dresler [*sic*]. Somehow the census taker missed the Dangberg household, for the Dangberg name did not appear that year. In Carson City's German population, the enumerator found Jacob Klein and his partners busy at their work of brewing, and J. Rosenstock, who was listed as a "merchant." Across the valley again at Genoa, the enumerator found Lawrence Frey, a farmer, and Henry Epstine, a clerk, who would become Douglas County's Assemblyman in the first State Legislature. On the Comstock, times were busy and confused, and the census taker missed another of Nevada's interesting pioneers, "Dutch Nick" Ambrosia, first Justice of the Peace of Carson County, who built the first building at Gold Hill adjoining the property that would later belong to Sandy and Ellen Bowers.

Between 1860 and 1870, the history of Nevada was marked by change from the primitive status of 1860. The State was made a territory, and then admitted to statehood in 1864. The boundaries Nevada now enjoys were attained in 1867 after a series of accretions of land. However, by 1870, the census taker had changed neither his methods nor his attitudes, although he left a more complete record—if only because there were more people around! In that year, the miners of the Comstock were suffering a recession. The work on the lower levels was not going well; the stockholders of the larger mines were letting their shares go for assessments; and some of the more enterprising (or

hungry) miners packed their shovels and their extra shirts to leave for Pioche, Eureka, or Hamilton, which was then having its best year. As he walked from one house to another in Virginia City, the census enumerator tried at first to carry out his assigned task, but then his attitudes intruded. He would remember for a time to ask (or guess) the amount of real or personal estate owned by the head of the family or the owner of the business. Then someone reminded him that such things were a man's own business, and the bureaucrat quit asking. He decided next that perhaps if he asked the first person on a street the questions involving the highly personal financial information, and he received the information, then all of the people on the same street could be assigned roughly the same figure. When he came to John Piper though, the enumerator was either not asking or forgot in the excitement of interviewing the famous theater owner, and left a blank in the column where financial information was required. Turning a corner, the visitor went from house to house making the record, and found some 40 or 50 Mexican and South American women doing something he called "keeping house." A similar group of Chinese women on another street were "harlots," "prostitutes," or "prostitutes of the lowest order," as were several white women—native and immigrant.

The census taker became confused, and turned the same corner twice. Not realizing that he had visited several people before, he simply enumerated them again. Indeed, he became so confused that the first time he visited Anna Baker and three small girls, he wrote for the record that she was a "harlot." The second time he saw Mrs. Baker, he found that she was married to a German saloon keeper, and that she was baby-sitting with one of the children for another saloon keeper. The enumerator went twice to the Schoeneman family, or perhaps once to their home and once to their gunshop, thus the gunsmith and his wife, both from Germany, and their 4-year-old daughter, born in Nevada, appear twice in the 1870 census. So also do the Steffans: the father a butcher from Hesse Darmstadt, the mother from Bavaria, and three young children. As he walked along the Comstock streets, the inquirer wearied of asking whether the men were citizens, finally marking all males citizens without asking. In the business district, perhaps partaking of the refreshments offered, he distinguished for the record in some way that is undiscoverable from the information given between and among these terms: "saloon keeper," "bar keeper," "liquor merchant," "keeps saloon," and "bar tender." Similarly, he was able to find in the same domicile: a "prostitute," a "prostitute of the lowest order," and a woman "keeping house." Like his predecessor of 1860, the enumerator on the Comstock missed several persons, including Phillip Deidesheimer,

the inventor of the square-set mining timber system. Nevertheless, he established for the record that the Nobel Prize Winner, Albert Michelson, and his talented brothers and sisters were present in Virginia City in 1870.

Traveling over the mountain to Carson City, and through Washoe City to Reno, the enumerator visited both Kitzmeyer's harness shop and Platt's clothing store in the capital city. He also found some Chinese "prostitutes," and some German "hurdies."* At Washoe City, he visited the Andrew Sauer family with their five young children, and found the little town busy and prosperous. Arriving in Reno, the census taker indicated that by 1870 the Beckers had established a saloon, the Menkes a grocery store, and that Dr. Bergman, then 32 years old, was ministering to the health needs of the "biggest little city." One of the last stops in Washoe County was outside Reno, where the enumerator visited Joseph Frey, his wife Louisa, and six small children.

