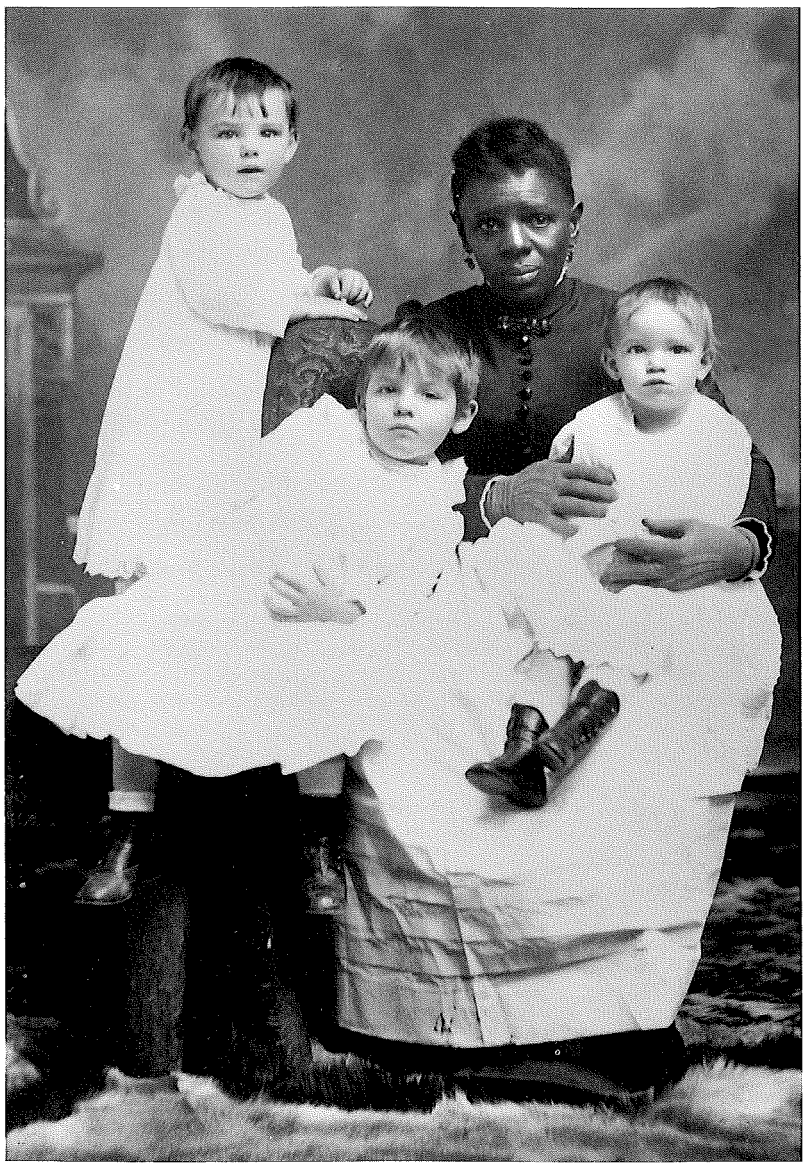
Nevada
Historical Society Quarterly



WINTER 1992

NEVADA HISTORICAL SOCIETY QUARTERLY

The *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* solicits contributions of scholarly or popular interest dealing with the following subjects: the general (e.g., the political, social, economic, constitutional) or the natural history of Nevada and the Great Basin; the literature, languages, anthropology, and archaeology of these areas; reprints of historic documents; reviews and essays concerning the historical literature of Nevada, the Great Basin, and the West.

Prospective authors should send their work to The Editor, *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 1650 N. Virginia St., Reno, Nevada 89503. Papers should be typed double-spaced and sent in duplicate. All manuscripts, whether articles, edited documents, or essays, should conform with the most recent edition of the University of Chicago Press *Manual of Style*. Footnotes should be typed double-spaced on separate pages and numbered consecutively. Correspondence concerning articles and essays is welcomed, and should be addressed to The Editor.

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Nevada
Historical Society Quarterly

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Front Cover: The photo is labeled simply "Lieut. Ducat's Children," with no mention of the woman pictured. Many black women in nineteenth-century Nevada worked as nannies and domestics. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

Book Reviews

DRUNKS, FOOLS, AND LUNATICS
History and Folklore of the Early Comstock

Ronald M. James

The 1859 discovery of gold and silver in the area now known as the Comstock Lode is one of the more colorful stories in western history. The tale is vividly presented in *The Big Bonanza* (1876) by William Wright, under the pen name Dan DeQuille, and *Comstock Mining and Miners* (1883) by Eliot Lord, as well as in works by later historians.[1] These authors employ characters as memorable as any found in finely crafted drama: Drunken James "Old Virginny" Finney, lazy and insane Henry Tompkins Paige "Pancake" Comstock, and many of their colleagues occupy permanent places in the lore of Nevada. They are depicted as bumbling fools and fast-talking charlatans who, stumbling upon one of the richest mineral deposits in the world, let it slip through their fingers for meager rewards.

A careful examination of the earliest sources indicates, however, that the standard account needs reassessment. The placer miners who explored and exploited Gold Canyon before the strike were following a reasonable and predictable pattern of mining. Unfortunately for their reputations, their strategies were not easily understood by the hard-rock quartz-mining community that replaced them. An aura of folklore quickly enveloped the earlier period, transforming its history into a Wild West story. By sorting out the legendary elements from those grounded in reality, it is possible to arrive at a different view of the history of the Gold Canyon area during the 1850s and to gain insight into the society that participated in the rewriting of its own past. This different view suggests that the original discoverers of the big lode were not the ne'er do well failures so often depicted, but rather shrewd participators in one of the West's great mineral discoveries.

Three types of sources regarding this period of Comstock history are available, each requiring criticism. The earliest records consist of contemporary newspaper accounts and mining claim records. Both are problematic, the former because newspapers are seldom flawless and the latter because the early miners did not

Ronald M. James, state historic preservation officer for the state of Nevada, is a frequent contributor to this journal. He and Elizabeth Raymond of the UNR History Department have begun a compilation of essays on the women of the Comstock.

always produce accurate records of their claims. In addition, Henry DeGroot's overview of the Comstock, published in Kelly's 1862 directory for the Nevada Territory, provides a nearly contemporaneous firsthand account.[2] The second group contains histories of the Comstock, including those by Wright and Lord. Written during the nineteenth century, these works contain firsthand recollections of early events or eyewitness interviews, and often include reliable sequences of events based on documents, some of which are no longer extant. By the 1870s, however, historians were beginning to characterize the earliest period in terms more colorful than accurate. The third group of sources comprises histories written in the twentieth century. These include firsthand accounts of life on the Comstock, usually after 1870, and later works by trained historians. For the earliest period of the Comstock, these later publications generally rely on the second group of sources. Thus, the works of Wright and especially Lord have come to represent the definitive histories.

Historical Overview

In the early 1850s a small colony of would-be miners began to scour the hills of what is now called the Virginia Range, running parallel to the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada. Flakes of California gold had been found in a broad north-south swath on the western side of the Sierra, and conventional wisdom maintained that these deposits resulted from the disintegrating fringe of the Mother Lode, the hypothesized golden core of the mountain range. It seemed reasonable that the other side of the Sierra might also bear the eroded residue of this mythical miraculous deposit.

As early as 1850, Mormon settlers along the eastern Sierra were reputed to have discovered placer gold, dust left in alluvial sands, but the church hierarchy of the Latter-day Saints discouraged mining.[3] Gold rushes inspired uncontrollable human tidal waves that might dilute Mormon society. The Saints had, after all, come to the Great Basin to establish the State of Deseret, a utopia populated only by the faithful.

No church prohibitions could effectively discourage outsiders, however. Pursuing the logic of the Mother Lode, prospectors in 1851 slowly worked their way up from the Carson River. They soon found what Mormons had possibly discovered a year or two before, that the sands, deposited over the millennia by occasional flooding from Sun Mountain above [present-day Mount Davidson], contained specks of gold, or "color," as they called it. At the foot of ranges and ravines, where water could collect, settlers found rare oases, which gave the hope of agriculture. But it was the higher elevations, where neither soil nor flora hid the bones of the land, that beckoned the early prospectors. During the 1850s, these explorers searched the eastern slope of the Sierra and the ranges immediately to the east. A few promising deposits of gold-bearing sands provided some encouragement and income, but throughout most of the decade, there was

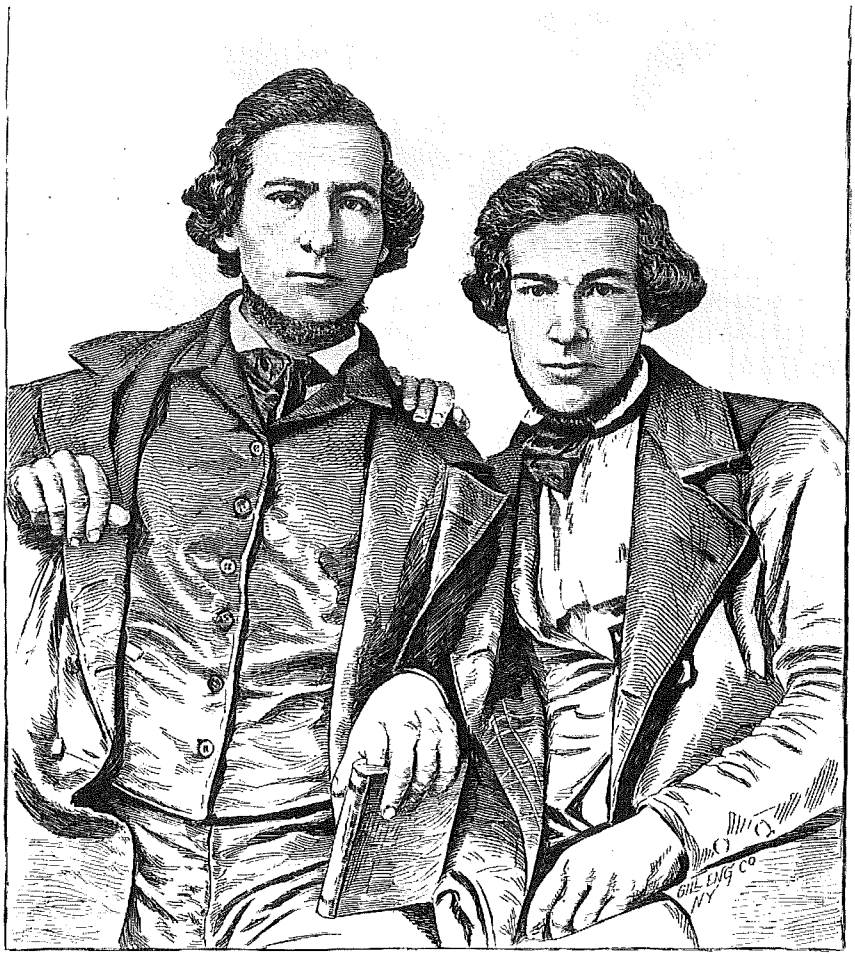
no reason to favor one ravine over another. Still, the discoveries gave hope to those who believed in an eastern counterpart to the California gold country. The *Territorial Enterprise* observed:

> A great number of very rich quartz specimens have been found in Gold Canyon and vicinity [present-day Virginia Range], gold is known to exist in considerable quantities *throughout the entire range of hills on the east of the chain of valleys skirting the Sierras* from Walker's River [south of the Virginia Range] to Pyramid Lake [north of the Virginia Range], and it is reasonable to conclude that there must exist also in those hills a vast amount of gold-bearing quartz which will at no very remote period be a source of great profit to the capitalist and the miner, and be one of the chief sources of wealth to our country (emphasis added).[4]

The California experience had shaped expectations in the Great Basin. Miners looked for placer gold and assumed that deposits were widespread, as they were in the multitude of California valleys and stream beds.[5] And as they had on the other side of the Sierra, these miners used simple methods to extract the gold, relying on the weight of the mineral to cause it to settle lower than worthless sand. Most often, they used rockers or long toms, wooden troughs with small ridges at the bottom, in which gold-bearing sand was rocked and washed until the gold settled out and the sand flowed away. When water was scarce, the miners used mercury, which attracted the gold, but that method was more costly. Groups of miners thus worked up and down the ravines, wherever likely-looking sands had accumulated, just as they had in California. Wealth would be cumulative, not concentrated, and strikes would emphasize the promise of the entire region, not of specific locations.

A few realized other possibilities. Much has been made of Hosea and Ethan Allan Grosh, who reputedly identified a ledge of silver between 1853 and 1857. A succession of tragedies prevented the brothers from revealing or developing their discovery. On August 19, 1857, Hosea struck his foot with a pick and died of blood poisoning within a few weeks. Later that year, Ethan Allan stumbled into a mountain blizzard while crossing the Sierra and died of exposure.[6] The brothers figure prominently in local folklore because their plight underscores the dangerous, chancy nature of early prospecting, and, of course, it makes a good story. The anecdote also suggests that some were not limited by the idea of the golden Mother Lode and sought instead other mineral possibilities in the austere mountains of the Great Basin. Nevertheless, for most in the 1850s, the canyons of the eastern slope of the Sierra provided an opportunity to eke out a modest living from placer gold, while continuing a search for more promising sands.

Records of the early community in Gold Canyon and the vicinity of Sun Mountain, although rare and suspect, offer some information. A continuing mining camp was established in Gold Canyon by the early 1850s, but it was largely abandoned each summer for lack of water needed to work the sands. The mining itself was "monotonous and colorless," according to Lord, who inter-



The Grosh brothers, Hosea B. on the left and E. Allen on the right. They apparently discovered silver in the area of the Comstock Lode in the mid-1850s, but died tragically before they could develop their find. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

viewed many of the participants. During the summer, miners' crude dwellings made of stones, sticks, and brush dotted the landscape near promising diggings. In winter, the miners retreated to abodes only slightly better constructed of stone, mud plaster, canvas, and boards. Window glass was an unobtainable luxury. Chimneys were rare. Holes in the roof and throughout were the standard means of getting rid of smoke.[7]

Entrepreneurs built a crude station house at the foot of Gold Canyon during the winter of 1853–54, and soon afterward added a combination store, saloon, and bowling alley further up the ravine. These facilities provided local miners with provisions, liquor, clothes, and entertainment. Fresh meat assuaged the drudgery, and so miners always welcomed a successful hunt or local ranchers

who would on occasion "drive a cow or calf up the cañon, slaughter the animal at some convenient point and sell portions as required, or roast the whole by a barbeque."[8] Wright maintained that "the people . . . though not numerous, were jovial. They were fond of amusements of all kinds. Nearly every Saturday night a 'grand ball' was given at 'Dutch Nick's' saloon."[9]

Many Mexicans numbered among the early miners. Only a few years before, the entire region was part of Mexico. Treaties may have placed land under the control of the United States government, but people with Hispanic traditions continued to live there. As did Anglo prospectors, Mexicans found reason to cross the Sierra into the Great Basin. In addition, Chinese laborers and miners worked in the area of Gold Canyon. Together with the native American Paiutes, these groups early formed an international society in the eastern Sierra.[10]

A crisis occurred in the mining community in 1857. Both earnings and the number of miners had declined since 1855. Nearly two hundred men had depleted the richest sands, with no new discoveries to take their place. And the miners now faced drought, endemic throughout the West. Without water, it was nearly impossible to work the gold-bearing sands. Earnings dropped dramatically (Table 1); 1857 was a bad year and 1858 showed no improvement. Many left for more promising possibilities.

It was clear that the mining district would fail without development of a more reliable supply of water. The remaining miners organized, created rules for what they called the Columbia Quartz District, and hoped that investors would find the prospects attractive enough to fund ditches to supply the region with water from the nearby Carson River. At the same time, the *Territorial Enterprise* began promoting the mineral possibilities of the region, calling for capitalists to develop the single ingredient—water—that distinguished the eastern slope from that of California.[11] Vision was again bound by the familiar; some drastic change would need to occur if the mining colony were to survive.

January 1859 grew unseasonably warm in the area, and the wintering, dormant miners used the opportunity to return to work. There must have been little hope of finding new, profitable placer sands at the base of local ravines, because most of the exploration appears to have been higher on the mountain. Groups heading toward Sun Mountain from Gold Canyon to the south, and from Six Mile Canyon to the east, focused new attention on places where alluvial deposits were unlikely.

Prospectors searching such heights were probably filled with apprehension. Gold-bearing placer sands at the base of canyons needed only to be shoveled into rockers and washed before the gold could be removed. Nature had accomplished most of the milling and processing. Higher on the mountainside, miners searched for the source of the gold, and feared that it would be locked in stone. In order to work a solid ore body, a miner had to remove large amounts of rock, crush it, and transport it to a stream at the base of the canyon, all necessary steps before the material could be treated like placer sands. It was hard work, and it

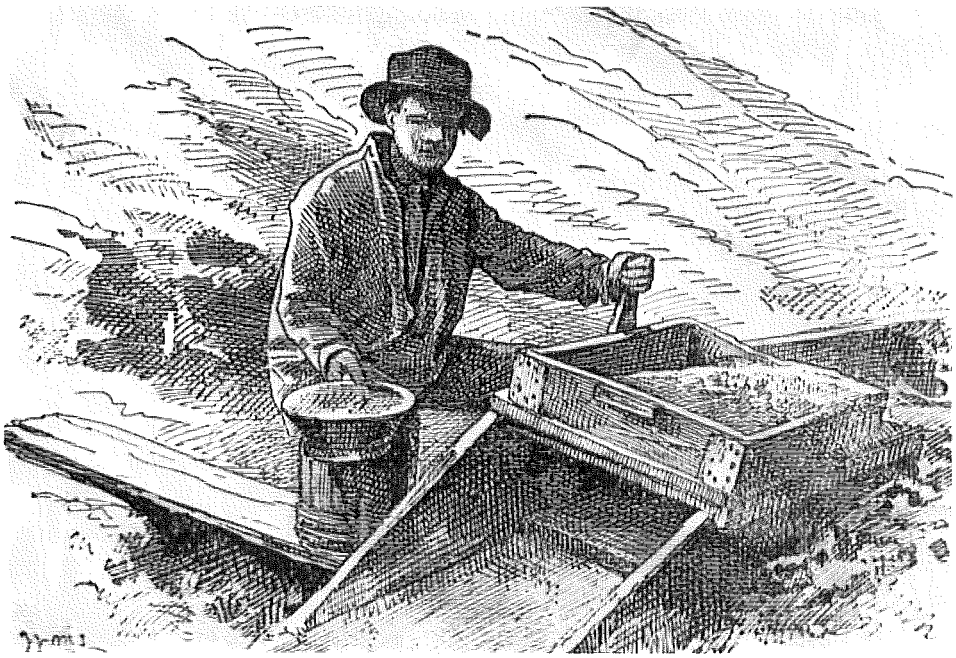
TABLE 1
Bullion Production from Gold Canyon, 1850–1857

Year	*Number of working days*	*Number of miners*	*Daily earnings*	*Total yield (in dollars)*
1850	–	–	–	6,000
1851	100	120	$5	60,000
1852	120	130	5	100,000
	220	20	5	
1853	120	90	5	76,000
	220	20	5	
1854	120	130	5	100,000
	220	20	5	
1855	140	180	4	118,400
	220	20	4	
1856	120	100	4	70,000
	220	25	4	
1857	70	80	2	18,200
	140	25	2	

SOURCE: Eliot Lord, *Comstock Mining and Miners* (1883; rpt. San Diego: Howell-North Books, 1959), 24. Lord used contemporary newspapers from California to estimate bullion produced and the average number of days worked for two types of miners: those who worked only a few days a year, and those who worked more. Lord's method is as flawed as the sources he was forced to use, but his computations show basic trends.

was costly. The year before, for example, the Pioneer Quartz Company had resorted to working a ledge near Devil's Gate down Gold Canyon. About 5 tons of rock were crushed and processed, returning for the effort 3.5 ounces of gold worth about $42. The company evaluated the return and decided that further work could not be justified.[12] With such experience in mind, the miners must have ascended Sun Mountain without enthusiasm. But aside from leaving the district, they had little choice. With the profitable alluvium exhausted, the remaining option was a search for the source of the placer sands in the hope that whatever ore resulted would be sufficiently rich to justify the arduous task of milling.

