

Nevada

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Historical Society Quarterly

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RIVAL ROAD BUILDERS

Private Toll Roads in Nevada, 1852-1880

David T. Beito and Linda Royster Beito

Although the word *privatization* had not yet entered the vocabulary, early Nevadans thoroughly understood the underlying concept. During the nineteenth century, they often gave leading roles to companies and voluntary associations in schooling, social welfare, sanitation, and many other services. On occasion, the authority of nongovernmental institutions, such as mining districts and livestock associations, even extended to such basic functions as legal adjudication and punishment. Although not as well known to modern historians, Nevada's experience with private long-distance roads was especially significant. Between the 1850s and 1880s, local entrepreneurs financed, built, and operated more than one hundred toll roads or turnpikes. This represented an enormous amount of activity for an area with so few people.¹

Prior to the era of toll roads in Nevada, the main transportation networks were little more than rough trails. Attention to maintenance ranged from poor to nonexistent and many travelers were left to their own devices. The Comstock mining boom in the northwest-central section of Nevada put an unbearable strain on this existing road system—such as it was. In the one-year period 1859-60 alone, the state's population increased from fewer than five hundred to more than six thousand.²

The condition of the Placerville State Road, a mountain artery on the section of the Overland Trail that connected Virginia City with Placerville, California, illustrated these transportation dilemmas at their worst. In *A Peep at Washoe*, traveler J. Ross Browne described it as "absolutely impracticable for

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wheeled vehicles" in many places. The trail

was literally lined with broken-down stages, wagons, and carts, presenting every variety of aspect, from the general smash-up to the ordinary capsize. Wheels had taken rectangular cuts to the bottom; broken tongues projected from the mud; loads of dry-goods and whiskey barrels lay wallowing in the general wreck of matter; stout beams cut from the roadside were scattered here and there, having served in vain efforts to extricate the wagons from the oozy mire.

After a harrowing journey that year, Horace Greeley warned, "I cannot conscientiously recommend the route I have traveled to summer tourists in quest of pleasure, but it is a balm for many bruises to know that I am at last in California."³

Public officials were largely helpless to mitigate these frustrating travel conditions, at least by direct action. Until the late 1870s and later in many cases, governments had neither sufficient legitimacy nor taxation capacity to undertake serious construction. In a typical example, the Board of Commissioners of Ormsby County appointed a road supervisor but did not give him actual power to build roads. Tongue in cheek, the surveyor general of Nevada lamented that as to "suggestions concerning county roads, reference is respectfully made to my former report, in which, it is believed, they have been presented at least one generation too early."⁴

In their search to improve their transportation infrastructure, early Nevadans began to embrace the model of the private toll road. The idea was an old one. Many feudal lords in medieval Europe, for example, charged travelers to use their roads. In addition, associations such as guilds and religious orders operated toll bridges. The long-distance private toll road first arose in Great Britain in the early eighteenth century.⁵

Although these methods never caught on in the American colonies, local governments authorized tolls for other purposes, such as private ferries. The first toll roads did not appear in the United States until the 1790s. Legislatures, first in the Northeast and then in other regions, issued thousands of franchises to profit-making companies. While the prospect of paying tolls sometimes provoked grumbling, even many critics acknowledged that the quality had improved markedly over that in the previous system of state and county roads. The spread of toll roads followed closely behind western settlement, and by 1852, the territorial legislature of Utah had issued a few franchises for roads in the area that is now modern Nevada.⁶

As in much else, however, Nevadans most looked to California for guidance. Toll roads had become ubiquitous there since the gold rush of 1849. As former Californians, many pioneers on the Comstock had observed how toll road builders had kept pace with a booming mining economy and surmounted an imposing terrain, conditions also present in Nevada. According to the *Reese River Reveille* of Austin, "California has shown that a moderate toll is the best



Virginia City, Nevada, 1880. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

guarantee for practicable roads through mountainous sections with a sparse population."⁷

The first major tollroad projects in Nevada centered on the mountain passes between Virginia City and northern California—the perilous Placerville Road to the south of Lake Tahoe and the Henness Pass to the north. As early as 1859, the *Territorial Enterprise* of Virginia City had called for privatization, lamenting that as “the matter now stands, it is strictly speaking nobody’s business to keep the road open.” In 1861 and 1862, the legislatures of California and Nevada finally acted by franchising private companies to operate each state’s section of the two roads.⁸