The mining camps in the eastern part of Nevada were busy places in 1870. At Treasure City in White Pine County, the enumerator discovered a very large "Chinatown," using several pages of his notebook to mark the names of the miners, their wives, and the inevitable women "keeping house." Shermantown, too, was a busy place that year, while at its sister city of Hamilton, young Reinhold Sadler worked as a grocer, and Louis Zadow as a butcher. The Tobias family, selling clothing to the miners of Hamilton, interested the census taker enough to count them twice; Michael and Betsy Tobias had four teenaged children, all born in England, and a daughter born in California. Also at Hamilton, the enumerator found a number of Mexican and South American women, as well as German, French, and Irish girls, happily "keeping house." Their Chinese sisters were doing the same.

If the bureaucrat had been interested in migration patterns, he might have noticed, as he went from one community to another in the young State of Nevada, that there were four or so centers of population containing clusters of German farmers. In Paradise Valley of Humboldt County, for example, William Stock had arrived some 4 years earlier. By 1866, Stock had already lived a full and colorful life, and was ready for the farmer's existence. In 1870 there were 17 Germans around his ranch, and by 1880 there were twice that number, most of whom worked for, or were related to, Stock. In Mason Valley, then Esmeralda County, there were 43 German farmers. The Mason Valley Germans included Chris Hernleben, who was known as "Uncle Chris" by the residents of

*The words "hurdy," "hurdy gurdy," "hurdy dancer," or "hurdy girl," referring to women, appear fairly often through the enumeration. It is impossible to determine whether the census taker meant that these were dancers or prostitutes. The etymological derivation of "hurdy" indicates "buttocks."

the Valley and nearby Yerington; and Adam Herbold (or Herbolt). The Herbold son, John Adam, was the first white child born in Mason Valley. Another German community in the making might have been seen in Churchill County, where the Somer (or Summer) family settled. By 1880 there were clustered around the Somer ranch at Stillwater some 16 Germans: the 4 Somers (who would by then be 7), and 12 more. One of the Churchill County Germans was a stockraiser, Charles Kaiser. Kaiser was a political refugee who became Churchill County's state Senator in 1878. A fourth community of German farmers, larger and more permanent than the other three, could be seen in its beginnings in Douglas County around Nevada's first town, Genoa.

When the representative of United States bureaucracy arrived in Carson Valley on a June day in 1870, he found at least four German farmers who had been there 10 years before. Furthermore, 20 of the farmers resident in the valley in 1870 would still be there 10 years hence. In 1870 some of the Germans enumerated by the census taker were: two families of Freverts, Fred Banning, William Salge, Fred Dressler, several families of Dangbergs, Fred Furth, and the hotel keeper Samuel Rice. It was a bad day for hay fever when the visitor arrived; all the Springmeyers were written on the record as "Sprigmeyer," two of them twice; while the Neddenrieps appeared variously as Nedinrig and Neddenrif. The census taker was defeated by the Chinese names in Douglas County's population, and wrote only "Chine man" or "Chine woman." The heat of the day spoiled his notes somewhat, too, for most of the pages of the book are smeared and blurred.

Having finished his chores, the enumerator sent his notebooks off to Washington, probably heaving sighs of relief. When the statisticians received the records, there were several important decisions to make, and questions to answer including: How can we list the members of the world's oldest profession? The United States Census surely cannot be a pornographic document! Finally, someone hit upon a solution that seems peculiar on first reading, but more fitting on second thought. All the "prostitutes," "courtesans," "harlots," and "prostitutes of the lowest order" appear in the 1870 census compiled statistics as "cotton and woolen mill operatives." The hundreds of women "keeping house" are lost in the statistical compilation.

By 1880 the State of Nevada was suffering a depression from which it would not recover until the great mining strikes were made at Tonopah and Goldfield. There were short-lived flurries of excitement at Virginia City, but the great silver lode never regained its prominence of the middle 1870's. Hamilton had only 3 years of mineral production in excess of $1 million in the early days. Even the exciting camp at Eureka, still active in 1880, was beginning to show signs of declining.

Nevertheless, the state's population increased over the decade, and the census taker was again on the land during the summer of 1880.

In form, the census of 1880 was not significantly different from that of 1870. The enumerator was expected to fill spaces with information about each person's name, age, sex, marital status, occupation, nativity, nativity of parents, literacy, physical disabilities, educational experience of children, and number of months employment during the year. The Bureau of the Census decided that year to forego the financial information; apparently Nevada's experience was not unique. The census taker was not different in 1880 from his predecessor of the decade before, nor was he more careful, although he occasionally took his instructions very literally. For example, in the space asking whether a person were ill or incapacitated at the time of the census visit, it was not unusual for the enumerator to mark "constipated," or "bilious." When the bureaucrat visited a hospital, he was often painstaking in his descriptions of illnesses encountered. In Storey County, he discovered a shoemaker who had lost his feet, a miner who was drunk, a brick mason with syphilis, and another miner who suffered from "debility."