Unexpected success awaited those who explored the higher elevations of Sun Mountain. Indeed, it would be months, arguably even years, before the degree of success was fully understood. During January 1859, James "Old Virginny" Finney, John Bishop, Alexander Henderson, and John Yount returned to the steep slope of Sun Mountain. They began working with the soil of a mound at the head of Gold Canyon and easily obtained a yield that quickly proved promising. Although clearly not alluvial sand, the outcropping was sufficiently de-



James "Old Virginny" Finney working his rocker. (*From Dan DeQuille,* History of the Big Bonanza: An Authentic Account of the Discovery, History, and Working of the World Renowned Comstock Silver Lode of Nevada [*Hartford, Conn., American Publishing Co. and San Francisco, A. L. Bancroft Co., 1876*], *28*)

composed to make pulverizing of rock unnecessary. The material caught in the bottom of each rocker glittered. They named the site Gold Hill and immediately established a camp. Prospects in the district suddenly looked better than they had since 1857, if not before. The site promised about $12.00 a day for each miner.[13] The only question was how long it would last.

Word spread through the district, and local miners came to declare their interests in the area. Consistent with custom in the California gold country, the original prospectors claimed only that portion of the site that they could reasonably expect to work. Promising deposits nearby remained for the taking, the assumption being that the wealth was diffuse, not concentrated, and that it was impossible for a few miners to monopolize an entire district. Alva Gould soon joined the original four. Within days, Henry Comstock, James Rogers, Joseph Plato, Alexander "Sandy" Bowers, and William Knight posted their own claim nearby. They immediately began to sink a shaft to determine the depth of the resource. Eight feet of consistent yield justified the investment of labor to build a crude flume to carry water from a stream on the south side of Sun Mountain.[14]

By the time spring arrived, work was under way on the new prospects, and entrepreneurs were developing more secure sources of water.[15] The return for a

day's labor ascended to unprecedented values. The *Territorial Enterprise* reported in April 1859 that

> The diggings are in depth from 3 to 20 feet, and prospects from 5 to 25 cents to the pan, from the surface to the bedrock. Bishop & Co., two men, made during the week from $25 to $30 per day; Rogers & Co., two men, from $20 to $40 per day, and F. D. Casteel $10 per day, working alone and packing the dirt about 60 yards.[16]

The newspaper added that with sufficient water, "from $50 to $100 per day per man could be made with ease."[17] A week later, the newspaper estimated that claims were worth "from $4,000 to $5,000 per share."[18] Even if such a statement were outlandish aggrandizement, it is clear that prospects had improved dramatically. Gold fever gripped the community. The miners worked from dawn to dusk, obsessed with the quest for wealth. The normally freewheeling society turned serious. As the *Territorial Enterprise* reported in April 1859, "the miners are generally temperate and industrious, and whiskey has, therefore, become a drug in the market, with a downward tendency."[19] They had been bitten by the gold bug, and a reversal of fortune was nowhere in sight.

Miners began sinking more shafts in May 1859 to test the depth of deposits. Again, they found the resource deep and consistent in value. The *Enterprise* reported that a small claim, five by forty feet, had sold for $250, or the equivalent of about one month's earnings at the new inflated rate.[20] Clearly, Gold Hill would remain a hotbed of activity for some time.

During the late 1850s, a nearby colony of miners worked and prospected Six Mile Canyon, to the east of Sun Mountain. Encouraged by the success of Gold Hill and driven by a similar lack of unworked, viable alluvial sands, some from this group also began to search uphill during the spring of 1859. Finally, on June 8, Patrick McLaughlin and Peter O'Riley, two Irish miners from the Six Mile Canyon community, began working a new, even higher site. It contained a black crumbly rock unlike any they had seen before. Most pressing to the miners at the moment was that water, a rare commodity in the district, flowed through the area. While building a crude dam, the two threw some soil into their rocker as an afterthought. Like the finds at Gold Hill, the results were astonishing and immediate. With every shovel full, gold glittered at the base of their rocker. There was no question that they had found a valuable claim, even though its pale color led the two to conclude that the gold was alloyed with some worthless metal, and the black rock weighed nearly as much as the gold, making separation difficult.[21]

That evening, after working all day to obtain handfuls of gold, McLaughlin and O'Riley began to retire their equipment. At that point, Henry "Pancake" Comstock of Gold Hill arrived on the scene. What ensued soon became a pivotal episode in local legend, recounted endlessly and used to illustrate the nature of the players and the times. Although it has become folklore, there is no reason to

An early view of Gold Hill, the boom town of the 1850s in Gold Canyon. (*From J. Ross Browne,* Crusoe's Island: A Ramble in the Footsteps of Alexander Selkirk. With Sketches of Adventure in California and Washoe. [*New York, Harper & Bros., 1864*], *379*)

doubt its accuracy. Comstock quickly recognized that the miners had made a significant discovery. Large amounts of gold lay nearby, and besides, it was common knowledge that miners had been searching to define the extent of the Gold Hill ledge.[22] Whether these men were working the same or a separate ore body remained to be seen, but Comstock recognized opportunity. He immediately declared his right to the area and began negotiating. Comstock benefited from two factors. First of all, it is not uncommon for prospectors to claim many sites, most of which they do not plan to develop. Although such claims are weak, there is always the hope that the first claimant can secure concessions from subsequent miners who profitably work the property, if that ever occurs. It is not known whether Comstock had actually claimed the McLaughlin-O'Riley site. Indeed, he may not have been certain. But it was a reasonable possibility.

Miners confronted with such prior claims frequently conceded a portion of an ore body to avoid dispute. Second, the assumption in the 1850s, that mineral wealth was diffuse and not concentrated, meant that it was not much of a concession to admit Comstock to the site. Additional partners, after all, meant that more feet could be claimed, according to regional mining custom. Comstock's insistence that his friend, Immanuel "Manny" Penrod, also be included was similarly received.[23]

On June 11, 1859, the growing community held a meeting to adopt rules to govern the mining district. Although this had been done before, a new compact, designed to suit the situation at Gold Hill, and accepted by its newer citizens, seemed appropriate. The miners also felt a need to fill certain offices for the growing community, and the meeting saw the election of J. A. "Kentuck" Osborn as justice of the peace, James F. Rogers as constable, and V. A. Houseworth as recorder.[24]

Although word spread soon after about the new discovery, Gold Hill remained the more promising location because it yielded purer gold and the site was untainted by what some called the annoying blue stuff.[25] Still, the new diggings added to the excitement, and a local rush ensued during the summer of 1859, drawing on the agricultural areas at the eastern base of the Sierra.[26] Rush after rush to mining districts, in pursuit of gold far rarer than initial reports promised, had left the West reluctant to respond to word of new discoveries.[27] Nevertheless, more and more people realized that the gold of this Great Basin mining district was plentiful. As the *Enterprise* reported in early July 1859, "we have heretofore been somewhat skeptical, but recent developments have proven to our entire satisfaction that the resources of these mines, incredible as it may seem, have not been over estimated."[28] With the growing attention, values of claims inflated, and some of the first to mine the area saw it as a good time to sell for fear that the gold would run out and the bubble would burst.

Slowly the community acknowledged that no matter how easily the first shovels full of dirt surrendered its gold, the quartz ore deeper down would require milling. Again consolation came from the other side of the Sierra. The *Territorial Enterprise* reported as early as February 1859 that "quartz operations in California are every day more clearly demonstrating the fact that as an avenue for the safe and profitable investment of capital, quartz mining is destined eventually to superceed [*sic*] placer mining."[29] Only a few years before, for example, the Empire Mine of Grass Valley, California, had begun an underground operation that was to last more than a century. Profit was available for those willing to work such a mine, but that did not make it more palatable for Sun Mountain's miners, who recognized that their future work would of necessity take a different, more complicated form.

One of the easiest ways to solve the problem of dealing with obstinate ore was to sell one's claim and leave. Although later ridiculed for accepting absurdly low prices, the first claimants received as much as $12,000 for their interests.[30] Com-

pared with the millions eventually reaped, these were paltry amounts, but they were more than most miners could hope to see in two or three years of hard labor, even at the high yields the district had just begun to provide. As long as excitement held and newcomers were willing to pay such prices, the old-time placer miner was able to profit without attempting something beyond his experience.

Excitement and wealth, however, were about to be redefined. As O'Riley, McLaughlin, Comstock, and Penrod dug down, they noticed that the black rock plaguing their claim coalesced into a seam which grew thicker the deeper they probed. A curiosity, its heavy weight hindered the retrieval of gold. Complicating the situation even more, they soon reached rock that required crushing before it could be washed. Work with picks and sledge hammers proved arduous and time consuming. Profits diminished. The miners weighed the possibilities and decided to give John D. Winters, Jr., a local rancher, and "Kentuck" Osborn, newly elected justice of the peace, one sixth of their claim in exchange for the construction of two arrastras—simple mills—furnished with two horses or mules to run them.[31] The agreement for this project, documented by Houseworth in his record book, is elaborate and attempts to consider all possible scenarios. Without the counsel of lawyers, the miners nevertheless understood the magnetism between gold and costly lawsuits.[32]

A few weeks after the discovery of the new site, B. A. Harrison, a ranch hand from the nearby Truckee Meadows, took a sample of the black rock to Placerville in California. On June 27, 1859, he gave it to Melville Atwood, an assayer, who found its value per ton to be $876 in gold. The big surprise was that a ton of the ore would also yield $3,000 in silver. Together with Judge James Walsh and Joseph Woodworth, both of Grass Valley, Harrison hurried back to profit from the discovery before it became widely known and the values of claims exploded. But as William Wright pointed out in his farcical 1876 history of the mining boom, "each man had intimate friends in whom he had the utmost confidence . . . and those bosom friends soon knew that a silver-mine of wonderful richness had been discovered over in Washoe country. These again had their friends."[33] And so on. A rush of major proportions had begun.

Walsh, like all those who followed with money, began purchasing claims throughout the region. By fall, many of the original discoverers were out of the picture, replaced by entrepreneurs and experienced quartz miners from California. Those who came late and without significant funds, merely hoping to find gold or silver, claimed anything they could. The result was a network of overlapping claims, further confused by the hundreds who arrived before winter. The rules established in the June 11 meeting were not sufficient to handle the weight of humanity now pressing in upon the hillside. Houseworth's book became filled with vague claim after ill-defined notice. Wishing to avoid legal disputes so that they could focus on mining, all concerned strove to untangle the cat's cradle, and customary boundaries of claims were eventually established.[34]

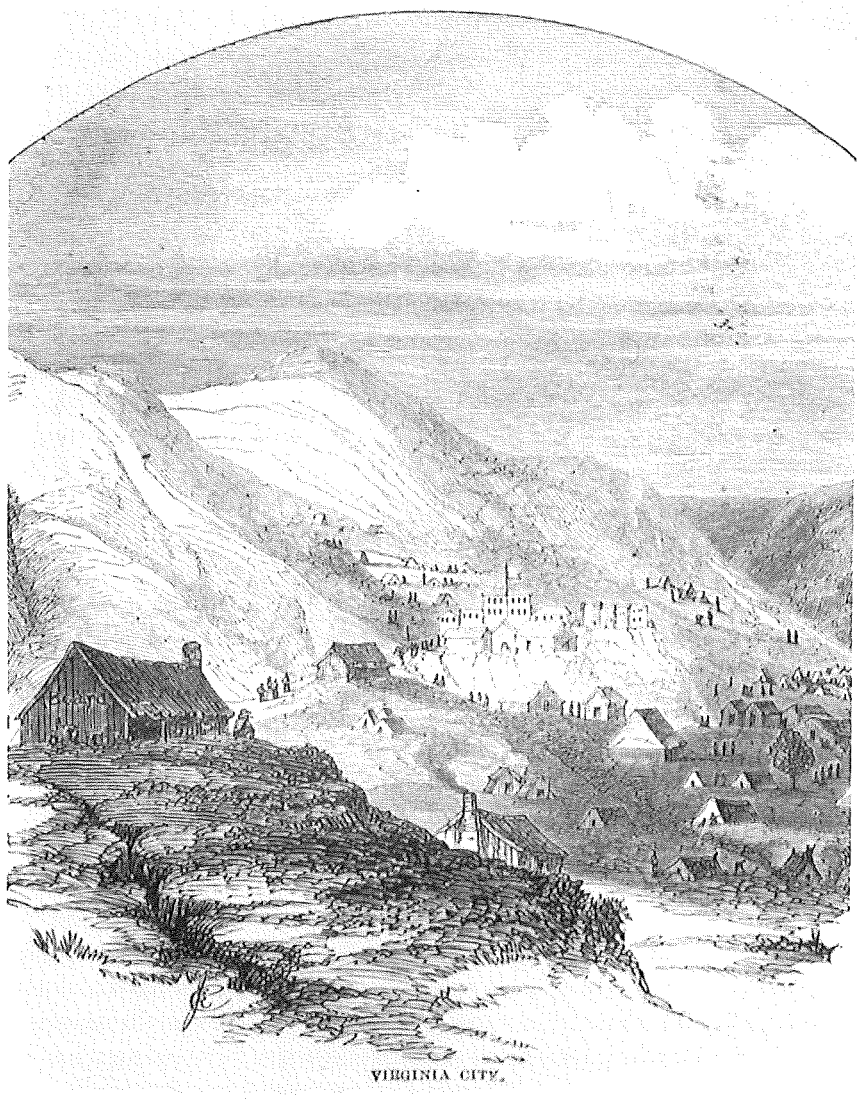
As the miners set to work, they found wealth on an immense scale. The first who worked in the area of the O'Riley-McLaughlin strike during the early summer of 1859 had called the incipient community Mount Pleasant. By August 5, after news of the assay, it had been renamed the Town of Ophir, the site of the original strike becoming the Ophir mine. With biblical references at their fingertips, these miners knew of the Old Testament's fabled gold mine, the riches of which exceeded all others. Throughout history, many had searched in the hope of finding its dormant, long-lost treasure.[35] Now the miners of the Great Basin claimed to have found comparable wealth of biblical proportions. Although local miners held a meeting in September during which they renamed the growing town for an early claimant, James "Old Virginny" Finney, one of its richest mines continued its identification with ancient Ophir.[36]

Silver, together with gold, was now the game. In hindsight, writers would later point out that this should have been more apparent to those who worked the canyon for gold. DeGroot, an eyewitness at the scene in 1859, later wrote that many people believed that silver deposits probably existed within the Great Basin. In addition, he noted that Spanish legends of silver in the region were well known.[37] Still, silver was far from the miners' minds, and once again their perceptions were colored by the California experience wherein gold was the only goal. Even had silver been recognized earlier, it might have been ignored: Mexican mining tradition maintains that "it takes a gold mine to run a silver mine."[38] Without capital to pay wages, buy material, and build mills, the first miners were restricted to working gold deposits.

The second wave of quartz miners who worked the district were able to accomplish, by virtue of capital and experience, things impossible before. And in the process, they were about to create an international legend. In September, Judge Walsh brought 3,150 pounds of high-grade ore to San Francisco for milling. It yielded $4,871. Over the next few weeks, 38 tons followed. Although it cost $512 per ton to transport and mill, the $114,000 it produced more than offset the expense. The resulting bullion, prominently displayed in the windows of the bankers Alsop and Company, provided tangible proof that tremendous treasure had been found.[39] Before long, not just California, but the entire globe answered the call of yet another rush for mineral wealth.

On November 2, 1859, one foot of snow fell in Virginia City. The storm cut off the Sierra passes, ending both the rush to the Comstock Lode and the transportation of ore to San Francisco. Virginia City settled in for the winter. By then the community consisted of several hundred people living in crude accommodations. Everything from tents and brush hovels to the mining tunnels themselves served as abodes. As Wright pointed out, they became a community of troglodytes.[40] Winter progressed, and the ground froze, ending most work. Many, finding the cold of their meager shelters unbearable, descended to communities in the valleys. Food was scarce everywhere, however, since many of

the local farmers had forsaken their fields to try the new diggings during the summer. On the western slope of the Sierra, a good part of California waited for the first opportunity to cross and inspect the new El Dorado. For a brief time, Virginia City was not in flux. The quiet would not be repeated for thirty or so years.



An early view of Virginia City, on the slopes of Mount Davidson (Sun Mountain), before it became prosperous and permanent. (*From Browne,* Crusoe's Island, *374*)

Development of an Oral Tradition

By the winter of 1859, success had permanently altered the community in the Gold Canyon area. A new society of outsiders had replaced the original ragtag band. One by one, old-timers were fleeing; placer mining was a thing of the past. The Comstock Mining District now thrived with hard-rock mining. As the community moved forward in pursuit of its destiny, it occasionally looked back, assessing and reassessing its past. The more removed the 1850s Comstock became, the more incomprehensible that period appeared.[41] This created a fertile environment that spawned a rich tradition fabricated to explain what had been unexplainable.