The resulting improvements were dramatic. Referring to the Placerville Road, Eliot Lord commented that a “narrow, dangerous, wretched trail [which] was scarcely fit for the passage of sure-footed pack-mules” had been transformed into “a broad, compact, well-graded highway, which might fairly be likened to an old Roman road.” J. Ross Browne agreed: “It is now a magnificent highway The rise is so beautifully graded as to be scarcely appreciable.” During three winter months of 1863 alone, 2,500 wagons passed over it. Swan and Company, which was in charge of a ten-mile stretch, devoted \$2,000 per mile to yearly maintenance in the 1860s and earned annual receipts ranging from \$40,000 to \$70,000.⁹

THE TWO WAVES OF CONSTRUCTION

The "turnpiking" of the Placerville Road and Henness Pass was just the beginning. Between 1861 and 1864, Nevada's territorial legislature granted fifty-five more franchises. A typical franchise document described the route, established maximum tolls and stipulated minimum standards of repair. Median tolls authorized by the legislature for 1862 franchises follow:

Wagon with two horses	\$1.00
Each additional animal	.25
Horse and rider	.25
Pack animal	.10
Loose animals	.05

After 1864, the state transferred authority for issuing, as well as regulating, franchises to the counties. The legislature also approved a 2 percent tax on gross proceeds which it earmarked for the state school fund.¹⁰

The proliferation of franchises inspired considerable satire, most notably from the pen of Mark Twain, who was a reporter on the *Territorial Enterprise* from 1862 to 1865. Twain wildly exaggerated the particulars of the franchise frenzy but captured much of its intensity. In 1862, for example, one of his articles, co-written with colleagues, took the form of a mythical legislative report for the "Committee on Internal Improvements." It recounted how "Colonel Williams," a legislator, had secured a franchise for a road to run "from a certain point to another place." A decade later, Twain returned to this theme in *Roughing It*:

... it was estimated that every citizen owned about three franchises, and it was believed that unless Congress gave the Territory another degree of longitude there would not be room enough to accommodate the toll-roads. The ends of them were hanging over the boundary line everywhere like a fringe.¹¹

While many projects never became more than words on a page, a considerable number were built. Information from various sources, including newspaper accounts and official reports, shows the completion of at least 117 toll roads in Nevada between 1859 and 1880. Construction came in two main waves (Table 1), the first was between 1859 and 1864, and the second was between 1865 and 1880. As might be expected, the pace fluctuated with the ebb and flow of mining activity. Most of the first roads were in the northwestern counties near mining centers, Ormsby, Storey, and Washoe. In general, they followed an east-west pattern (Figure 1) and linked up with the mountain routes to California at points such as Virginia City or Aurora.¹²

Table 1.
Construction of toll roads and bridges in Nevada

First Wave of Construction, 1859-64		Second Wave of Construction, 1865-80	
<u>Year</u>	<u>Number Completed</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Number Completed</u>
1859	1	1865	3
1860	7	1866	4
1861	6	1867	1
1862	22	1868	10
1863	10	1869	18
1864	12	1870	6
		1871	2
		1872	4
		1873	2
		1874	2
		1875	2
		1876	1
		1877	0
		1878	2
		1879	0
		1880	2

During the second wave, construction shifted to the new mining areas centered around Elko, Nye, White Pine, and Churchill counties. In contrast to the east-west configuration of western Nevada roads, these new arteries followed a north-south pattern. This, of course, reflected the north-south orientation of the mountain ranges and valleys in the east. The nearby mining communities of southern Idaho used these roads as their main outlets for ore shipments to the Pacific coast.¹³

The amount of resources that the builders devoted to construction varied greatly. For some level grades, they did little more than mark out a route by having a team of horses drag logs to remove obstructions. Other projects received more careful attention, such as smoothing out steep grades, filling in gullies with stones and loam, erecting bridges, and digging wells. The builders of the road from Carson City to Empire City successfully improvised a smooth surface by laying down large pieces of sandstone.¹⁴