The government representative found a very large immigrant population at Virginia City in 1880, and recorded substantial groups of Irish, English, Swiss, Italians, and Germans along with native Americans. Most of these were, as might be expected, miners or in occupation groups that served the mining profession. The typical Irish lady (often a widow), for example, kept a rooming house; while a typical German catered to creature comfort by operating a brewery, saloon, restaurant, or other food or service establishment. The census taker visited as many of these people as he could, including Mr. Young, the harnessmaker, twice. He finally found Phillip Deidesheimer, who wrote his own hard-to-spell name in the notebook and gave his occupation as "mine superintendent." At least one person enumerated on the Comstock in 1880 would never appear again on a census record; Augustus Ash, the U.S. marshal, shot himself 2 years later in a fit of depression over losses in mining investment. Among those who had better staying power were Richard Herz, a watchmaker; and several families of Rauhuts.

Down the canyon and to Carson City, the census taker meandered, interviewing or ignoring people as the mood took him. In Carson City, he became confused about his instructions again, marking people who had worked all year as unemployed for 12 months. He visited the Olcovich store, the Tobriner tobacco shop, and Cohn's dry goods store, where he noted that Morris Cohn and his wife had two young daughters—Bertha and Felice. The enumerator visited Leopold Stern, the constable, and his large family, and turned toward Douglas County,

but not before making one more stop. At the last stop he found 17 women doing what he called "keeping house;" the only man in the domicile was a sailor, who must have been happy indeed.

In Douglas County, the group of German farmers had increased again, and had these new members: Henningsen, Lampe, Hussman, Winkelman, Heitman, Rabe, Stodick [*sic*], and Allerman. A side trip to Glenbrook acquainted the census taker with the Pomin family who would soon be operating the good ship *Tahoe*. The enumerator made the researcher's job difficult; having misplaced his pen, he wrote the record with a hard pencil. The government representative found Germans in Washoe County, too, but at that point his limited literacy caused him to color the record by spelling it "jermany." Some of the "jermans" visited in Reno were at Hammersmith's barber shop, Ruhe's butcher shop, and Barnett's shoe store.

Crossing the State, the visitor arrived in Eureka County. There he marked every adult in New Town as illiterate, and counted Jacob Ketchel, the butcher, twice. He marked every adult in the town of Eureka as having been unemployed for many months, including Miss Mau, the teacher, whom he marked as unemployed for 10 months. Several white women alone were called "courtesans," or marked "at home;" their Chinese counterparts were "prostitutes."

Moving on to Elko County that summer day in 1880, the census taker might have noticed that, thanks to the combined activity of the Central Pacific Railroad and a number of enterprising miners and farmers, there were several thriving centers of population. In a hand somewhat more legible than he had used in some other counties, the visitor recorded a troop of soldiers at Fort Halleck, the hotel keeper at the Garrecht resort in Elko, and the owners of both Reinhart's and Rosenthall's stores in the same town. Then he interviewed Sheriff Johnson at Tuscarora, and moved on to Wells. At Wells, the enumerator wrote the names of Morris Badt, a general merchandise dealer and sometime banker; and J. H. Taber, a stockraiser at the same place.

Returning across the State, the enumerator gave a confusing performance in Nye County. There he marked the Sampter family at Belmont "Sumpter;" and at Elsworth [*sic*] he counted the Gooding and Merton families twice. This was quite a feat in regard to the Goodings—they had seven children. When the visitor reached Esmeralda County, he was fully back to his old ways, using a leaky pen and a semiliterate hand to record the miners in the dry, dusty little town of Candelaria (population, 900).

Finally, having circled and crossed the State as he had in the two previous decades, the bureaucrat bundled up his notebooks and sent them off again for compilation at the nation's capital. And again the

statisticians made another vain attempt to erase those ubiquitous symbols of frontier America, giving an accounting of all occupation groups except the dozens of "courtesans," "prostitutes," and "hurdy girls."

One must feel a twinge of sympathy for government statisticians in their attempt to make something meaningful from the huge mounds of information, misinformation, and noninformation as it was gathered by the western census taker. What thoughts may have drifted through the statistician's head at such times one can only guess, and hope that they were kind and understanding thoughts. Nevada's experience with her census takers was not unusual; every western state had similar problems.

The difficulties one encounters in exploring the nearly century-old notebooks of the census taker are compensated by the rewards of vicarious enjoyment of bygone days. The exercise requires imagination and time, but the pleasure truly transcends eyestrain and occasional frustration.

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