The first miners who worked the district died for the most part in obscure poverty. Local folklore has been unkind to the discoverers of the Comstock Lode, depicting them as mad, lazy, drunk, and unimaginative or incredibly unlucky. From the Grosh brothers to "Old Virginny" and "Pancake" Comstock, the early characters enacted a comedy of errors, with obligatory tragic moments. They filled the repertoires of local writers and continue to provide tour guides with material. It is probably a universal attribute of mining camps that their citizens revel in celebrating the eccentric nature of their origins. Perhaps people also like to think that were they placed in similar circumstance they would not make the same mistakes, and thus they characterize history's players who failed as inept or unfortunate.

Nevertheless, it was through local tradition that these early miners gained the notoriety that their discovery might also have afforded them. James "Old Virginny" Finney and Henry "Pancake" Comstock both acquired immortality because of the ore body, in spite of having little to do with its exploitation. Finney gave his nickname to the principal community of the district, and Comstock's name identifies the ore body.[42] Virginia City and the Comstock Lode won international fame even if their namesakes' monetary gains were minimal. With celebrated or invented idiosyncrasies, the two miners also became the focus of colorful legend. Locally, stories about Finney and Comstock have always been popular. By tracing the evolution of their images, it is possible to understand an aspect of western folklore.

The earliest sources feature Finney and Comstock as hard-working, locally prominent miners. James Finney[43] had a local reputation for having a good nose for prospecting. All sources consistently support the idea that he was one of the first to recognize the mineral-bearing potential of the area of the future Comstock Lode. Still, he was a simple man, unable to write, possessing what appear to have been limited aspirations.[44] Henry DeGroot wrote in 1862 that Finney was an "honest old pioneer" who was "ignorant but generous." He also records a story which has Finney selling Comstock a claim for "an old horse and a bottle of whiskey."[45] By 1876, DeGroot elaborated on Finney's association with the bottle, suggesting that he died of old age and alcoholism. He pointed out that

Finney "received nothing for his interests" although, being first, he deserved more. DeGroot also recounted the story of Finney selling his claims for an Indian pony and a bottle of whiskey, adding "some supplies" to the purchase price.[46] Whatever the cause, Finney appears to have been dead by the summer of 1861.

Early references to Henry Comstock are far more abundant. A rich assortment of newspaper articles reveals a gradual shift in the perception of this miner. Sources dating to 1859 described Comstock as a hard worker who took advantage of opportunities. For DeGroot, writing in 1862, he was shrewd.[47] After insinuating himself into the early success of the district, he sold his interests and used his capital to establish himself in a mercantile business, providing support for the new mining community. His failure at the commercial enterprise sent him wandering throughout the West, prospecting for a new claim to equal the one he had once owned and which was by then making international headlines.[48] In 1863, Comstock attempted to reestablish his link to the district through legal dispute.[49] Following the failure of that tactic, the *Virginia Evening Bulletin* reported that Comstock could be found "ekeing [*sic*] out a miserable existence by working a poor claim on the Powder river," a turn of fate written off as "miner's luck."[50] One year later, the *Gold Hill News* contradicted the idea that Comstock was doing poorly, suggesting that he was discovering rich ore bodies in Idaho and that "money is no object with him; he has too much energy to eke out a miserable existence anywhere."[51] During the summer of 1865, Comstock returned to Virginia City and established a company intended to exploit a claim north of town. The *Evening News* reported that "Comstock is acting Superintendent of the mine, and we trust that this old pioneer of the silver fields of Nevada may reap a rich reward for his long and continuous labors."[52]

During or shortly after his 1865 visit, Comstock began to be known for an increasingly irrational mental state. In 1868, he wrote a letter from Butte, Montana, making outlandish assertions. The *Territorial Enterprise* pointed out that "many of the statements in the letter are unquestionably true, while others, no doubt are sheer fictions. When Comstock was last here . . . it was impossible to listen to him and believe in his perfect sanity."[53] His reputation for imbalance growing, Comstock said in late 1868 that he was hard at work on a new claim.[54] Two years later, he apparently committed suicide in Bozeman, Montana, but word of the event did not reach Virginia City until 1875. At the time, the *Territorial Enterprise* maintained that "he shuffled off the coil [and] was led to the rash act by dissipation and want."[55] Later that year, the *Enterprise* summarized Comstock as "an illiterate man, being unable to read or write," and added that "the notoriety which attached to his name led him to frequent exaggerations of his personal importance—a weakness which may be readily excused in the old pioneer."[56] Writing in 1876, DeGroot characterized Comstock as full of bluster and as having lost his money to an "artful woman." He reported that Comstock sold one of his claims for an old horse and $40, but that he received larger sums

Henry "Pancake" Comstock, after whom the mining district was named. (*From DeQuille,* History of the Big Bonanza, *85*)

for other of his properties. On one occasion, Comstock boasted that he had won the better part of the deal from a so-called California rock sharp. DeGroot also held that Comstock's self-destruction occurred in the midst of a temporary bout of insanity.[57]

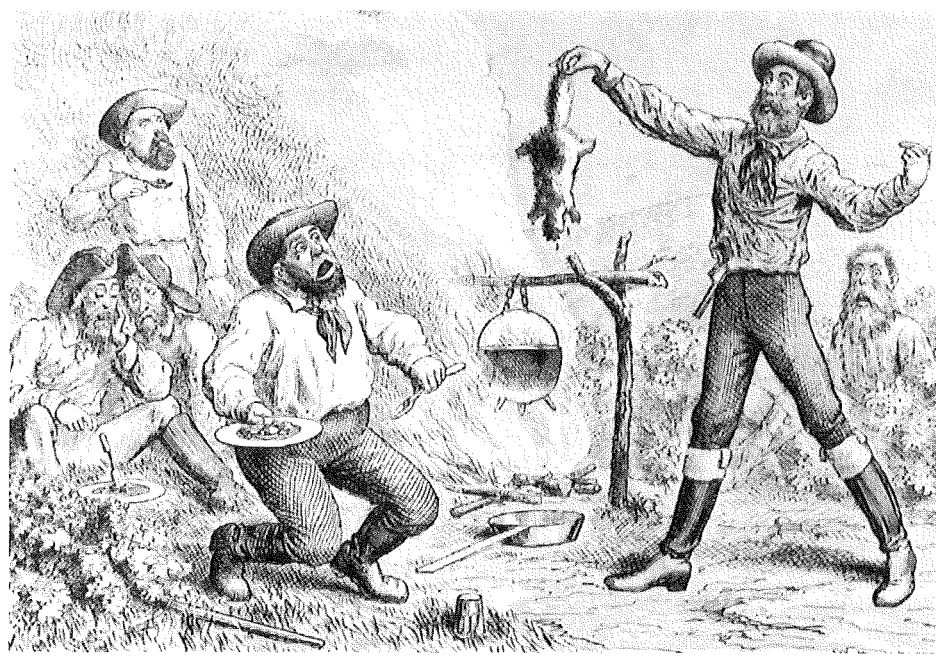
The earliest evidence concerning Henry Comstock suggests that he was a hard-working, clever miner who was able to recognize opportunities and exploit them. After the local transition to quartz mining, Comstock attempted to succeed by using his profits to exploit the need for mercantile support of the community. But like Finney, he was clearly out of his league in the new environment. Finney and Comstock both died impoverished within a dozen years of the discovery of the Comstock Lode, before the second phase of local historiography was launched.

Even before he died, Henry Comstock was becoming the object of elaboration in the local folklore. The idea that he was illiterate is a fiction, given the letters he wrote. In addition, the *Enterprise,* which mistakenly called him John Comstock, attributed to him the sale of his claims for "a mule, a shotgun and a bottle of whiskey,"[58] thus confusing his role with that of Finney. The introduction of an "artful woman" as the source of Comstock's economic demise also appears to be a later, fanciful addition. In contrast to Comstock, Finney died much earlier, and so he could not make himself a current topic of conversation as Comstock had through repeated visits and letters. Except for the constant eponymous reminder of the city's name, "Old Virginny" was in danger of dropping out of popular view. After all, like Comstock, he possessed the unremarkable traits of hard work and lack of economic success. It was up to William Wright under the name of Dan DeQuille to place the immortal, legendary stamp on both Finney and Comstock.

It is impossible to know whether Wright created or merely used the tradition surrounding Finney and Comstock. Perhaps a combination was in fact responsible for the author's final product. For Wright, Finney was a drunk and a fool. He was capable of hard work, but tended to stop his labors as soon as he had enough money to buy whiskey. Wright maintained that he was attempting to correct the record by refuting the story of Finney selling one of his claims for an old horse, a pair of blankets, and a bottle of whiskey, but the author was equally capable of perpetuating stories of questionable basis.[59] Wright is the earliest source for the story that Finney himself named Virginia City. To this day, local residents relish Wright's recollection of inebriated "Old Virginny" tripping and breaking a bottle of whiskey on the ground. Not wanting to waste the precious substance, the prospector announced that he was baptizing the new town in honor of Virginia, the state of his nativity.[60] Whether this happened or not, evidence clearly indicates that local miners decided in a meeting to name the community Virginia City. Still, Wright's story lives on. Wright also immortalized Finney's drinking habits with a story about a lawsuit that called on the old pioneer to find his original claim notice. Perennially drunk, Finney refused to cooperate until the lawyers locked him up, away from whiskey, and waited until the next morning to discuss the issue with a sober but surly prospector. After negotiating for one drink to start the day, he was able to lead the lawyers to the notice. Wright held that Finney was eventually done in by alcohol, having been

thrown from a horse while drunk.[61] Wright also characterized Finney as a hunting enthusiast, recounting how Finney shot a skunk and then surreptitiously fed it to the camp. Only after the meal was well under way did Finney, in trickster fashion, reveal the nature of the beast.[62] None of these anecdotes appears in the original primary documents, and there is no reason to believe in their historical veracity.

Comstock fared no better under Wright's fanciful pen. For the author, Henry Comstock was a lazy, fast-talking charlatan who deserved none of the fame he acquired. He had, according to Wright, incompetently and recklessly squandered the opportunity that he had won through neither fairness nor work.[63] Wright stated that Comstock was called "Pancake" because he never baked bread, professing to be too busy. Instead, he fried the ever-simple pancake. Unwilling to work, Comstock employed native Americans to labor at his claims. As Wright put it, after Comstock swindled his way into the Ophir claim, he "elected himself superintendent and was the man who did all of the heavy talking."[64] Wright suggested that Comstock "in the early days, was considered by many persons to be 'a little cracked' in the 'upper story' [and] was a man flighty in his imagining."[65] According to Wright, Comstock's only positive attribute, besides sobriety, was generosity. There is the story of Comstock offering visitors to his claim a pan full of dirt that they could wash, keeping whatever



"The Happy Breakfast," the scene when Finney revealed the secret ingredient to his guests. (*From DeQuille,* History of the Big Bonanza, *92*)

they found. Once, some visiting women received a pan that proved to be worth $300, to the delight of "Old Pancake."[66] Wright also told of Comstock wooing a wife away from a Mormon who was passing through the area. Confronted by the jilted husband, Comstock paid a sum in compensation, but demanded a bill of sale. Later, when the woman ran away from Comstock in favor of yet another man, he enforced his bill of sale and demanded her return.[67] Eventually, however, she managed to effect her escape, and the miner's investment, like so many other of his, proved misplaced. As in the case of Wright's treatment of Finney, none of the attributes or stories regarding Comstock can be verified in the earliest documentation. Indeed, the earliest sources indicate that Comstock was hard-working, and although he appears to have suffered from growing insanity by the late 1860s, there is no documentation of mental illness earlier.

Wright's *The Big Bonanza* is recognized as a quasi history with literary aspirations. Historians rightly treat it with suspicion. Eliot Lord's *Comstock Mining and Miners*, on the other hand, is regarded as a reliable source. For Lord, Finney was a good prospector, but little else. He "remained sober when he was too poor to buy whisky and would never work longer than was necessary to obtain the means of filling his bottle."[68] Lord repeated Wright's story of Finney needing to be isolated from alcohol so that he could find his original claim notice. He also echoed Wright in asserting that Finney died in 1861 after falling from a horse. He portrayed Finney as a miner who eked out "a precarious livelihood by bartering feet in sundry claims in exchange for drink and food-money."[69] In the case of Henry Comstock, Lord reiterated the idea that he was lazy, used native American labor and was a fast talker. He repeated Wright's story about the purchase of a Mormon wife and agreed that Comstock was insane and committed suicide. Lord introduced an additional story, providing no source. In this anecdote, Comstock allegedly sold his claim to a Herman Camp for very little money. After being ridiculed for the bad deal, Comstock persuaded his friends to conduct a mock trial to judge the validity of the transaction. This court invalidated the exchange and in spite of Camp's protestations forcibly obtained and destroyed his deed. Like Wright's stories, most of Lord's assertions about Finney and Comstock cannot be confirmed by earlier documentation.

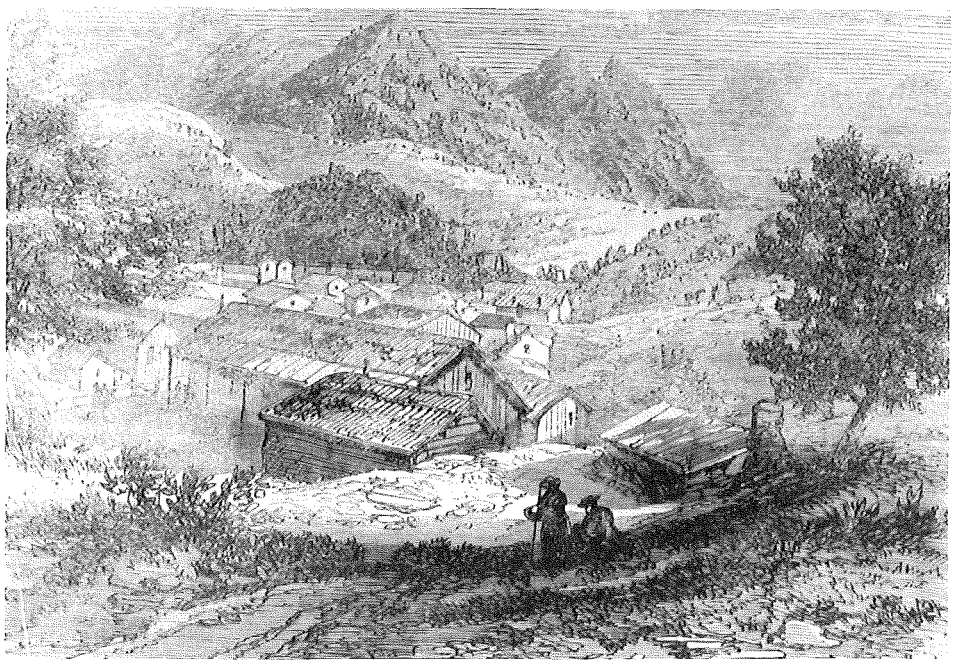
Lord focused his study upon the evolution of mining technology and the history of the claims associated with the Comstock Lode, and these aspects of his work are meticulously researched and documented. He was perhaps less interested in the assessment of personalities, and, although he salted his writing with characters and anecdotes, literary color was not his principal objective. Instead, he likely relied on Wright for perspective and stories in this regard. Because subsequent historians have given Lord so much credibility, these stories became codified as accepted history in a way that would not have occurred had Wright alone been the source. Understandably, twentieth-century historians of the Comstock invariably repeat, if not the actual stories, then at least the evaluations of Finney and Comstock as presented in Wright and Lord.[70]

Conclusion

The first decade of mining within what became the Comstock Mining District played a crucial part in the discovery of wealth and the laying of a foundation for the meteoric success of Virginia City. In spite of their importance, the earliest miners were destined to be misunderstood. Placer mining quickly became unknown on the Comstock, making the 1850s incomprehensible for later residents of the district. In the attempt to reconcile the prospectors' behavior with the point of view of the community after the rush, Comstock oral tradition cast the earliest players into the roles of drunks and madmen, and that transformation has become part of the history of the community.

The dominant irony of the early Comstock is that most if not all of the prospectors searched for gold rather than silver, the precious metal which ultimately brought fame to the region. The fact that the first miners ignored all but gold even while digging into one of the richest silver ores in the world is nothing short of comical. Underscoring that aspect of humanity which sees the world according to its preconceptions, their reasoning took three phases: For a decade, local miners regarded placer gold-bearing sands as more economical to mine than their point of origin, the quartz veins above. Second, for nearly half a year after the first big strike, the retrieval of gold remained the objective. The miners ignored the mineral-bearing black rock and pursued gold. And, finally, when the original claimants to what would be some of the richest mines in the world had a chance to sell out, they did so, often to the first bidder, and trotted away gloating at their good fortune. All this made sense from the perspective of the miners of the 1850s. With hindsight, later authors such as William Wright regarded the nature and value of the resource as obvious and judged the earliest prospectors accordingly.

In fact, nothing of the district's ultimate fate was self-evident to those early miners. The prospectors who worked Gold Canyon and the surrounding area during the 1850s were largely industrious men who approached their craft seriously and methodically, but the California experience had shaped their expectations. They understood gold. They knew how to acquire it, and they preferred to work alone or in small teams. They also knew that fabulous mineral wealth lodged in a single area was a rarity. They probably suspected it was an impossibility. Ore bodies, after all, almost never met the expectations of the rushes they inspired. To resist a willing buyer offering thousands of dollars for a claim to a vein that might pinch out a few feet from the pit's bottom would have been reckless gambling. The possibility that a claim was worth significantly more than was being offered was slim. The miners' decisions to sell represented calculated risks that would have been regarded as shrewd maneuvers in almost any other situation. Perhaps they were astute enough to know that it would take considerable capital; an understanding of wages, accounting, logistics, and mining law; and a good amount of luck to bring success to the new kind of operation



Gold Hill from "Sketches from the Washoe Silver Region, America: Gold Hill, Mount Davidson, and the Ophir Road" by the artist R. P. Leitch (*Nevada Historical Society*)

needed to work the district. Considering that they had neither the money nor the experience, they made the rational best choice. That these particular men happened to be dealing with the Comstock Lode made their gamble appear foolhardy, leaving them vulnerable to later judgment. It also created a situation ripe for folklore.