There were also long-term maintenance costs. At a minimum, these included wages for a toll collector, who usually lived on site. In many cases, he provided security, sold supplies to travelers, and made repairs. Toll road companies often hired additional workers for such tasks as periodic resurfacing, filling pot-holes, shortening the route, plowing snow, sprinkling water to keep down dust, and clearing debris. Thirty to forty men, for example, were constantly at work

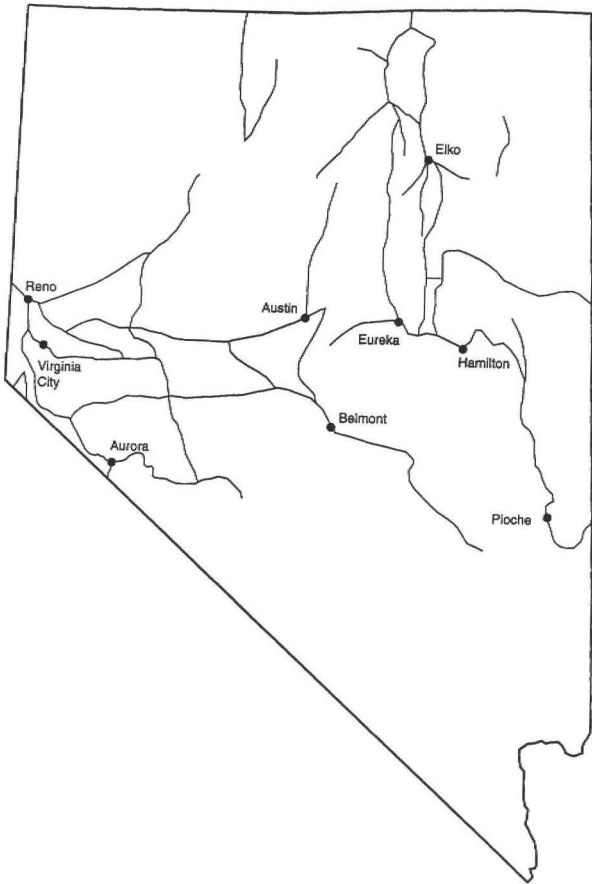
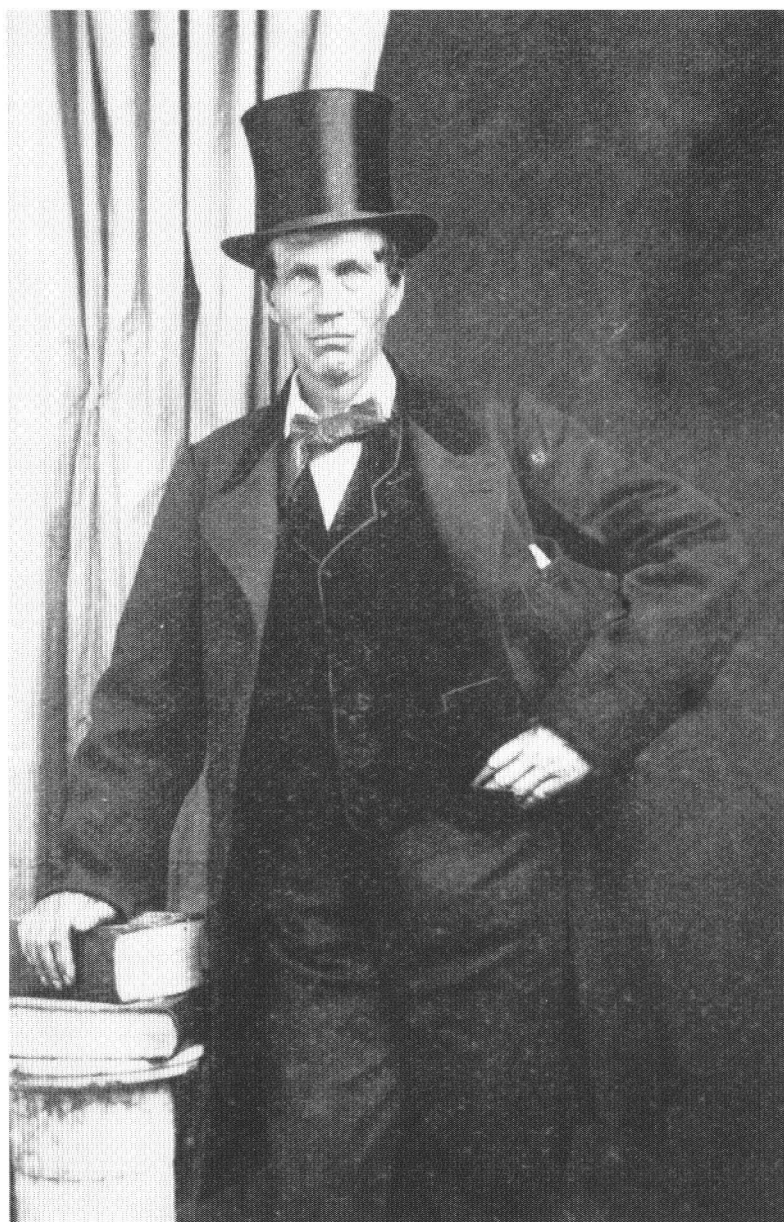