The traditions generated about the original miners, and in particular those about James "Old Virginny" Finney and Henry "Pancake" Comstock, were well in place within fifteen years of the time they sold their claims. They had become vivid characters in a myth developed to explain their acts. No amount of historical research and source criticism is likely to overcome the persuasive nature of a folklore that has assumed the role of local history. Indeed, it thrives today and has all the promise of surviving into the next century in spite of anything written here. Of paramount importance is the fact that it took less than two decades for this myth to assume its place—hard-working, serious miners transformed into eccentric, devil-may-care drunks. The latter fit easily into the legendary Wild West during its carefree frontier period; the former would contradict that image. The explosive nature of the Comstock's growth and shifts in population allowed for a citizenry so removed from its own past that its heritage could be profoundly misunderstood and transmuted. Ultimately, the story of

the discovery of the Comstock Lode illustrates the power of the myth of the Wild West and exemplifies how quickly it could develop.

NOTES

[1]William Wright [Dan DeQuille, pseud.], *The Big Bonanza* (1876; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953); Eliot Lord, *Comstock Mining and Miners* (1883; San Diego: Howell-North Books, 1959); Effie Mona Mack, *Nevada: A History of the State from the Earliest Times through the Civil War* (Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Co., 1936); Russell R. Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 2d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987); James W. Hulse, *The Silver State: Nevada's Heritage Reinterpreted* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1991).

[2]J. Wells Kelly, *First Directory of Nevada Territory* (1862; rpt. Los Gatos, California: Talisman Books, 1962).

[3]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 11–14; Leonard J. Arrington and Davis Bitton, *The Mormon Experience: A History of the Latter-day Saints* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 174. See also Hulse, *Silver State*, 50–66; Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 61–68.

[4]*Territorial Enterprise* (Genoa, and later Carson City, Utah Territory; subsequently Virginia City, Nevada Territory and State), 5 February 1859, 2:4.

[5]See J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).

[6]Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 14ff; Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 24–31; Henry DeGroot, *The Comstock Papers* (Reno, Nevada: The Grace Dangberg Foundation, 1985), 5; Kelly, *Directory*, 196–97.

[7]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 16, 19–21. See also Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 9–10.

[8]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 16, 20.

[9]Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 11.

[10]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 13–16; Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 10–11; *Territorial Enterprise*, 16 April 1859, 2:5; Wilbur S. Shepperson, *Restless Strangers: Nevada's Immigrants and Their Interpreters* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1970); Ronald M. James, "A Plan for the Archeological Investigation of the Virginia City Landmark District," 1992 addendum to the *Nevada Comprehensive Preservation Plan* (Carson City: Nevada Division of Historic Preservation and Archeology, 1992).

[11]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 33, and see extant issues of *Territorial Enterprise*, throughout the spring of 1859.

[12]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 33–34.

[13]*Ibid.*, 35–36; Wright *Big Bonanza*, 21–23; *Territorial Enterprise*, 29 January 1859, 2:5.

[14]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 36; Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 21–23; *Territorial Enterprise*, 29 January 1859, 2:5.

[15]*Territorial Enterprise*, 16 April 1859, 2:5; 21 April 1859, 1:2.

[16]*Ibid.*, 21 April 1859, 1:2.

[17]*Ibid.*

[18]*Ibid.*, 28 April 1859, 1:2.

[19]*Ibid.*, 21 April 1859, 1:2.

[20]*Ibid.*, 21 May 1859, 2:2; and see 4 June 1859, 2:4.

[21]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 37, 38; Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 24–25; *Territorial Enterprise*, 2 July 1859, 2:2. And see the *Enterprise* article of 4 June 1859, 2:4, which appears, though not conclusively, to allude to an earlier strike in the area.

[22]*Territorial Enterprise*, 28 April 1859, 1:2.

[23]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 38–39; Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 26–27; DeGroot, *Comstock Papers*, 7–8.

[24]*Territorial Enterprise*, 25 June 1859, 2:3–4.

[25]See, for example, Kelly, *Directory*, 105. And see the *Territorial Enterprise*, 2 July 1859, 2:2.

[26]*Territorial Enterprise*, 16 July 1859, 2:4.

[27]J. Ross Browne, *Resources of the Pacific Slope with a Sketch of the Settlement and Exploration of Lower California* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1969), 2–14 (page numbers refer to the first series with the volume).

[28]*Territorial Enterprise*, 9 July 1859, 2:5.

[29]*Ibid.*, 5 February 1859, 2:4.

[30]*Ibid.*, 16 July 1859, 2:4. Houseworth, the district recorder, diligently made note of each claim and

transaction, and although specific locations are often missing, his record book, *Gold Hill Record Book A*, on file in the Storey County Courthouse, remains an exceedingly useful source on the pivotal year of 1859.

[31]An arrastra is a device of Spanish-Mexican origin in which heavy stones are rolled and dragged over ore by an animal hitched to a turnstile. The pulverized rock can then be washed or treated with mercury to extract gold. See Donald L. Hardesty, *The Archeology of Mining and Miners: A View from the Silver State*, Special Publication Series, number 6 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Society of Historical Archeology, 1988), 9, 10, 39; Otis E. Young, *Western Mining* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), 69–71.

[32]*Gold Hill Record Book A*, page 7, recorded 25 June 1859; Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 54.

[33]Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 33; DeGroot *Comstock Papers*, 11–12; Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 54–55.

[34]See *Gold Hill Record Book A;* Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 45–49.

[35]Browne, *A Peep at Washoe and Washoe Revisited* (Balboa Island: California Paisano Press 1959), 8. See also Genesis 10:29; I Kings 9:28; Job 28:16.

[36]The *Gold Hill Record Book A*, which Wright claimed to have read, provides a chronicle of the names used. See also Wright's *Big Bonanza*, 32; *Territorial Enterprise*, 24 December 1859, 2:4; 3 December 1859, 2:2. See also *Alta California* (San Francisco), 25 September 1859, reprinted from the *Territorial Enterprise*, 24 September 1859. And see Grant H. Smith, *The History of the Comstock Lode: 1850–1920* (Reno: Nevada State Bureau of Mines, 1943), 13–16.

[37]DeGroot, *Comstock Papers*, 17 (and see page *i*).

[38]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 57; and see Samuel Clemens [Mark Twain, pseud.], *Roughing it* (1872; New York: Harper and Row, 1962), II, 93.

[39]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 65.

[40]Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 64.

[41]See, for example, *Gold Hill Evening News*, 23 June 1865, 2:2.

[42]*Territorial Enterprise*, 24 December 1859, 2:4.

[43]Some sources suggest that Finney's last name was in fact Fennimore. He appears in the 8th United States Manuscript Census (1860) as Finney. See, however, Mack, *Nevada*, 204–7.

[44]See, for example, *Gold Hill Record Book A*. On page 78, dated 3 September 1859, there is a record of a transaction signed by James Finney with an X, labelled "his mark."

[45]Kelly, *Directory*, 105.

[46]DeGroot, *Comstock Papers*, 9, 30.

[47]Kelly, *Directory*, 105.

[48]See, for example, *Territorial Enterprise*, 29 January 1859, 2:5; 24 December 1859, 3:1; 21 May 1859, 2:2.

[49]*Virginia Evening Bulletin*, 5 August 1863, 2:4. Comstock asserted that he had inherited claims from the Grosh brothers that remained valid and had never been purchased by the mine operators of the time.

[50]*Virginia Evening Bulletin*, 1 October 1863, 3:2.

[51]*Gold Hill News*, 21 November 1864, 2:6; 13 January 1865, 2:1.

[52]*Ibid.*, 9 August 1865, 3:1.

[53]*Territorial Enterprise*, 20 February 1868, 2:2.

[54]*Ibid.*, 22 December 1868, 3:1.

[55]*Ibid.*, 13 January 1875, 2:5.

[56]*Ibid.*, 10 July 1875, 2:3.

[57]DeGroot, *Comstock Papers*, 8, 10, 15–16, 29–30, 34, 38, 50.

[58]*Territorial Enterprise*, 13 January 1875, 2:5.

[59]Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 10, 20, 27, 29, 52–53, 54–57.

[60]*Ibid.*, 32.

[61]The earliest version of Finney's death by a fall from a horse dates to a 15 May 1873 *Territorial Enterprise* article. The newspaper purports to preserve the text of an interview with a Paiute who witnessed the death. It is possible that the piece is fanciful. The text was reproduced in Wright's *Big Bonanza*, 53.

[62]Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 28–29, 55–57. The *Territorial Enterprise*, 13 June 1875, 3:2, echoes the story of Finney finding the original claim but mentions nothing of his drinking.

[63]See Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 10, 20, 23, 30–31, 35–38, 42, 45–52, 62.

[64]*Ibid.*, 30.

[65]*Ibid.*, 49.

[66]*Ibid.*, 30–31. The *Territorial Enterprise*, 25 May 1875, 2:2, perpetuates this idea by stating that Comstock was like all prospectors, representing a "generous, open-hearted race" who give treasure away "for a trifle."

[67]Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 45–47.

[68]Lord, *Comstock Mining*, 34.

[69]*Ibid.*, 411.

[70]See George J. Young, "History of Mining in Nevada" in Sam P. Davis, *The History of Nevada* (Reno: The Elms Publishing Co., 1913), 316; Mack, *Nevada*, 204–5, 207, 438; Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 63–64; Hulse, *Silver State*, 67.

AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN NEVADA

Michael Coray

African-Americans have been partners in the Nevada adventure since the formative decade of the 1860s, but it was not until the decade of the 1940s that they accounted for as much as one percent of the state's total population. According to the federal censuses, the African-American population of 664 (0.6 percent of the state population) in 1940 increased to 4,302 (2.7 percent) in 1950. This number tripled during the 1950s to become 13,484 (4.7 percent) by 1960. The decade of the 1960s brought continued growth, and the 27,762 African-Americans in Nevada in 1970 accounted for 5.7 percent of the state's population. During the 1970s the number of African-Americans in Nevada's population increased to 51,203 or 6.4 percent of the total population. In 1990 the census indicates 78,771 African-Americans in the state or 6.6 percent of the population.[1]

A comprehensive history of black Nevadans remains to be written. Elmer R. Rusco's study of black Nevadans in the nineteenth century spans the years between the earliest white explorations of the Great Basin and 1890, and is the only book-length publication in which the saga of black Nevadans holds center stage. Others have published article-length studies of various elements of the black experience in Nevada, but enormous gaps in chronology and content remain. Studies which center on the period from the 1890s to the 1940s are notably absent. The rapid development of the African-American population in southern Nevada is just beginning to receive the attention of careful scholarship, but continues to demand book-length treatment. With these caveats in mind, then, the history of black Nevadans can be divided into three periods: (1) the territorial phase and early statehood to 1890, (2) 1890 to 1940, and (3) 1940 to the present.

At first glance, the most singularly impressive historical feature of Nevada's black population during both of the historical periods preceding 1940 was that population's small size. The federal censuses from the 1860 to 1940 report fewer than seven hundred African-Americans in Nevada at any census year. On further reflection, however, the size of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century black community becomes secondary to a more subtle feature: persis-

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tence. The small size of the black population in the nineteenth century did not preclude the creation of a vital community replete with key social and cultural institutions. Nor did small size prevent blacks from mounting organized and vocal campaigns to exercise civil and political rights prohibited by law and custom.

Blacks in Nevada before the 1890s

Black Nevadans succeeded in making a place for themselves in the nineteenth century, sometimes against great odds. From the territorial period to the 1870s, black Nevadans, like their African-American contemporaries in other states and territories along both the mining and agricultural frontiers of the West, were saddled with a seemingly prescribed set of civil and political disabilities. Despite the avowed antislavery proclivities of Nevada's white population and the political domination of the Republican party until the 1870s, the earliest territorial legislatures prohibited the participation of blacks in voting, office holding, and service in the militia. They were barred from the legal profession. Blacks were subject to civil, criminal, and tax law, but barred from service as jurors or witnesses in cases involving whites. Intermarriage with whites was a misdemeanor "punishable by one to two years in the territorial prison not only for the offending parties but for the person solemnizing such unions as well. Whites convicted of cohabitation with nonwhites 'in a state of fornication' faced fines ranging from one hundred to five hundred dollars, and as long as six months in the county jail."[2] Such proscription in Nevada, and similar arrangements in the adjoining states and territories of the West, were based entirely on the supposed deficiencies of blacks as members of an inferior race. They made no allowance for the fact that black Nevadans were not slaves living in a slave society.[3]

Blacks were present in every county in Nevada from the 1860s, but the majority was concentrated from 1860 to 1880 in Washoe, Storey, and Ormsby counties, particularly in the Virginia City and Gold Hill region of the Comstock and in Carson City. Smaller concentrations could be found in Elko County in 1870 and 1880, and in White Pine County following the rise and decline of the Treasure Hill mines from 1868 to 1870.[4]

The black population until at least 1880 was heavily male, predominantly southern, and disproportionately composed of persons aged twenty to forty-nine years. Most found employment in the unskilled service occupations (i.e., cooks, servants, barkeepers, gardeners, common laborers, et cetera) of the nineteenth century. Some were farmers, some were cowboys. Those with skills that allowed the development of the necessary capital, particularly barbers and those with experience in retailing, operated small businesses that served a predominantly white clientele. Few, however, were miners, since blacks were excluded from the miners' unions as late as 1879. Only one was classified as a professional.[5]

Elmer R. Rusco's study of black Nevadans in the nineteenth century offers an

analysis of their occupational persistence from 1870 to 1880. Despite an occasionally questionable placement of specific occupations within larger categories, Rusco's findings demonstrate a basic continuity in the occupational pattern of blacks from 1860 to 1880.[6] Such persistence allowed some to become an economically vital middle class of relatively independent shop owners and tradespeople who, by the period of Reconstruction, looked forward confidently to continued economic improvement.[7]

Rusco's study suggests strong links between economic and political improvements. By the early 1880s, most of the antiblack legislation of the previous decades had been repealed, largely as a result of the active protests of the black community and the general support given by Nevada's politicians to the policies promoted by the Republican Reconstruction.[8] But a sometimes substantial gap existed between what white Nevadans applauded for the distant South, and what they would allow nearer to home. Social equality between the races was condemned as the harbinger of interracial marriage and widespread miscegenation. The consequence of either, according to the popular racist rhetoric of the time, was the catastrophic adulteration of white civilization. Nevada's antimiscegenation statutes were not repealed until 1959.[9]

White antipathy toward social interaction with blacks was also at the heart of the ultimately successful battles waged by black Nevadans to overturn the

Jeff, pictured here, was a cook employed on the John Sparks ranch around the turn of the century. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

state's cumbersome requirements for segregated public schools. From the 1860s, blacks, the Chinese, and native Americans were excluded from public schools that served whites; they could lawfully attend only those schools established for their specific racial groups. A segregated school for black Nevadans was operated by Dr. W. W. Waterman at the Oriental Hotel on E Street in Virginia City for several months during 1866, and served fifteen children by day and an equal number of adults at night. After years of fighting on editorial pages, with school boards, and in the courts, blacks won the right, in 1872, to enroll their children in the state-supported schools.[10]

The social antipathy of whites toward blacks did not result in strict residential segregation, as it did for the Chinese. Aside from the antimiscegenation laws, no legal strictures appear to have dictated where blacks might or might not reside. Residential concentration, however, did exist. In Virginia City, for example, blacks were clustered by custom or economic necessity, along B and C streets "between the white miners and the prostitutes in the commercial heart of the city" in both 1870 and 1880.[11]

Black Nevadans did have to fight, however, to gain access to the political and legal arenas. Even though Nevada was the first state to ratify the Fifteenth Amendment, in 1869, and despite the fact that some black males exercised suffrage from 1870, the state constitution did not recognize the rights of blacks to vote, hold political office, or serve as jurors until 1880. The ban on black testimony in civil cases was lifted in 1869, but it remained in force in criminal cases until 1881.[12]

Blacks faced fewer obstacles in the administration of justice. It appears that they may have received harsher punishments than whites when convicted of crimes, but blacks were not singled out as a group that was particularly given to criminal activity. Their rights before the law received far better protection than was the case for either native Americans or the Chinese in nineteenth-century Nevada.[13]

Much of the initiative for social, political, and legal advancement came from organized groups within the black community, particularly in Virginia City and Carson City. The First Baptist Church was located in Virginia City from 1863 to 1866 and was reputedly a focal point for black religious and social activity. An African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church existed in Virginia City on an irregular basis from 1863 until at least 1869, and appears to have shared ministers with the AME Zion Church in Carson City.[14] Prince Hall Masonic lodges existed in both cities during the 1870s and 1880s. Virginia City's Ashlar Lodge No. 9, formally established by warrant in 1867 but probably active before that date, served the political as well as social and fraternal needs of the community. Destroyed by the 1875 fire, its hall was replaced by a new building dedicated in 1877, and the organization continued to serve the black community until at least 1880. Carson City's St. John's Lodge No. 13, meanwhile, existed from 1875 to perhaps 1886.[15]

In addition to serving the immediate needs for religious fellowship and social interaction, churches and lodges linked black Nevadans to the network of black organizations in California and beyond. Such linkage, and the wider feeling of community that it encouraged, aided the exchange of information and strategies. It helped to bring focus to other group activities, ranging from literary and social clubs to celebration balls commemorating the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation.[16] Black churches and lodges were social centers that lent institutional support to the pursuit of social, political, and economic advancement by individuals and groups.

1890–1940

The decline of mining production throughout the state by 1880 sent Nevada into an economic depression that persisted until 1900.[17] Depression fostered a general population exodus in which the number of blacks decreased "from 396 people in 1880 to 242 in 1890 and 134 in 1900, declines of 38.9 and 44.6 percent. The black populations in Virginia City and Carson City, which had been large enough to sustain various community organizations, dropped to quite low levels. In 1890 there were 37 blacks in Storey County and 56 in Ormsby County; in 1900 the totals were: Storey, 9; Ormsby, 12."[18] By 1910 the black population had increased to 513, but declined to 346 in 1920. The year 1930 began a process of slow but sustained growth in which the 516 blacks increased to 664 in 1940.[19]

Despite the absence of published studies of black Nevadans during this interim period, the lack of stability evident in the population statistics suggests a few guarded inferences. If it is reasonable to suggest a relationship between a population's size and concentration and its ability to maintain key social institutions, then the pronounced population decline between 1880 and 1900 (242 to 134) makes it unlikely that the small residual black community could maintain the range of community institutions that were established in the earlier period.[20] The recovery of the population in 1910 may have led to the resurrection of such institutions, particularly where the African-Americans settled in concentrated numbers. If such concentration continued, then the decline in 1920 still left a community large enough to maintain key social institutions such as churches. The increase in 1930 marked a return to the general level of population persistence (at 0.6 percent of the total state population) that was characteristic of the peaks of African-American population before World War II.[21] It may have also provided the stable critical mass necessary to sustain the broader range of social institutions that has become typical of the modern African-American community.

The importance of 1890 as a watershed year in the history of black Nevadans lies in the possibility that the decade witnessed the end of the general pattern of acceptance of African-American participation in social, political, and economic life that had marked the 1880s. By the early twentieth century the use of racial epithets was routine in newspapers, and racial parody became a fixed social

institution in such forms as "coon balls" and other events within the white community. African-Americans were forced to leave some Nevada communities, and prevented from taking up residence in others. Police in Reno in 1904, with the active support of the white community, enforced a policy of arresting and expelling unemployed African-Americans. Similar arrangements may have operated in other communities in northern Nevada as well.[22]

The worsening racial climate in Nevada between 1890 and 1945 corresponds with, and may have been encouraged by, larger national trends. Between 1890 and 1910, the movement to eliminate African-Americans from southern political life was largely completed. State-based regional programs of disfranchisement effectively reasserted white political hegemony by recreating a white monopoly of the tools of political power. White social supremacy was sealed by a rigid system of segregation. The Supreme Court's validation of the "separate but equal" basis for segregation in *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* in 1896 elevated the differential treatment of whites and nonwhites to the status of a sociopolitical norm for the entire nation. The continuation of white economic dominance reinforced this structure. It was fine-tuned by the socially sanctioned use of extralegal violence to keep African-Americans in their assigned place at the mudsill of American society.

The Pullman Club baseball team of Tonopah. Newspaper reports indicate they played several games in 1907. The Pullman Club was a saloon on the northwest end of Tonopah. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

Black Nevadans, like their contemporaries in other parts of the West, escaped most of the political proscriptions of a segregated society. But they did feel the sting of social and economic discrimination and the general effects of a maturing system of racist beliefs. Francis G. Newlands, who represented Nevada in the House of Representatives and the Senate from 1893 until 1917, viewed African-Americans as "an obstacle to progress in politics" and recommended that the Democratic party platform of 1912 include a plank that would repeal the Fifteenth Amendment.[23] During the mid-1920s, several klaverns of the Ku Klux Klan operated openly in Nevada, recruiting members in Caliente and Las Vegas; Elko, Ely, Wells, and Winnemucca; Reno, Carson City, Fallon, and Gardnerville.[24] The Nevada Klan was chiefly concerned with "law and order" issues, and often operated in conjunction with fraternal organizations such as the Odd Fellows' Lodge. But the use of the rhetoric of racial and xenophobic prejudice was always the key to attracting attention and members.[25] Other developments in the late 1920s set the stage for an increase and reconcentration of the state's African-American population. In 1929 Congress commissioned the construction of the Hawthorne Naval Ammunition Depot and Boulder (Hoover) Dam. This designation of southern Nevada as the recipient of a massive infusion of capital, combined with the millions of dollars dedicated to the construction of highways throughout the state, produced an economic boom that softened the effects of the Depression on the Nevada economy. Thousands of new workers trekked to southern Nevada seeking jobs in the various construction projects. Those who were hired on the dam project needed housing and services close to the construction site. The federal government met this need by subsidizing the building of Boulder City, some thirty miles southeast of Las Vegas.[26]

African-Americans did not benefit directly from the major construction projects of the 1930s, nor do they appear to have received indirect benefits as a result of the boom economy that these projects sustained. Although local unions made efforts to ensure that local laborers received priority in hiring on the massive new projects, African-American workers were not included in such strategies. The formation of the Colored Citizens Labor and Protective Association in May 1931 brought little improvement. African-Americans continued to be barred from membership in the craft unions in Las Vegas, and were especially hard pressed to maintain their economic stability in the face of the increased competition for jobs that was the signature of the Depression years. The migration of thousands of newcomers to the Silver State further limited economic opportunities of the resident African-American community. African-Americans who came to Nevada hoping to find a job on the dam project were discouraged from waiting for openings and were usually urged to move on. Some who stayed fell victim to the selective enforcement of vagrancy laws. They were consigned to chain gangs in which they performed the full range of public service jobs that, in better times, might well have been the province of menial municipal employees.[27] At its employment peak in the summer of 1934, the dam

project provided more than 5,200 jobs. Fewer than 20 were held by African-Americans.[28]

The selective enforcement of vagrancy laws is but one example of the systematic discrimination against blacks that emerged in the 1930s. The fact that the Boulder Dam project attracted job-hungry workers from every section of the country helped to produce a blatant system of racial discrimination. New workers, particularly those from the segregated South, brought the cultural baggage and social mores of their home regions to the desert of southern Nevada. Local white employers and retail businesses responded by barring African-Americans as workers or customers. The color bar that was erected to eliminate African-American customers from the red light district on Block Sixteen quickly spread to the downtown area. And because a significant proportion of the new African-American population was also from the South, there was no immediate protest against the imposition of such practices.[29]

The cast of *Etheopia at the Bar of Justice,* presented by A.M.E. Church of Reno at the Civic Auditorium on May 22, 1935. Seated left to right: Business–J. E. Suttles, Opposition–Laura G. Fluis, Profession–O. H. Hammonds, Etheopia–Loraine Stevens, Love–Viola Harris. Middle row standing: Public Opinion–Clara Russell, Oppression–Marie Jones, Page–Laurence L. Lawrence, Jr., First Slave from Africa–A. Wright, Director's Assistant–C. E. Mitchell. Back row: Mercy–Winona Henderson, Chrispus Attacks [*sic?*]–J. Clapton, Declaration of Independence–Emma Tanner, Negro Church–Rev. R. E. Handy, Civil War Veteran and Labor–Eugene Coleman, Negro Womanhood–Leona Walker (also Director), Slave of '61–Louis Lawrence. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

Clear patterns of spatial segregation were also apparent in the 1930s. The homes and businesses of African-Americans were concentrated within a two-block area bounded on the south by Stewart Street and just opposite blocks Sixteen and Seventeen. By the mid-1930s there were a few black-owned businesses there. Those businesses began to appear as a result of the discriminatory practices in the downtown area. But spatial segregation was also influenced "by the appearance of many Southerners in the Boulder Dam work force, and the erection of an all-white town (Boulder City) which housed many of those workers, [and] also by the ever-increasing number of tourists who began arriving as early as 1934."[30] The practice of segregation quickly spread to most public accommodations as well as to public facilities such as movie theaters, public swimming pools, and brothels. Even the city and county jails housed prisoners on a racially segregated basis.[31]

The 1930s were a turning point for the state's economy. The decade marked the first effective attempts to break Nevada's dependence on mineral production as the basis of the state's economy. Legalized gaming was restored after a twenty-year absence, and the residency requirement for acquiring a divorce was reduced to a six-week period. The divorce industry had long paid dividends to the local economy, particularly in Reno, but the economic impact of legalized gambling would not be felt until World War II.[32]

The construction of Boulder Dam, meanwhile, was a watershed in the development of southern Nevada. It provided the local area with a massive infusion of capital, both financial and human. It provided a stable source of much-needed water and electrical power, and it constituted an engineering marvel that would become a major tourist attraction. The Boulder Dam project transformed southern Nevada from a sleepy backwater into an incipient colossus with a potential "for industrial and commercial development much greater than anything available upstate."[33]

All of these developments pointed to the growing possibility of making Nevada a destination resort. Given the changed predisposition of white Nevadans by the 1930s, these developments also implied that this destination resort would be racially exclusive. Segregation and discrimination would await African-American residents and visitors alike in the Silver State.

1940 to the Present

Because Nevada's economy was supported by the federal government during the depths of the Depression, the state was poised for a massive growth in population by the beginning of World War II.[34] The decade of the 1930s, a harbinger of trends to come, witnessed a population growth of 21.1 percent. The 1940s, 50s, 60s, and 70s, saw the state population grow by 45.2, 78.2, 71.3, and 63.8 percent, respectively.[35] Increases in the state's African-American population made even these healthy figures appear pale. In the decades between 1940 and 1980, this population grew by 154, 319, 49, and 54.2 percents.[36]

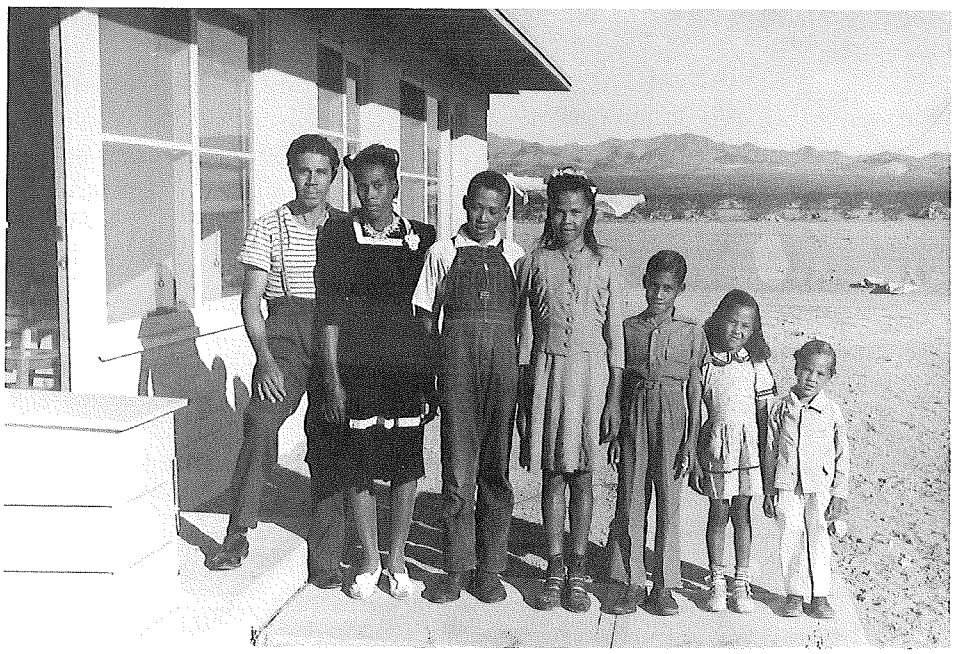
The bulk of this African-American population growth coincided with the development of Clark County and Las Vegas during World War II. The location of major defense industries in southern Nevada brought another wave of immigration, particularly from the southern states. By 1940 the population of Clark County reached 16,384. Las Vegas continued to be the hub of the county, and the re-emergence of legalized gaming was beginning to pay dividends in terms of hotel expansion to serve the growing tourist traffic to Hoover Dam by as early as 1939. Hotel expansion produced a silent policy of squeezing out the few African-American businesses in the area by denying license renewals, or requiring relocation as a condition of renewal. Because both Boulder City and North Las Vegas barred residence to African-Americans, the effect of either tactic was to drive them into the McWilliams Townsite that would later become the Westside.[37] Despite the efforts of local African-Americans and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to prevent such discrimination,[38] the pattern of forcing a concentration of the African-Americans into one section of Clark County intensified during the 1940s.

The war years shaped the modern economy of Nevada. The outbreak of World War II gave new importance to the state's mining industry, particularly with regard to the many minerals that were crucial to the war effort.[39] The need for copper and magnesium was especially acute, and the decision, in July 1941, to build the Basic Magnesium extraction plant on 2,800 acres of desert between Las Vegas and Boulder Dam had an immense impact on the economy of southern Nevada.[40] Because this commitment was made less than a month after President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, the construction and operation of the Basic Magnesium plant would serve as a test case of the order's ban on racial discrimination in the work force of defense contractors.[41]

The logistics of magnesium production placed severe strains on the existing communities of Clark County. Two separate plants would be required for extraction and processing, and new housing would be required for the 13,000 plant workers and their families. Because of the distance between Las Vegas and the Basic Magnesium site, the need for new housing led to the creation of a new townsite at Henderson that was more populous than Las Vegas itself.[42]

For black Nevadans, the construction and operation of Basic Magnesium brought new job opportunities, and a growing population. It also continued the residential segregation that began in the 1930s. Those who lived in Henderson were confined "to a section of the northeast side of the highway called Carver Park. . . . White workers lived in Victory Village and in the newly constructed Huntridge section of Las Vegas." Carver Park, a federally funded housing project built by Paul Revere Williams, an African-American architect based in Los Angeles, included 324 residential units: 64 dormitory rooms for unmarried males, 104 each of one-bedroom and two-bedroom units, and 52 three-bedroom units.[43]

According to Lubertha Johnson, a former recreation director of the project:



The first family to move into Carver Park standing outside their new house, October 13, 1943: left to right—Robert C. Williams; Mrs. Rosie Lee Williams; Theodore, 14; Cleopatra, 13; Roscoe, 9; Clarice, 5; Yvonne, 4. (*Henderson Public Library Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Nevada Las Vegas Library*)

Carver Park was just a little black world. . . . It was *completely* separate. It was more like going back to Mississippi, although most of the people there came from Arkansas and Louisiana. Still, they were southern people who had just come directly from the South. . . . Most of them had come from areas that were similar to what we created at Carver Park. In other words, they were more or less the have-nots, and they came because they wanted to earn more money. They had nothing to lose by coming to Las Vegas. But the majority of the black people did *not* live in Carver Park; they lived in West Las Vegas.[44]

The attraction of the West Side lay in the inexpensive cost and broader social life available there as compared to the costly and isolated social environment of Carver Park. As Johnson recalls, "There was *nothing at all* for people to do—not any kind of activity, not even a church, which was most important in their lives." All African-American employees at Basic Magnesium were eligible to live at the project. But despite the superiority of its facilities (adequate living space within the units, domestic hot water, swamp-cooler systems, in-home laundry facilities, and even pre-school programs for resident children) and the general shortage of adequate modern housing available to African-Americans in Clark County, most of the black employees of Basic opted for life on the Westside. "We didn't fill the place up," Johnson recalls, so "finally, they had to divide the

property at Carver Park and put white people in one part of it and black people in another."[45]

So most of the new arrivals settled, along with the longtime black Las Vegans who were being forced out of the downtown area, on the Westside, where they faced acute shortages of adequate housing. The area became a mix of permanent dwellings and crude shacks, shanties, and tents. For African-American newcomers, it provided temporary shelter but little in the way of sanitary and other facilities. Unlike the longtime African-American residents of Las Vegas, the newcomers, who came principally from a region of the South that centered on northeastern Louisiana (Tallulah) and southcentral Arkansas (Fordyce), were not unfamiliar with such living conditions or with the system of segregation from which they sprang. Many had experienced similar conditions at home or along the trek that took them first to the timber mills of Arizona before their final arrival in Nevada. What mattered most was that wages offered for the demanding physical labor at Basic Magnesium were far higher than those that could be earned in the equally demanding timber industries or cotton fields back home. The fact that so many of the new arrivals had been recruited by the word-of-mouth network of extended families may have further softened the tensions created by the close, crude living conditions of the Westside.[46] The Westside also offered a host of churches and other centers for social activity.[47]

Despite their initial acceptance of the dictates of segregation, African-American workers at Basic Magnesium were not willing to accept such conditions indefinitely. Urged on by the local chapter of the NAACP, and irritated by racially determined employment levels as well as by petty requirements for racially exclusive work crews, water fountains, and lunch facilities, "black workers staged a walk-out to protest the segregation which existed at the plant. The strike was investigated by a representative of the Fair Employment Practices Commission [as provided by Executive Order 8802], who recommended an end to the practice of segregation on the job site." This ruling brought little change to the private behavior of individuals.[48]

The closure of Basic Magnesium in November 1944 had a major impact on the African-American community in southern Nevada. The loss of this most lucrative source of employment forced some to scramble for poorly paid jobs in the growing hotel industry. Others, particularly women, moved into domestic service in private homes.[49]

The African-American experience at Basic Magnesium proved to be more than a case study of the conditions facing blacks in Clark County during the early war years. It provided, in fact, a model of the three elements that would be central to the African-American experience in Nevada until the early 1970s. First, the lure of available jobs ensured continuous population growth. Second, racial discrimination in the marketplace limited African-American employment prospects to the most menial and poorly paid jobs. Such practices were a constant threat to the economic viability of members of the African-American commu-

The royal court of the "Keno Queen" beauty pageant sponsored by the New China Club of Reno, 1961. Bill Fong, the owner of the casino, stands amid the ladies of the court. (*New China Club Collection, Nevada Historical Society*)

nity, be they employees or small business owners. Third, and perhaps most crucial, the dismantling of segregation, and the economic, social, and residential discrimination that it sanctioned, would require the active involvement of Nevada's African-American community.