Figure 1: Principal Nevada Toll Roads Completed 1859-1880 (Approximate location)



Abraham Curry, the Comstock pioneer for whom the Curry Mine was named. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

on the Devil's Gate toll road between Gold Hill and Silver City, which carried much of the Comstock's ore and supplies. The company in charge of a much longer road between Hamilton and Elko always kept five men busy with cutting sagebrush and smoothing the grade.¹⁵

INDIRECT BENEFITS, PROFITS, AND COMPETITION

During both waves of construction, many investors, both large and small, sought their profit not primarily from the tolls but rather from the indirect benefits that a road would bring. These might include anything from faster ore shipments to more riders for stagecoach lines. People who lived along a road were often the first subscribers. It is significant that only a small minority of investors identified themselves in territorial and local directories and the United States census as being toll road owners or collectors (Tables 2 and 3). Ranching and farming, staging, mining, and hotel ownership were far more common in the list of occupations. Two leading individual examples were Myron C. Lake, a hotel owner who founded Lake's Crossing, later known as Reno, and Abraham Curry, the Comstock pioneer for whom the Curry Mine was named.¹⁶

In the second wave, staging, freighting, and railroad entrepreneurs moved to the forefront. Some of the best known were Leonard Wines (Wells Fargo, Wines and Company), Erastus Woodruff and Joseph R. Ennor (Woodruff and Ennor, Eureka and Palisade Railroad), Nick Pritchard (Pritchard Fast Freight Lines), H.M. Yerington (Carson and Colorado Railroad), and Fred Birdsall (Dayton, Sutro, and Carson Valley Railroad). As had been true before 1865, many of these men regarded their toll roads primarily as appendages to more profitable enterprises.¹⁷

Table 2.
Leading Occupations of Toll Road Investors
*First Wave of Construction, 1859-64*¹⁸

Investment	Percentage
Ranching or Farming	23.4
Station or Hotel Ownership	17.1
Freighting, Staging, or Teamster	15.6
Toll Road Owner or Collector	14.0
Mining and Mining Mill	12.4
Attorney	9.3