The quest of black Nevadans to exercise the civil rights guaranteed to other Americans began haltingly in the late 1930s and mid-1940s, with failed attempts to get the state legislature to end racial discrimination in "city-owned facilities" and public accommodations, and to remove the ban on interracial marriage.[50] By the 1950s, NAACP branches in Reno-Sparks, Hawthorne, and Las Vegas had taken the lead in the fight to convince state and municipal governments to bar public discrimination by government agencies and blatant private discrimination by individuals. The latter form of discrimination had become so commonplace during the 1950s and 1960s that Nevada was given the well-earned label of the Mississippi of the West.[51]

Not even the quest for profit was strong enough to induce the acceptance of African-American customers in the burgeoning casino industry. Even though casinos accepted the utility of African-American entertainers in attracting white customers, African-Americans themselves, be they "talent" or customers, were barred by the rulers of the gaming industry from all major casinos until the

A civil rights demonstration on the steps of the Capitol in Carson City in the early 1960s. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

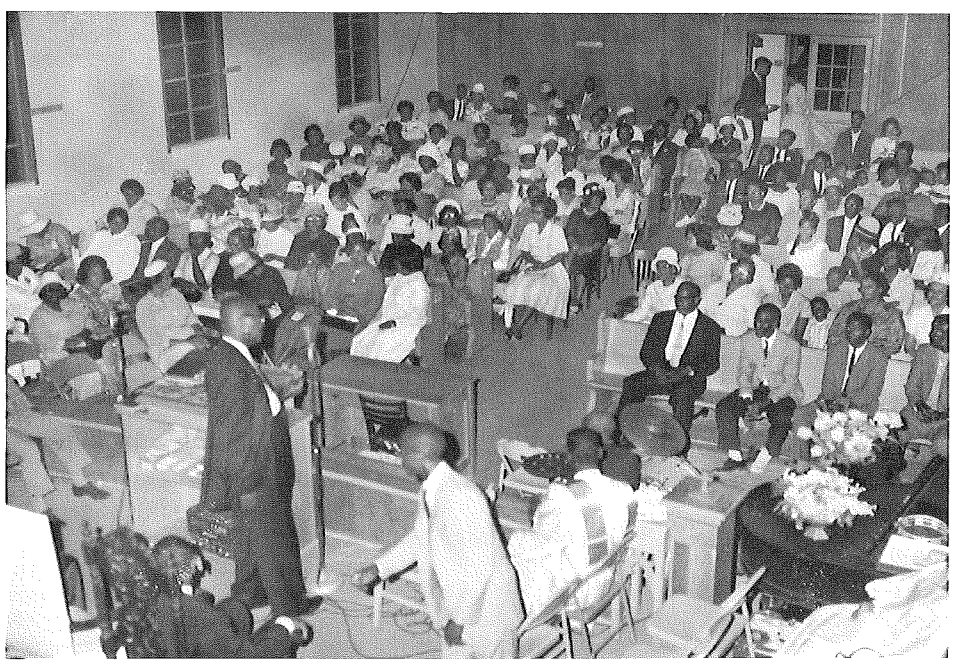
1960s. African-Americans were consigned to smaller clubs that catered to a predominantly black clientele. These included the Moulin Rouge, the Brown Derby, the Harlem Club, and Fox's Restaurant in Las Vegas, and the New China Club and another small enterprise on Lake Street in Reno.[52]

The pervasive private discrimination facing black Nevadans was more resilient than its public counterpart, largely because it fell outside major federal civil rights legislation until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.[53] This last piece of legislation altered that situation by protecting American citizens from discrimination and/or segregation "in voting, education, and the use of public facilities." It also established the federal Equal Employment Opportunities Commission and required all programs and agencies that received federal assistance to end racial discrimination or forfeit federal funds.[54]

Nevada's response to the changing national racial climate of the 1950s and 60s was mixed. Matters requiring immediate resolution because they were in conflict with federal law were brought into compliance quickly and with little rancor. The Nevada Advisory Committee to the federal Civil Rights Commission was established in 1958; the miscegenation law was repealed in 1959; the 1961 legislature barred discrimination in state-based apprenticeship programs as well as in employment by state and local government, and by agencies that contracted with them. But schools in Las Vegas remained in de facto segregation until 1972.[55]

The response to the assault on private acts of discrimination was more bitter. It took threats of sit-ins and civil rights demonstrations on the Las Vegas Strip, and protests over public accommodations during the 1960 Winter Olympics, to turn the attention of the legislature to the oppressive private discrimination that had become endemic to Nevada. The fight to establish a state Equal Rights Commission, first as a civil rights study group, then as an agency with the power to investigate and make recommendations regarding allegations of discrimination, and finally as a government entity with the power to impose penalties on those who violated the civil rights of others, was as highly charged as it was tortuous. So, too, were the fights to eliminate the private discrimination in services by businesses licensed by municipalities, discrimination in the hiring practices of businesses in the private sector, and discrimination in housing.[56]

The dearth of published information on the contemporary African-American community in Nevada suggests to some that the struggle to carve out a better economic and social future peaked in the 1960s and 70s. Intuition suggests that this struggle continues. African-Americans have made important though limited strides in Nevada politics. The changing pattern that substituted corporate for private ownership in the gaming and hotel industry has brought the nucleus of a new class of talented, upwardly mobile African-Americans to the financial and commercial centers at both ends of the state. The rapid growth, improved pros-



A rally for civil rights at the Second Baptist Church in Las Vegas. Bishop C. C. Cox is presiding over a portion of the congregation. (*Donald M. Clark Collection, Special Collections Department, University of Nevada Las Vegas Library*)

perity, and broader opportunities available to African-Americans in southern Nevada have allowed that community to disperse beyond the boundaries of the old Westside. Similar changes in the Reno-Sparks area are slowly bringing more African-American families into the area's up-scale residential neighborhoods.

But problems remain. Black Nevadans are still often perceived by the wider society in the shadowy tattered stereotypes of a bygone era or in the graphically bright relief of contemporary inner-city life. African-Americans continue to be overrepresented in low-paying, dead-end jobs, in school dropout rates, and in crime statistics. Perhaps far too many black Nevadans have internalized the stereotypes ascribed to them. Too many African-Americans may be mired in the obstacles of the past to seize the opportunities of the present. Perhaps, for some, the grim realities of the present preclude any glimpse of the promise of the future.

But the past has proven that they, too, can persist. They, too, will endure. They, too, will contribute to the evolving entity that is Nevada.

NOTES

[1]Elmer R. Rusco, "A Demographic Description of Nevada," in "Ethnicity and Race in Nevada," Elmer R. Rusco and Sue Fawn Chung, eds., *Nevada Public Affairs Review* (1987), 8–9; *U.S. Summary* 1990 Census of Population and Housing (Bureau of Census: Washington, D.C., 1991).

[2]Michael S. Coray, " 'Democracy' on the Frontier: A Case Study of Nevada Editorial Attitudes on the Issue of Nonwhite Equality," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 21 (1978), 189–90.

[3]Elmer R. Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?" Black Nevadans in the Nineteenth Century* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), 22–28; Russell R. Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 2d ed., (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 392; *cf.* Michael S. Coray, "Negro and Mulatto in the Pacific West, 1850–1860: Changing Patterns of Black Population Growth," *The Pacific Historian*, 29 (1985) 19–20.

[4]Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?"* 125–31.

[5]*Ibid.*, 14–16, 125, 134–41, 142–47.

[6]*Ibid.*, 136–37. Based on the frequency in which each occupation was reported in the federal censuses, Rusco maintains that the majority relied on "nonhousehold service" occupations (i.e., bootblacks, chambermaids, cooks, hotel and laundry workers, porters, stewards, waiters, and janitors). "Unskilled labor" (undefined) was the second largest occupational category, followed closely by "keeping house," and "barbers," wholly separate categories within Rusco's framework. Next in frequency was a catchall "other" category (barkeepers and bartenders, calciminers, clerks, expressmen, fishmongers, gardeners, hostlers, messengers, midwives, prostitutes, teamsters, et cetera). Less frequent were "craftsmen, foremen, etc." (into which Rusco consigned blacksmiths, bricklayers, butchers, carpenters, dressmakers, milliners, moulders, painters, paperhangers, seamstresses, shoemakers, and tailors), "private household workers," "farmworkers," "miners," "farm owners or managers," and, finally, "managers, officials, and proprietors" (of boarding and lodging houses, restaurants, and saloons), and "professionals."

[7]*Ibid.*, 151–66.

[8]*Ibid.*, 42–44.

[9]Coray, " 'Democracy' on the Frontier," 200, 204; Phillip I. Earl, "Blood Will Tell: A Short History of Nevada's Miscegenation Laws," in "Ethnicity and Race in Nevada," Rusco and Chung, eds., 82.

[10]Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?"* 36, 80–92; Myron F. Angel, *History of Nevada with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers* (1881; rpt. Berkeley: Howell-North, 1958), 230. Rusco argues that the small size of the black school-age population made it economically impractical to abide by the school law that not only required segregated schools, but stipulated that they must serve a minimum of ten students. Nevertheless, several failed attempts were made to establish such schools in Storey County and Carson City in 1867, and in Virginia City in 1867–68. Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?"* 84–85.

[11]Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?"* 125, 128–29.

[12]*Ibid.*, 45–50, 56, 58–59.

[13]*Ibid.*, 199–203. For a discussion of the growth of anti-Chinese sentiment and its effect on Nevada politics, see Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 166–69.

[14]Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?"* 174–79.

Angel reports that an AME church was organized in Virginia City 1873, "and in June, 1875, [there was] erected a small frame church on E Street between Union and Center streets. It was destroyed in the conflagration in the following October, and no attempt was made to reorganize the society . . . until 1879, when the Rev. Mr. Wier was appointed Pastor, and remained less than a year. Because of lack of financial support no pastor was subsequently appointed." Angel, *History of Nevada*, 209. The AME church was a product of the independent church movement of the late eighteenth century. Led by Richard Allen and Absolom Jones, black northerners attempted to break the pattern of white domination of church affairs and the increasing institutional discrimination against black worshippers by establishing racially separate independent churches within the Methodist tradition. The several black Methodist congregations that were formed in the 1790s in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, and Maryland were organized into a formal organization in Philadelphia in 1816, with Allen serving as the founding bishop. The AME church became, thereafter, the leading denomination among black Methodists throughout the nation. It was also the first national institution established by and for blacks in America. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans*, 6th ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 93–94; John H. Bracey, Jr., August Meier, and Elliott Rudwick, eds. *Black Nationalism in America* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970), 3–4; Edgar A. Toppin, *A Biographical History of Blacks in America since 1528* (New York: David McKay Company, 1971), 247.

[15]Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?"* 179–83. Prince Hall Masonry was established by Prince Hall, a native of Barbados who had immigrated to Boston in 1765. A leader of Boston's black community during the Revolutionary War, Hall was inducted into "a British army lodge of Freemasons attached to a regiment under General Gage near Boston" on March 6, 1775, just prior to the outbreak of the war. In 1776 Hall was licensed to establish the "first organized body of black Masons in America," African Lodge No. 1. The lodge was not authorized, however, to grant degrees. Thwarted in his attempt to gain such authority from "white Provincial Masonic authorities in America" after the war, Hall petitioned the British Grand Lodge in 1784. Three years later, he obtained a charter and became the master of African Lodge No. 459 in Boston. In 1791 or 1792 he organized and became grand master of the African Grand Lodge. By 1792 Hall was issuing warrants for the establishment of lodges in Philadelphia and Providence. By 1815 three major black lodges had emerged across the nation. These lodges, like their white counterparts, were generally racially exclusive, but mutual visitation and cooperation across the color bar was quite common among Masons during the nineteenth century. Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 95; Toppin, *Biographical History of Blacks*, 309–10.

[16]Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?"* 183–84.

[17]Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 167–73.

[18]Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?"* 206.

[19]Rusco, "Demographic Description," 8.

[20]*Ibid.*

[21]*Ibid.*, 8, Table 3.

[22]Rusco, *"Good Times Coming?"* 206–14.

[23]William D. Rowley, "Francis G. Newlands: A Westerner's Search for a Progressive and White America," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 27 (1974), 70–71.

[24]Craig F. Swallow, "The Ku Klux Klan in Nevada during the 1920s," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 24 (1981), 205–6. The Klan enjoyed only temporary success, and was strongest in the northeastern and southern regions of the state. The Las Vegas klavern was the only one to survive into the 1930s. *Ibid.*, 204–20.

[25]*Ibid.*, 218–20.

[26]Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 273–77.

[27]Roosevelt Fitzgerald, "The Evolution of a Black Community in Las Vegas: 1905–1940," in "Eth-

nicity and Race in Nevada," Rusco and Chung, eds., 26; *idem*, "Blacks and the Boulder Dam Project," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, 24 (1981), 256.

[28]Fitzgerald, "Blacks and the Boulder Dam Project," 255–60. Fitzgerald suggests that despite fluctuations in a labor force that always numbered in the thousands, no more than sixty-five blacks were employed on the dam project at any given time. *Ibid.*, 260.

[29]Fitzgerald, "Evolution of a Black Community," 26.

[30]*Ibid.*

[31]*Ibid.*, 27.

[32]Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 278–82, 285.

[33]James W. Hulse, *Forty Years in the Wilderness: Impressions of Nevada, 1940–1980* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986), 7.

[34]Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 297.

[35]*Ibid.*, 404.

[36]*Ibid.*, 405 (computations for the black population are based on Table 1); Rusco, "Demographic Description," 8.

[37]Roosevelt Fitzgerald, "The Demographic Impact of Basic Magnesium Corporation on Southern Nevada," in "Ethnicity and Race in Nevada," Rusco and Chung, eds., 29.

[38]*Ibid.*, 29–30.

[39]Hulse, *Forty Years in the Wilderness*, 20; Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 307–8.

[40]Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 310; Hulse, *Forty Years in the Wilderness*, 20; Fitzgerald, "Demographic Impact of Basic Magnesium," 30.

[41]Fitzgerald, "Demographic Impact of Basic Magnesium," 30; Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 388–89.

[42]Fitzgerald, "Demographic Impact of Basic Magnesium," 30.

[43]*Ibid.*, 30–31; Jamie Coughtry, ed., *Lubertha Johnson: Civil Rights Efforts in Las Vegas: 1940s–1960s* (Reno: Oral History Program, 1988), *xii*.

[44]Coughtry, ed., *Lubertha Johnson*, 14.

[45]*Ibid.*, 14–15, 17. According to Johnson, most women who lived at Carver Park were housewives, and did not use the preschool program because outside employment was unavailable. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

[46]Fitzgerald, "Demographic Impact of Basic Magnesium," 31–32. Basic Magnesium paid base wages of $1 per hour, and $1.50 for overtime. The typical forty-eight-hour work week allowed an employee to make $52 per week, and, because subsistence cost averaged about $7 per week, a sizable portion of each paycheck could be sent to maintain family members who remained at home, or used as working capital to purchase land and housing on the Westside, where lots sold for about $75 during the 1940s. *Ibid.*, 33.

[47]The Westside supported a Church of Christ Holiness (Reverend Lester Cruise, pastor), a Methodist church, (Reverend Cook and, later, Reverend Stevens, pastors) and a Baptist church as well. The local chapter of the NAACP was also located here, as were the Catholic services, which assisted blacks in times of personal trouble or misfortune. Coughtry, *Lubertha Johnson*, 20–22, 33–34.

[48]Fitzgerald, "Demographic Impact of Basic Magnesium," 33–34.

[49]*Ibid.*, 34–35; Coughtry, *Lubertha Johnson*, 36.

[50]Elmer R. Rusco, "The Civil Rights Movement in Nevada," in "Ethnicity and Race in Nevada," Rusco and Chung, eds., 76.

[51]*Ibid.*, Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 393.

[52]Rusco, "Civil Rights Movement," 75; Sue Fawn Chung, "The Chinese Experience in Nevada: Success Despite Discrimination," in "Ethnicity and Race in Nevada," Rusco and Chung, eds., 47; Coughtry, *Lubertha Johnson*, 31–32, 38.

[53]Congress passed major civil-rights legislation in 1957 and 1960. Both acts centered on voting rights. The Civil Rights Act of 1957 ended the laissez-faire stance of the federal government toward civil rights that had existed since 1875. It established the United States Commission on Civil Rights, "authorized the federal government to bring civil suits in its own name to obtain injunctive relief, in federal court, where any person was denied or threatened in his right to vote." It also charged the Commission on Civil Rights to "investigate allegations of denials of the right to vote, to study and collect information concerning legal developments constituting a denial of equal protection of the laws, and to appraise the laws and policies of the federal government with respect to equal rights.

. . . The real significance of the legislation [was] its recognition of federal responsibility and its reflection of a remarkable and historical reversal of the federal policy of hands-off in matters involving civil rights." The Civil Rights Act of 1960 extended the provisions of the 1957 act to registrars of voters in primary, special, and general elections and declared those registrars agents of the state. In essence, the 1960 act held the states responsible, and thereby legally liable, for the action of its agents. Franklin and Moss, *From Slavery to Freedom*, 438–40.

[54]*Ibid.*, 449.

[55]Rusco, "Civil Rights Movement," 76; Earl, "Blood Will Tell," 82; Coughtry, *Lubertha Johnson*, 41.

[56]Rusco, "Civil Rights Movement," 78–80; Joseph N. Crowley, "Race and Residence: The Politics of Open Housing in Nevada," in *Sagebrush and Neon: Studies in Nevada Politics*, Eleanore Bushnell, ed., (Reno: Bureau of Governmental Research, 1979), 59–79.

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

THE COMSTOCK NEIGHBORHOOD AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY PHOTOGRAPHS

A Call to Locate Undocumented Historic Photographs of the Comstock Region

Bernadette Francke

The Comstock Historic District Commission has begun an intensive historical photographic survey of the Comstock Mining District. The purpose of the survey is to document the architectural and social history of the region from 1860 through 1900. The results of this work will assist historians, agencies, and, more important, the commission itself in fulfilling its mandated efforts to encourage the maintenance, protection, and development of the cultural resources of the Comstock Historic District.[1] The District encompasses approximately 28,000 acres and includes Virginia City, Gold Hill, Silver City, Sutro, and a portion of Dayton. The commission's responsibilities cover a wide range, from reviewing proposed exterior architectural features of all new and existing structures within the district boundaries to assisting local governments in preservation efforts, as well as providing heritage education for civic groups and children in the classroom.

In order to fulfill these responsibilities, the Historic District Commission needs access to the widest possible range of information about the Comstock. Historic photographs are one important reservoir of information, but the locations of such photographs, from a myriad of sources, have only recently been recorded and indexed. The index of the location of these photographs will expand as

The author is inspector/clerk of the Comstock Historic District Commission in Virginia City. She reviews specific construction or alteration designs for structures and sites within the district, works with the Commission on general construction or alteration designs for their approval, maintains an office and library open to the public, builds reference sources of documents and photographs concerning the history of the area, assists local governments with preservation efforts, provides public education programs and serves as a liaison between the public and the commission.

people and agencies with previously undocumented materials learn of this project and contribute to the effort.

The following example demonstrates the kind of research that a photographic survey can foster. Period photographs can be compelling because their images communicate a wealth of information and raise questions. Photographs can also answer questions and allow pursuit of new aspects of historical research, taking us a step further in understanding our past.

The author selected the location of 66 South B Street, Virginia City, for further elaboration because the mansion that once graced that address in an area known as Millionaire's Row now exists only in a few surviving photographs. The subject provides an opportunity to bring to life a currently empty lot in a part of town once noted for its influential inhabitants. The use of primary written sources such as newspapers and court, tax, and census records on the people and buildings associated with the property, together with historic photographs, provides a glimpse into the past. And in some cases it is the picture that tells the most.

On the slopes of Mount Davidson, facing into the eastern skies, stood the mansion of Abram M. Edgington at 66 South B Street in Virginia City. This elegant dwelling, built in 1872, was the home of Edgington, his wife Mary Bailey Edgington, formerly of Gold Hill, and his step-daughter Lillie. Edgington, a native of Springfield, Ohio, had resided in Virginia City since the early 1860s. As a well-known citizen he was involved in various ventures on the Comstock. In the early 1860s he served as a deputy sheriff in Storey County and was appointed deputy internal revenue assessor in 1865. Having also worked as an accountant for the Morgan Mill in Ormsby County, he was appointed superintendent of the Union Mill and Mining Company in Virginia City in 1867.[2]

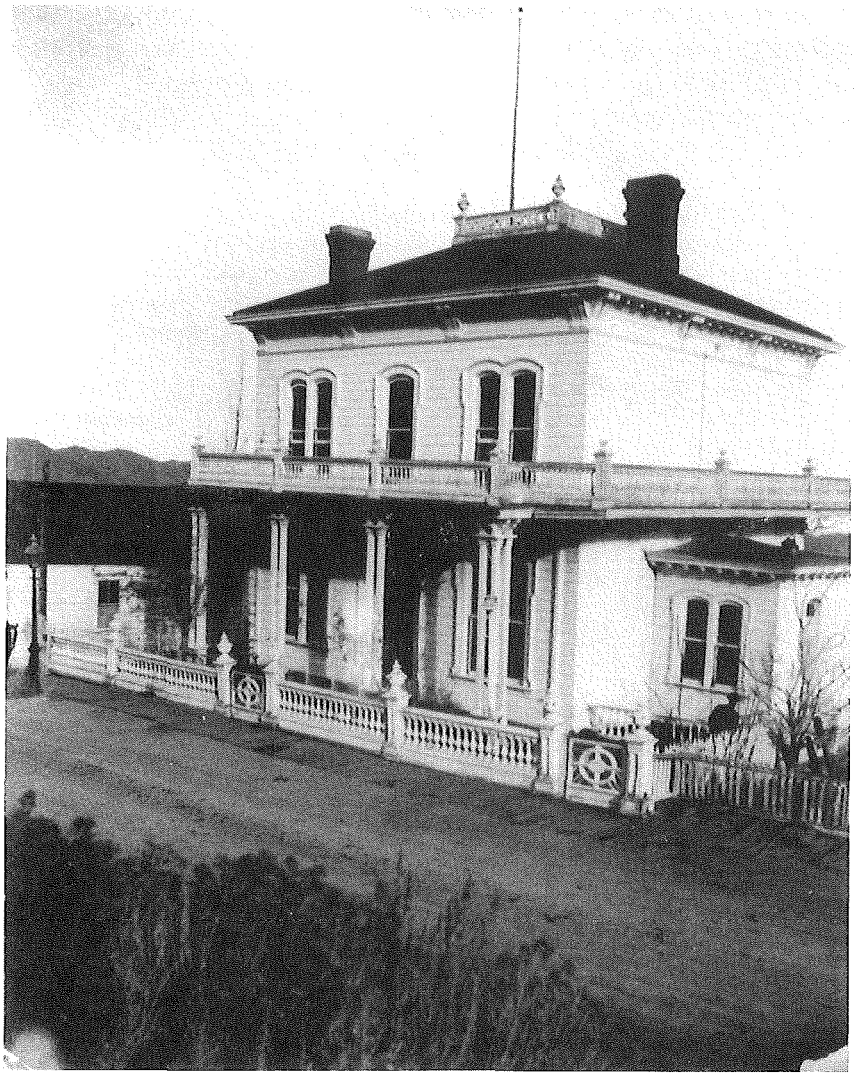
The Edgington mansion was referred to in the *Territorial Enterprise* as "quite an ornament to the city,"[3] and often captured the attention of local newspaper reporters. The mansion was described in detail, beginning with the landscaping:

> . . . no where in this place [Virginia City] have we seen a sward of green, thick and perfect as carpets, as Mr. Edgington's grounds. Nothing superior to it can be seen in any country. Not a particle of underlying earth can anywhere be seen. This sward is composed of a mixture of blue grass and white clover, the latter now just in bloom. The grounds about the building are terraced with flowers, shrubs and ornamental trees.[4]

The mansion itself was a French Second Empire design, one of the popular architectural styles of the day. The Second Empire style takes its name from the 1852–70 reign of Napoleon III, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte. During this time, many Parisian buildings displayed this then modern form. It was also known as the General Grant style, since many government buildings constructed in the United States during President Ulysses S. Grant's administration are of this design.[5]

The mansion of Abram M. Edgington formerly stood at 66 South B Street in Virginia City. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

Elements typical of Second Empire architecture include a height of at least three stories and a steep mansard roof punctured with dormer windows and decorated with slate surface and deep bracketed eaves. The mansard roof was a unique double-pitched roof that François Mansart (1598–1666), a French archi-



The house of James G. Fair, which was across B Street from the Edgington house. (*Comstock Historic District Commission*)

tect, incorporated in his designs. This roof design was utilized as a result of a prohibition against more than six floors along the boulevards in Paris.[6] With the roof extending downward, a seventh story could be created and not look like an extra floor. The mansard roof with dormer windows became popular in the Victorian era.

The house to the south of the Edgington mansion belonged to H. Blauvelt, president of the Gold Hill Bank. This structure, now known as the Castle, was built in French Chateau style and displays the fine interior furnishings enjoyed

by the wealthy of the Comstock. Directly across the street from the Blauvelt house was the residence of James G. Fair, a United States senator and one of the famous Bonanza Kings. Indeed, this was an elite neighborhood.

The Edgingtons furnished their mansion in the high Victorian style of the day. According to the *Territorial Enterprise* of December 8, 1872,

> the principal rooms on the lower floor are the parlor, sitting-room, dining-room, kitchen, etc. The hall is provided with an elegant gasolier. The burner is surrounded by numerous glass pendants which in the night time resolve the light into all the colors of the rainbow. The parlors are glossed in tints, one being rose color and the other French gray. The doors and window cornices are handsomely grained in imitation of walnut and laurel. The plastering was a handsome piece of workmanship, the wall being of snowy whiteness. The ceilings are ornamented with center pieces and cornices. The parlor carpet is an Axminster landscape pattern. The parlor furniture is upholstered principally with satin damask, each one of the chairs being of a different pattern. The parlor is provided with a large bay window, the drapery over which is of satin, the prevailing colors being green and gold. The furniture in the sitting room is upholstered with brocatel of silver-gray color.

The second and third stories were not as thoroughly described as the main floor, but the article nevertheless continues, affording additional insight into the life of the occupants.

> The bed-rooms are supplied with stationary bevel washstands, having marble tops. The pleasantest one of these apartments has been assigned to Mlle. Lillie the pet of the household. The furniture in this room is black walnut of elegant design and superior workmanship. The carpet is a light blue of beautiful figure. The room, taken all in all might be a home for a fairy. In another bed-room we noticed an elegant English walnut bedstead of antique pattern with a dressing bureau to match. On the third floor the owner of the house has appropriated to himself a room which he has converted into a smoking room or man rookery. This room is provided with easy chairs, card table and sideboard. The walls of the room are ornamented with pictures of dogs, horses, etc. Here Abe entertains his bachelor friends when they grow weary of the society of ladies. Himself, and family are given to hospitality and persons visiting the house will always find the latch string out.

In 1874 Lillie Edgington, the step-daughter, was married to Mark Strouse (also Strause, Strous), a prominent Jewish butcher in Virginia City. Strouse, a native of Germany, arrived in Virginia City in June of 1863, after crossing the Sierra with 5,500 sheep and lambs. Strouse formed a partnership with his brother Abraham and, after the brother's death, went on to develop the largest butchering business in the state. Located at 18 South C Street, it was known as the Central Market in Virginia City. Strouse served as city treasurer for two terms, was elected chief of police, and was also active in the Volunteer Fire Department, serving as foreman of Company No. 1 for seven years.[7] His 500-acre stock ranch in Honey Lake Valley was often listed in the local newspaper as part of his advertisement for the Central Market: "In addition [Strouse] will always keep on

A. M. Edgington. (*From Myron Angel, ed.*, History of Nevada with Illustrations and Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men and Pioneers [*Oakland, Thompson & West, 1881*], *585*)

Mark Strouse. (*From Angel,* History of Nevada, *570*)

hand beef fattened on his own ranch in Honey Lake Valley, which has not its superior on the coast."[8]

The wedding of Mark Strouse and Lillie Edgington was the social event of the season. Primary sources allow a look into Lillie's life. Concerning Lillie's wedding, Alf Doten, owner of the *Gold Hill Evening News,* made this notation in his diary:

Drove to St. Paul's church—so crowded inside and out that we staid in front in carriage and watched motion—when crowd came out we drove up to Edgington mansion on B. St. to reception—Grand Affair—Big Crowd—Whole house thrown open—plenty of waiters—band of music—big time—plenty of cake and wine—dancing, etc.[9]

The *Gold Hill Evening News* published a full description of the wedding reception, stating that

the happy bride and groom stood in a beautiful alcove at the south side [of the parlor] festooned with lace curtains and almost surrounded by luxuriantly growing natural flowers as the mother of the bride happily expressed it, all reared by herself, including the fairest Lily of them all.[10]

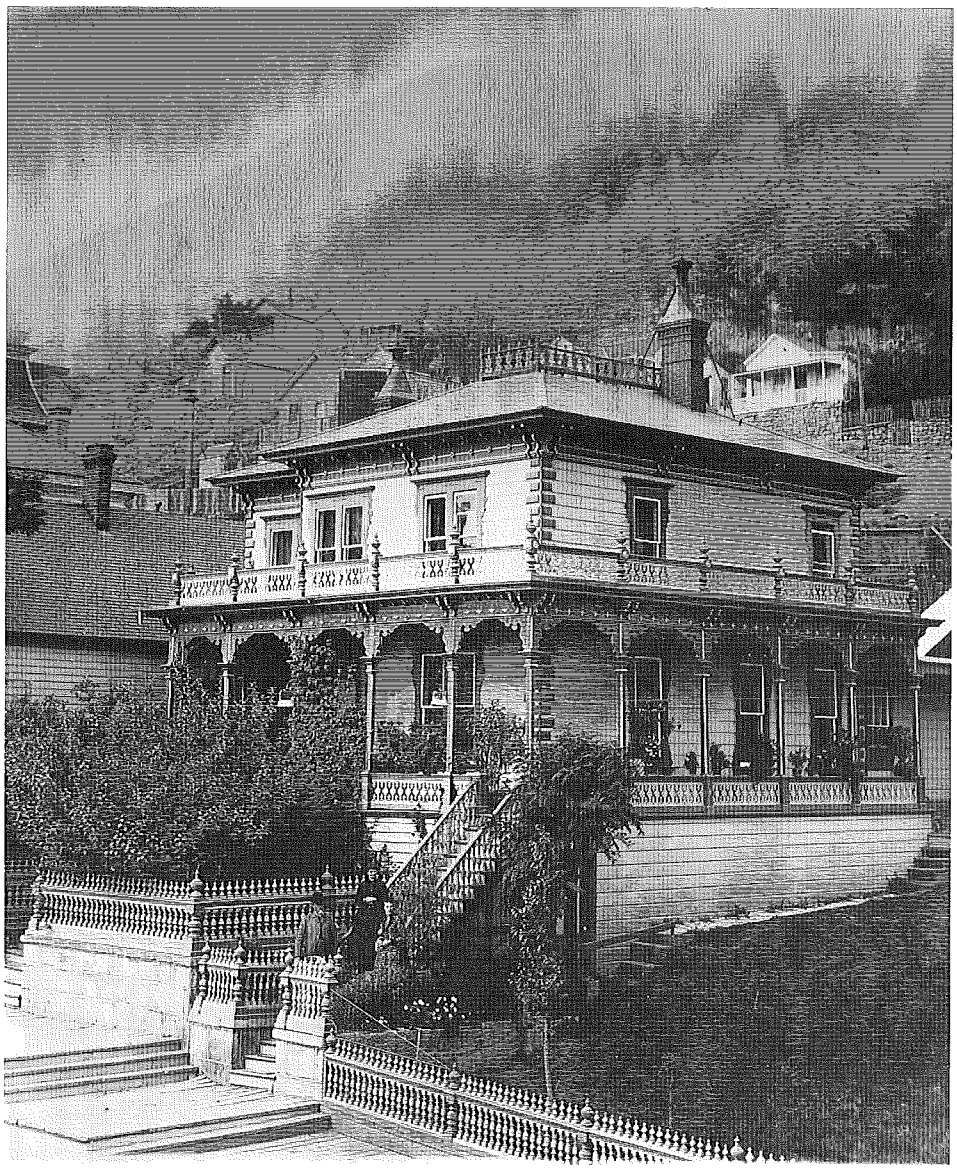
Lillie and Mark Strouse resided at 56 South B Street, four lots north of her parents.[11] Their home featured elaborate Italianate design elements—paired windows, brackets, and a semicircular arched doorway. Today, this house is referred to as the A. M. Cole Mansion and is a private residence. Italianate and Second Empire designs were the two most popular architectural styles among the wealthy of Virginia City.

In his book, *My Memories of the Comstock,* Henry M. Gorham told a story of the lively Lillie Edgington Strouse shopping in the Meyer's Dry Goods store in Virginia City. Lillie asked Mr. Meyers what new items he had in stock that "might interest a female who wanted to look her best in company?" On learning that Mr. Meyers had received a stock of jabots, two and half dozen at $10.00 each, Lillie responded, "If you will promise not to import any more of them, you may send them all up to the house and charge them to Mark," adding, "No tart in this town is going to run around and say that she had the identical neck fixin's that Lily [sic] Edgington has."[12]

Lillie and Mark had three children, two daughters, born November 14, 1874, and May 13, 1876, respectively, and a son, born Sept 6, 1877, who died shortly after birth.[13]

Abram M. Edgington, in ill heath for several years before his death, died in October of 1875,[14] just two months after selling his house to M. Lynch on August 4, 1875, for $25,000 in gold coin.[15] According to the 1880 United States Manuscript Census, Margaret Lynch, a widow, lived in the house with her five children, all under the age of fifteen. Also living there were a nephew, William E. Hill, who listed his occupation as engineer, and a servant named Maria Grady, who was twenty-one years old. Although Edgington passed away in Sacramento, he was interred in the Virginia City cemetery with great honors, and his elaborate headstone stands today. His will named his wife Mary and J. C. Ralston, then general agent from the Bank of California, as executors.[16]

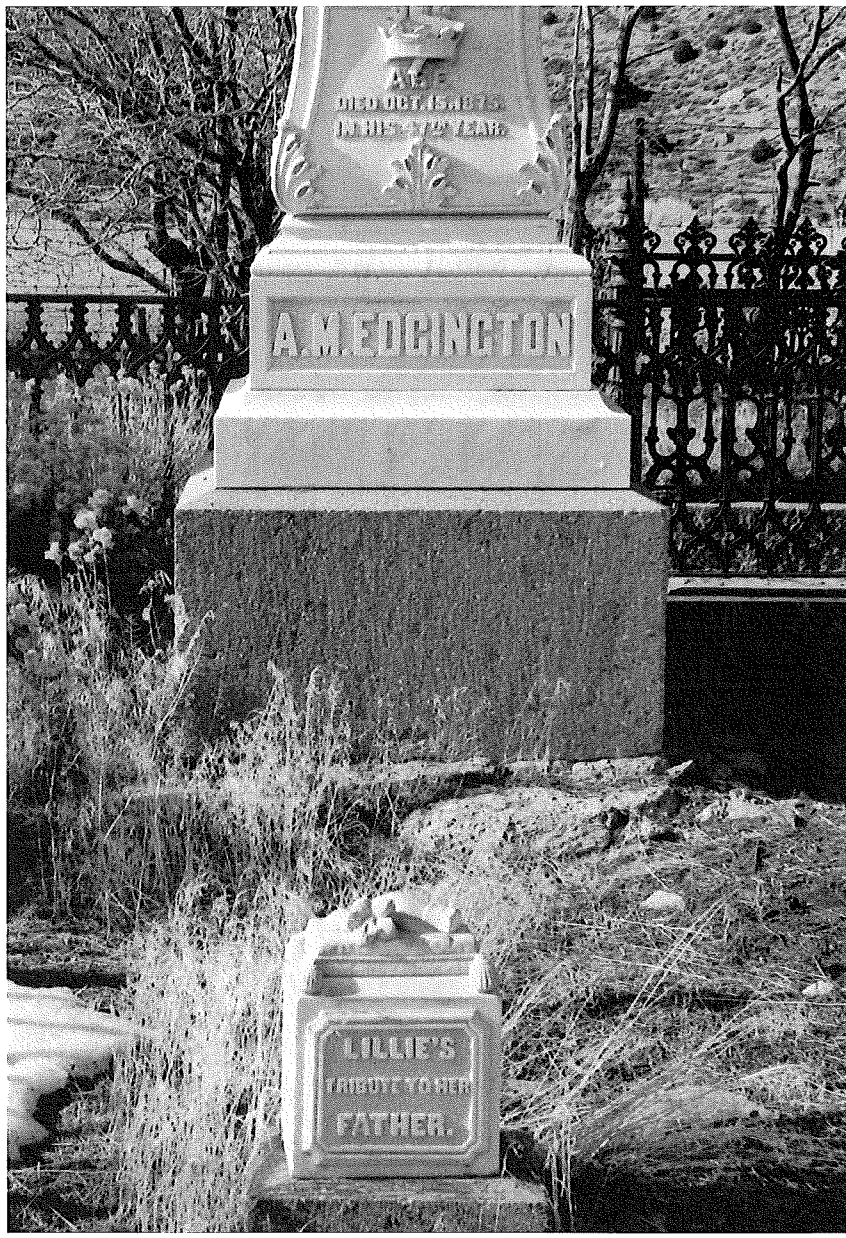
Mark Strouse divorced Lillie in August 1878, citing indiscretions between Lillie and J. C. Janes, which allegedly took place at Bowers's Mansion, a popular



The Strouse residence at 56 South B Street. (*Comstock Historic District Commission*)

resort of the day.[17] Janes, long-time principal of the Virginia City High School and then a private tutor to the children of James Fair, denied that there had been anything improper. As reported in the *Reno Evening Gazette,*

> while [Janes] was East a variety of circumstances led her to marry Strouse and ever since Mr. Janes has been determined to have his old lady-love back again. . . . The day after the divorce was granted Lillie and Janes were married in Reno.[18]



A. M. Edgington's grave in the Virginia City cemetery. (*Comstock Historic District Commission*)

The local newspapers did not forget about the Edgington family or Strouse and continued to carry reports about them. Lillie went on to her debut as an actress, appearing in a production of *The Lady of Lyons* at the Baldwin Theater in San Francisco. Reviewers for both the *San Francisco Chronicle* and the *Territorial*

Enterprise,[19] wrote positive appraisals of her performance, but her acting career then fades into historical obscurity. On March 1, 1881, the *Territorial Enterprise* tells us that "Mark Strouse has shaken the dust of the Comstock off his feet . . . and gone to San Francisco, to start the same business. We are sorry to lose Mark." An article of 1882 notes that Strouse had been fined $10 in San Francisco for "assault and battery of Leopold Aaron."[20] In July of 1882, the *Virginia Evening Chronicle* reports that "Mrs. Abe Edgington, well known on the Comstock, is building a hotel in Butte, Montana."[21]

With the passage of time no one is quite certain of the final fate of the Edgington mansion in Virginia City. The lot stands empty now. Only the massive carved stones lining the lot high above B Street yield slight clues about the "pleasant home in a region where nature seldom smiles and where the only outlook is upon rugged mountains and dreary deserts."[22] Local tradition maintains that the house was torn down and its materials used to build seven bungalows in Reno. Meanwhile, research continues on both the mansion and the individuals associated with it. Whatever its destiny, it served as one of the most glorious homes on the Comstock, reflecting the opulence and taste that gave Virginia City its world-wide acclaim.