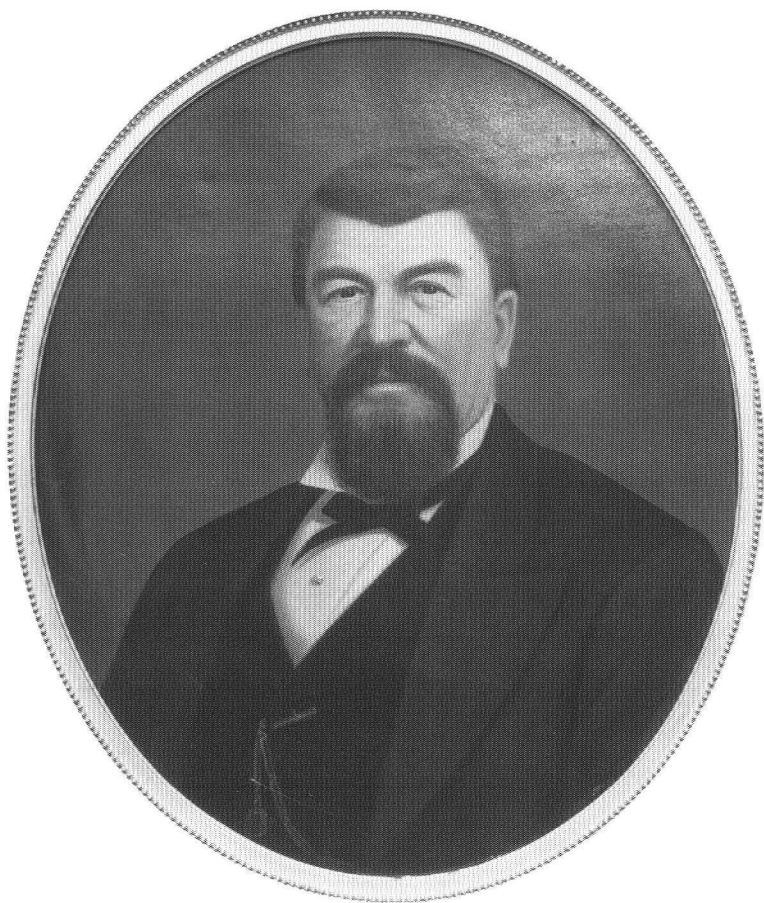
Table 3.
Leading Occupations of Toll Road Investors
Second Wave of Construction, 1865-80

Investment	Percentage
Railroad	56.5
Ranching or Farming	43.4
Freighting, Staging, or Teamster	30.4
Mining and Mining Mill	30.4
Station or Hotel Ownership	21.1
Toll Road Owner or Collector	13.0

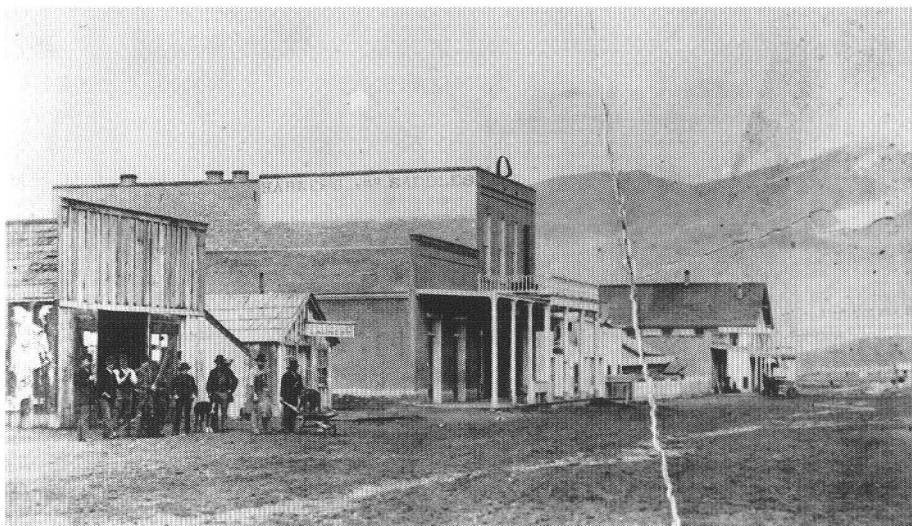
The most obvious contrast between the second and first construction waves was in the scale of the projects. Lengths of twenty miles, which had been rare before 1865, became commonplace. More than ever, the physical plant featured wells, hay ranches, repair sheds, and bridges. It became necessary for even a smaller road to have stations at regular intervals. These new attributes created a need for entrepreneurs who had more capital to invest and could contribute special expertise in transportation.¹⁹

A prominent example was Hill Beachey of the Railroad Stage Lines. Beachey was an investor in the 268-mile road between Winnemucca and Boise, Idaho. When completed in 1868, this thoroughfare had a long line of stations that offered food and lodging and fresh changes of horses for stagecoaches. Contrary to the wide-open-spaces stereotype of American westerns, a traveler stranded on this road, and many others, needed only to walk a few miles in either direction to find refuge. In fact, unlike the scattered rest stops that characterize modern interstate highways, the toll roads generally had stations every seven to ten miles. Referring to a proposed road between Austin and the Carson Valley, the *Nye County News* asked, "What teamster would begrudge [*sic*] a few dollars if he could have water for his animals every five or six miles along these deserts, with the patches of heavy sand covered up or otherwise obviated, and the alkali flats rendered passable in winter?"²⁰

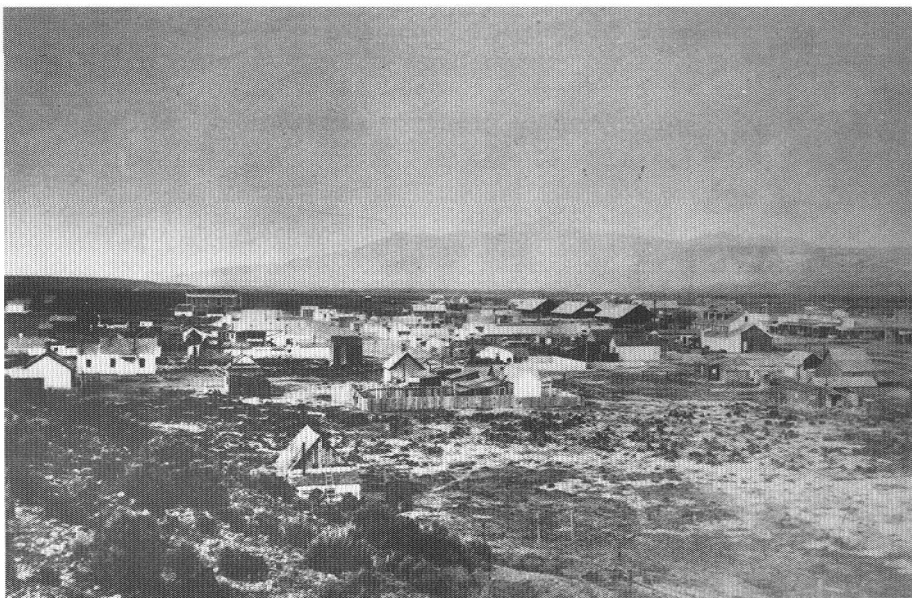
While railroads often brought the demise of toll roads, they could, if the opportunities were right, create incentives for the establishment of new ones. During the 1860s and early 1870s, entrepreneurs took advantage of opportunities to build north-south roads to connect outlying communities with the Central Pacific Railroad. In 1868, for example, some leading citizens of Austin began raising money for such a project. Attracted by the prospect of ore shipments, the Central Pacific and Wells Fargo made a joint offer. Should the road be completed, they would erect stations along the way and locate a railroad



Myron C. Lake was a hotel owner who founded Lake's Crossing, later known as Reno. (*Nevada Historical Society*)



Winnemucca, Nevada, 1881. (*Nevada Historical Society*)



Elko, Nevada, 1876. (*Elko Free Press*)

depot at the terminus. This conditional pledge was akin to the matching contributions used in modern fund-raising campaigns. To sweeten the offer for Austin, Charles Crocker, superintendent of the Central Pacific, donated \$1,000 at a special meeting of local toll road investors. A similar series of events occurred further to the west in 1875. The Virginia and Truckee Railroad encouraged the completion of a road between Dayton and Carson City by pledging a special depot at the terminus. It also promised that shipping rates would not exceed those already charged at the more distant depot on the Central Pacific.²¹