The combination of historic photographs with the written accounts provides a broadened perspective of the Comstock area. While the Edgington mansion no longer exists, its photographic portraits enable us to see it as it was, serving to answer questions, verify existing information, and enhance our understanding of the past.

Because there were many people and buildings on the Comstock about which little is now known, the entire mining region is in need of historical investigation. Locating and indexing previously undocumented photographs will not only expand the body of knowledge that currently exists on the Comstock region, but will help assure the preservation of these priceless documents. Readily available historic photographs will also enable the Comstock Historic District Commission to interpret our past and augment the commission's ability to determine what is appropriate for our future preservation goals.

Notes

[1]Nevada Revised Statutes, Title 33, Chapter 384.005 (added to NRS by 1979, 643; A 1989, 22)
[2]Myron Angel, ed., *History of Nevada* (Oakland: Thompson and West, 1881), 585.
[3]*Territorial Enterprise*, 8 August 1874.
[4]*Ibid.*, 8 December 1872.
[5]Marcus Wiffen, *American Architecture since 1780* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1979), 103.
[6]Norval White, *The Architecture Book* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1976), 189.
[7]Angel, *History of Nevada*, 570.
[8]*Territorial Enterprise*, 15 August 1878.
[9]Walter Van Tilburg Clark, ed., *The Journals of Alfred Doten, 1849–1903* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1973), 1217.
[10]*Gold Hill Evening News*, 15 January 1874.
[11]*1878 Business Directory of the Pacific States and Territories* (San Francisco: L. M. McKenney).

[12]Henry M. Gorham, *My Memories of the Comstock* (San Francisco: Suttonhouse Publishers, 1939), 133.
[13]*Territorial Enterprise*, 14 November 1874, 16 May 1876, 7 September 1877.
[14]Angel, *History of Nevada*, 585.
[15]Storey County Archives, Recorder's Office, Deeds Book no. 39.
[16]Storey County Archives, Clerk's Office, Edgington Estate Papers.
[17]Storey County Archives, Clerk's Office, Strouse Divorce Decree.
[18]*Reno Evening Gazette*, 16 August 1878.
[19]*Territorial Enterprise* 9 December 1880.
[20]*Virginia Evening Chronicle*, 19 July 1882.
[21]*Territorial Enterprise*, 22 July 1882.
[22]*Ibid.*, 10 July 1872.

BOOK REVIEWS

"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A History of the American West. By Richard White. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. 644 pp., illustrations, figures, tables, bibliography, index.)

Even before its publication, Richard White's new study was a much talked-about book in western history circles. Editors at the University of Oklahoma Press had pulled off an admirable coup in convincing one of the busiest and most productive young historians of the American West to present a new look at the region. White's first book, *Land Use, Environment, and Social Change: The Shaping of Island County, Washington* (1980), and two subsequent works, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (1983) and *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (1991), contain the themes of conflict and conquest of the natural environment and native peoples by a world-wide capitalist system that exerts inexorable pressures for change, transformation, and subjugation of peoples and environments.

It comes as no surprise that this survey of the American West, which extends in much detail into the twentieth century, expresses the convictions and the viewpoints of what some are calling the New Western History. The "new" history of the American West originates from the perspective of a generation that has grown beyond the coalition ideology of the New Deal, the righteous patriotism of World War II, and the comfortable accommodationist materialism of the postwar Eisenhower years. It claims its intellectual roots in the turmoil, strife, and diametrically opposing ideologies of America's divisive society in the 1960s. It comes down decidedly upon the side of the have-nots and the dispossessed in a region that has outwardly exuded optimism and prosperity. The text demonstrates an organizational efficiency, peppered with social criticisms that by most accounts can be considered a product of the politically correct professorate and, perhaps, of a generation that seeks revenge against a society that forced it to fight the Vietnam War. The very title of White's text, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own,"* suggests an uncompromising, competitive individualism that by the end of the story is recognized as self-defeating. Where earlier historians saw success and triumph, he sees failure and victimization.

Many of the ideas put forth here have grown out of complaints about who or what has been left out of western history—complaints made in various forums

supported from a variety of public-money sources over the last decade. No field in American history better deserves a realignment of basic assumptions. The glib acceptance of the triumphal progress of American civilization in the West has been a hallmark of understanding the growth of the American nation. This assumption can be traced back to the patriotic historians of the nineteenth century and, of course, to that proponent of the frontier theory of American history, Frederick Jackson Turner. Both Turner and nostalgic patriotism are old targets of historical criticism predating World War II. Earlier generations of historians have done much to set the story straight, and it would seem not to require a new critical analysis.

But the revisionism of this work is not aimed at the immediate post-Turner generation, but rather at the consensus history that engrossed American history writing in the post-World War II period. Into this generally self-satisfied view of the American past the story of the American West seemed to cement itself with a particularly firm bond, reflected especially in the general synthesis put forth by Ray Allen Billington in his widely used text, *Westward Expansion,* first published in 1949. White's new western history suggests that many were left out, suffered, and died early deaths because of the brutality of the system and the lack of social and protective legislation in western states. The federal government itself failed to protect individuals from the power of the corporations, and the native peoples from the onslaught of American individualistic enterprise. Even that revered western institution, the ranch, does not go unscathed in this critical revision. The individual family ranches are seen maintained largely by uncompensated family labor, which is the single ingredient that makes them economically viable.

A tarnished and critical picture of the western past does not rest well with many traditional western history buffs. They look with an approving eye at the progress of western life and nostalgically reflect upon the pioneer experience, with a romanticized view of the native Americans who bowed nobly and inevitably to civilization. Regardless of whose sensitivities are offended, however, this book sets the new dimensions and terms of western history. They include a consideration of multicultural questions in western life, environmental questions, gender roles, and the realities of class struggle in a neo-Marxian sense.

All of this is packaged in a history of a region that increasingly lays claim to a distinctive past within the nation. While not as psychologically disturbing as some of the dementia of the southern regional experience, western history and an increasing number of western literati identify with common forces that can be said to have produced a regional history. In this respect White's book has a linkage to the earlier historians of the West. They believe there is a region and a process of development within it, and that both place and process have distinctive qualities. Yet one is bothered by Frederick Jackson Turner's assertion in the *Rise of the New West* that western history is not regional history because it is the stage upon which American national history is enacted. White probably

agrees with this, but he also insists upon seeing the West as a part of a developing world capitalist economy.

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Mirage-land: Images of Nevada. By Wilbur S. Shepperson with Ann Harvey. (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1992. xix + 190 pp., notes, index.)

In *Mirage-land,* noted Nevada historian Wilbur Shepperson catalogues and critiques images of Nevada promulgated by residents, visitors, commentators, reporters, promoters, and provokers. Not only does the author present an array of images for the reader's enjoyment, in delightful prose he traces the origins of the images to historic event, personal experience, or personal pique, and notes how image can often assume a life of its own, continuing to exist with little or no foundation in fact, sometimes even becoming an obstacle to the understanding and assessment of the state. The underlying purpose of this work is to explore the portions of Nevada's history that are unique and to offer some explanation as to why Nevada, a region with few resources and apparently little to recommend it, has for the greater part of two centuries—even before its excursion into the netherworld of legalized gambling and sensational adult entertainment—attracted the attention of regional and national press, often reflecting in a multifaceted mirror the concerns and issues of the nation.

Shepperson organizes his study chronologically, following the major dividing points in Nevada history. Concentrating solely on printed references to Nevada, he draws images from a variety of sources: diaries, newspapers, magazines, travelogues, promotional literature, letters, fiction, reports, histories. Beginning with the shocked reactions of early explorers and emigrants to the immensity of the Nevada landscape, and their comments on its geography and climate, he then traces the attention of local, regional, and national commentators during the Comstock era. The third chapter examines themes emphasized in accounts of Nevada during its own Great Depression (1880–1900), exploring such issues as reclamation, prize fighting, and the emergence of an image of Nevada as the "black sheep of the states."

Moving to the twentieth century, Shepperson focuses in chapter four on the progressive image of a prosperous rural society founded on federally funded reclamation, also paying attention to published statements on mining, labor, road construction, and a variety of utopian experiments transplanted to the arid Nevada environment. Perhaps the most important chapter in the book is the fifth, which chronicles printed references to the state's experience from 1920 to

1955, the era in which most of the major themes associated with contemporary Nevada emerge: divorce, gambling, tourism, organized crime, and nuclear testing. Chapter six ambitiously seeks to analyze and synthesize the most recent forty years of the Nevada experience and touches upon numerous topics, organizing them into three dominant images of the state: the last frontier, modern Nevada, and the avant-garde. Finally, chapter seven summarizes and suggests why the Nevada image resembles a mirage, ever changing shape, eternally illusive.

Shepperson's efforts are to be applauded, for his task was Herculean, not only because of the amount and variety of sources to be examined, but because of the nature of the material itself. As the title suggests, images of Nevada have the maddening quality of assuming different shapes and, upon closer view, often disappearing entirely. The author notes that the difficulty in such a study lies in finding consistency and even sincerity in what is written about the state, in separating the genuine from the promotional, in sifting through the sheer amount of sometimes puzzling and contradictory material, and in trying to capture an image which is still developing.

As with all pioneering studies, this work is significant because of the questions it raises for historians to ponder. For example, chapter six touches upon the emergence of Las Vegas into the evolving Nevada image and its supplanting of Reno as the state's most prominent city. It is left to future scholars to explore in depth the impact of Las Vegas on the Nevada image. In addition, because of its focus on the printed page, the study omits the intriguing views of Nevada perpetuated in film (with the exception of the comments on *The Godfather*).

Nevertheless, this work is of major importance to all who are interested in Nevada and the West. While scholars in other western states, notably California, have begun to explore the impact of their states' images on the national culture, this is the first systematic assessment of the Nevada image held in the nation's consciousness. As such it is ground-breaking in its significance, and is of interest to residents of the state, both new and continuing, as well as to those who are concerned with the cultural life of the nation.

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Winter of Entrapment, A New Look at the Donner Party. By Joseph A. King. (Toronto: J. D. Meany Publishers, 1992. 265 pp., foreword, preface, illustrations, notes, appendices, bibliography, index.)

In his preface to the second edition of *Ordeal by Hunger*, George R. Stewart comments that no new information about the tragedy of the Donner Party is

likely "unless some miracle of excavation at Alder Creek should bring to light the diary which Tamsen Donner is said to have kept" (p. vii). Indeed, no significant new information about the tragedy has been uncovered since then. Yet Joseph A. King's *Winter of Entrapment* makes it clear that new interpretations of the known sources on the Donner Party still are possible. The author, who taught English at Diablo Valley College (Pleasant Hill, California) until his retirement, has written extensively about Irish immigrants in America and Canada. Not surprisingly, this book grew out of an interest in the Irish immigrants who traveled to California with the Donner Party in 1846, especially the Patrick Breen family. Much of *Winter of Entrapment* is a history of the Breen family, starting with their immigration from Ireland to Canada in the 1820s and continuing with their life in Iowa and then in California. In large part, the Donner Party's ordeal is told through the eyes of the Breens. The book also includes chapters on survivors Lewis Keseberg and John Baptiste Trudeau (also known as Trudo, Trubode, Truvido), along with an extensive bibliography on the Donner Party and appendices that reproduce several accounts (including John Breen's "Pioneer Memoirs," the Bathtub Papers, the Miller-Reed diary, and Harry J. Breen's sketch) that are not well known.

Winter of Entrapment is a revisionist history that attempts to correct a number of biases, stereotypes, fictions, and unjustified uses of unreliable evidence in other accounts of the Donner Party. Much of the effort centers upon the accounts of survivor William Eddy, who was the principal source of one of the earliest, and most influential, accounts of the Donner Party to be published, Jessy Quinn Thornton's *Oregon and California in 1848*. Eddy, according to at least some of the other survivors, had a tendency to tell tall tales, to exaggerate, and to self-aggrandize. For this reason, the earliest histories of the Donner Party, including those by C. F. McGlashan and H. H. Bancroft, depend less on Eddy and Thornton than on other accounts. Despite this, however, later Donner Party accounts rely heavily upon the Eddy/Thornton version. George Stewart's *Ordeal by Hunger* takes the brunt of the criticism. Professor King argues, first of all, that the book contains many inaccuracies introduced by relying too much upon the Eddy/Thornton accounts of the tragedy. Second, Stewart's penchant for "blurring the line between fiction and history" (p. 158) makes *Ordeal by Hunger* more a work of fiction than history. Third, Stewart introduces into the book a host of personal prejudices, biases, and stereotypes typical of the period in which he wrote, giving a slanted, subjective, and simply erroneous interpretation of the personalities involved, As might be expected, WASPS such as James Reed, William Eddy, and John Denton fare the best in the book while members of other ethnic groups such as Trudeau and Irish-Catholics like the Breens are roundly castigated and assigned questionable virtues. Professor King's chapter on John Baptiste Trudeau portrays the teamster in a much more favorable light by focusing on Trudeau's own account of the tragedy and on the reminiscences of Eliza and Georgia Donner.

To me, most of this is convincing. The book, however, is not free of problems. Most readers knowledgeable of the Donner Party, for example, will be surprised to find that the Graves-Reed contingent on Donner Creek lived in "two or three cabins" (p. 45); one double cabin best fits survivor accounts and the observations of later emigrants. Also, after noting the pejorative meaning of "Digger" (p. 33), the author unabashedly uses the word throughout the book when discussing the native Americans of the Great Basin. Still, *Winter of Entrapment* is a most interesting new look at the major sources and literature of the Donner Party that will be valuable to scholars and lay enthusiasts alike.

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Founding the Far West: California, Oregon and Nevada 1840–1890. By David Alan Johnson. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. 474 pp., illustrations, notes, index.)

This book focuses on the makers of the state constitutions of California (written in 1849), Oregon (1857), and Nevada (1864), and their political culture. These were the first three states created in the American West. The three are dealt with discretely, so if a reader wishes to read mainly about Nevada, for example, it is possible to do so. Yet Professor David Johnson has a comparative purpose: and despite their being adjacent to each other, the three states were actually quite different in background and direction. The book is divided into thirds and within each third, each state is treated in turn. In "Politics and Society," Johnson discusses the society, economy, and politics of each territory. Then in "Personality, Ideology and Culture," he writes of the political and ideological interplay in each constitutional convention. His interest is on the makers and their interplay, not on the resulting constitutions. Central to his treatment is his biographical approach, where he emphasizes the lives of a few selected leaders in each convention. In "History and Memory" Johnson carries the story, and the biographies, forward from statehood.

According to the author, Americans coming west in the mid-nineteenth century carried their ideas with them. They were a part of a larger political culture. They then adapted their "familiar political practices" to the local conditions they found. Californians and Nevadans at their state constitutional conventions spoke the vocabulary of Jacksonian Democracy. Oregonians, quite differently, spoke in terms of "classical republicanism." This is explained because the type of settler who went to Oregon was somewhat less materialistic in goals than his mining-driven counterparts in the other two areas. What was happening in the

three states, however, was driven by larger forces occurring in the general American society. The United States "went through a process of modernization," evolving from an individual-oriented—society to a more industrial, corporate dominated, monopolistic one. Johnson is interested how the experiences of the three states fit into this larger theme.

The California convention had a majority of Anglo-American leaders who believed the gold rush experience had created "a genuine democracy of free individuals." They envisaged a society where individual entrepreneurs would prosper. In the final analysis the California constitution "was unremarkable as constitutional doctrine; from beginning to end it merely repeated the received wisdom." The resulting constitution was outmoded as early as 1879, when a second constitutional convention convened. In the meantime, the leadership of the first constitutional convention failed to play a lingering role in the development of the state. By 1880, California had become a totally changed society: more urban and industrialized, its agriculture broken into larger units and its mining no longer in the hands of individual entrepreneurs. Oregon's experience was greatly different. In writing their constitution, the Oregon leaders attempted to write "fundamental law" and articulate "first principles." The writers were a comparatively homogenous group, reflecting emigrants who were agrarians opting at least temporarily out of the growing market economy. After statehood, Oregon remained a staid backwater, and it was not until after 1880 that it began to boom. Because of this slow process of change, the leadership of the Oregon constitutional convention remained important to the political and judicial functioning of the state for many years.

Nevada is a third story. Of the thirty-five delegates at the 1864 Nevada convention, all but two had moved to Nevada from California. Almost all were directly or indirectly connected with mining. They were in a larger sense workers in an increasingly capital intensive economy. Johnson gives extensive biographical information on four of the delegates (John Collins, Charles De Long, J. Neely Johnson, and Thomas Fitch). In the end, the needs of the supraindividual corporation won out in the writing of the Nevada Constitution. After statehood, Nevada became even more dominated by corporate control. This increasing monopoly of power manifested itself in the lives of the ordinary workers with the formation of labor unions on the Comstock. The age of individualism was over, and the new Nevada became a "stark antithesis" to the "old California" in that there was a "complete denouement of the individualist ethos that had drawn ambitious self-seeking men to California in 1849." The result was a "world that suppressed mortal individuals in favor of the artificial being of the corporation." The experience of Nevada, California, and to a lesser extent Oregon, reflected the similar transformation which changed the American economy and society during the Civil War period.

Professor Johnson's research is exemplary. The lengthy endnotes are most valuable to read and study on their own. This exceptionally detailed book has a

great density of information, and the book both merits and demands close reading. To be truthful, the author does not always make the going easy for the reader. One suspects at times that the detail is more than what is necessary to support the thesis. This reviewer believes the book would have been improved by a more comprehensive treatment of the respective state constitutions rather than of the constitution makers. Surely a discussion of Nevada's pathmarking "Paramount Allegiance clause," where the constitution makers acknowledged the supremacy of the federal government, would have fit in nicely with the book's larger thesis. Yet the author's meticulous, painstaking research commands great respect, and the fundamental argument is both interesting and persuasive. The book is a worthy, important addition to the study of the political culture of the West in the nineteenth century.

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