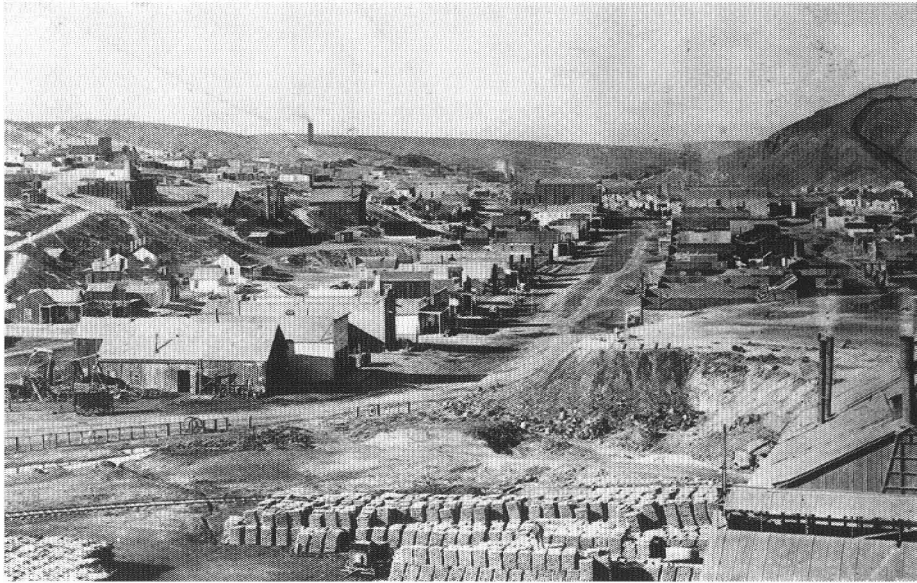
The biggest winners in the second construction wave were Winnemucca, Palisade, and Elko and other towns along the Central Pacific. Because they served as trans-shipment points between the toll roads and the railroads, they fostered the development of new mining and agricultural subeconomies.

Cheaper, faster, and more accessible transportation made it possible to exploit low-grade ore in outlying areas for the first time. For many miners and farmers, a bumpy thirty-mile toll road trip for their products was a small price to pay if the final destination was a connection to the swiftest and most extensive transportation system in the United States. Through this process, Nevada's toll roads served to integrate countless remote communities into the national economy.²²

Toll road investments in Nevada, much like those in other states, often reflected what economic historians Daniel B. Klein and Chi Yin have characterized as a "community enterprise model of action." The "impetus for taking stock was not dividends but gains that flowed from the use of the road: better transportation, higher land values, stimulated commerce, maybe just town pride." The community enterprise model went hand in hand with "social pressure tactics," such as local gatherings, during which leading citizens were urged to purchase shares. In making an appeal for residents to purchase stock, the *Elko Independent* stated that "there should be no hanging back in this work by the businessmen and teamsters of our town. It will be an important work to all, and all should be ready to come down with the cash liberally." In a more dramatic vein, the *Reno Crescent* declared of a proposed road that it would "do more for Reno and less for the holder of the franchise than any road built or likely to be built. Let us then help ourselves or order our coffins."²³

A related motivation for new investors, both large and small, was community rivalry. For instance, town leaders in Austin and Paradise engaged in a spirited competition in 1869 over which would obtain a connection on a toll road to Silver City, Idaho. Austin gained the early advantage when Leonard Wines, a stagecoach entrepreneur, pledged to invest on condition that the road pass through the town. In the end, however, Paradise won the road company's favor when a meeting of residents "tendered financial assistance."²⁴

It was widely understood in Paradise and elsewhere that road location was critical in the race for community supremacy. In 1869, when citizens in Carlin, a stop on the Central Pacific Railroad, failed to raise enough funds for a con-



Eureka, Nevada, 1870s. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

nection to a major toll artery, a newspaper editorial gleefully exclaimed, "Elko it would seem is destined to be the big and permanent town on the railroad after all." Under some circumstances, the prospect of a road could engender cooperation between communities. In 1863, a joint committee of investors from Austin and Clifton solicited stock and urged residents to contribute labor for a road connecting both communities to the Overland Mail Route. Ten years later, shareholders in Columbus and Carson City personally helped to grade a road between their towns.²⁵

Because of the promoters' heavy reliance on indirect benefits and social pressure, it would be tempting to conclude that Nevada's toll roads as such, were not profitable for the owners. Certainly, this was true in other states. Klein has pointed to the "nearly universal and well documented" poverty of toll roads and noted that, as a result, investors constantly had to be cajoled to exercise community spirit or be tempted with the prospect of indirect benefits. While the evidence for Nevada is more anecdotal, it does indicate a stronger record of profitability.²⁶

It is worth noting that first hand accounts from Nevadans show few indications that their toll roads had any general tendency to lose money. On the contrary, the predominance of evidence, limited though it may be, points in the opposite direction. Using company account books, Eliot Lord reported that Swan and Company, which was in charge of a ten-mile stretch, devoted from \$2,000 to \$3,000 per mile to yearly expenses in the 1860s and earned receipts between \$40,000 and \$70,000. From this, Lord deduced that a "toll-gate was far

more profitable than an ordinary mine." According to Hubert Howe Bancroft, a major Comstock area road connecting Dayton and Gold Hill "was a paying property." Historian Victor O. Goodwin estimated that the Bonanza toll road that passed through Carson City collected more than \$4 million in tolls between 1859 and 1868, "making it the most widely profitable toll road enterprise in American history." That said however, it is also doubtful that Nevada's toll roads, taken as a whole, were *especially* profitable. It is significant that while promotional appeals mentioned the possibility of profit from the toll receipts, they almost never stressed it. Instead, they underscored indirect benefits such as improved land values and better travel conditions.²⁷

That Nevada's state regulatory regime was not overly restrictive greatly contributed to the success of its toll roads. The franchises granted by the legislature rarely did more than name the route, set maximum (but generous) tolls, and establish expiration dates. Entrepreneurs faced fewer burdensome mandates on rates, location of toll booths, upkeep, and other specifics than did their eastern counterparts. Nevada's regulations were so lax that many investors never bothered to comply with the legal niceties of legislative authorization. Builders of at least eighteen roads failed to obtain the required franchises. In some cases, they secured authorization from a county's commissioners, but in others they operated for years without franchises.²⁸

Unburdened by heavy regulation, tollroad owners in Nevada were better able to crack down on "free riders." The state's franchises rarely granted exemptions from tolls or provided loopholes for evaders. In the East, it was common for legislatures to exempt whole classes of individuals from payment. Pennsylvania, for instance, gave free passage to any person en route to public worship, a town meeting, or jury duty. Just as important, the eastern states did not effectively enforce laws against illegal toll evaders.²⁹

Nevada's rugged terrain also helped to frustrate free riders. Owners were able to prevent evasion by placing collection booths at strategic locations such as mountain passes and bridges. The sparse population, great distances, and lack of water had the same effect. Because travelers were so dependent on amenities available only at stations, such as wells and food, there was less opportunity to evade tolls. The lack of navigable rivers forced many shippers to send goods either by road or not at all. The scant population also meant that tollroad owners did not have to expend vast sums to acquire rights of way. The United States Congress authorized local, state, and territorial governments to grant franchises for private parties to build on federal land.³⁰

Nevada's regulatory *laissez faire* came at a price. Toll road companies in Nevada could rarely rest secure against the threat of competition, a state of affairs rare in the East. There were numerous instances of head-to-head competition. One of the most colorful involved the famous mining baron James Fair, one of the Big Four of the Comstock's crowd. Fair owned a road connecting Dayton with the Virginia and Truckee Railroad. Resentful over high tolls,



Treasure City, Nevada, 1869, The only known photo. (*Nevada Historical Society*)



Belmont, Nevada, 1863. (*Elko Free Press*)

Manly Johnson, a teamster, retaliated by hiring eight men to lay out a competing road. Faced with this prospect, Fair finally relented and granted Johnson a special exemption. Nowhere was toll road competition more heated than in eastern Nevada. For about a year starting in 1869 staging entrepreneur Nick Pritchard ran his coaches down a toll road between Elko and Hamilton, paying the owner of the road to exercise this right. Pritchard finally liberated himself from the tolls by building a rival road and running his stages free of charge.³¹

An incentive prompting companies to compete was the prospect of drawing travelers from existing roads by supplying shorter and more comfortable routes. Entrepreneur Sam Gilson boasted that his road between Treasure City and Elko was not only shorter than its competitor, but easier to travel in wet weather because the old road ran through alkali and marsh lands. As an added inducement, Gilson located stations every nine miles and exempted all stages from tolls for six months. Competitive battles such as these inspired the *Territorial Enterprise* to proclaim in 1867 that the "spirit of rivalry in road building to our place speaks well for this section and gives promise that the immense amount of supplies that will be required for the wants of the community can be hauled over good and easy roads." A paper in Belmont used similar phrasing when it quipped that rival "roads to any section of the country are indicative of its general prosperity, and point to the standard it occupies in the estimation of the surrounding communities."³²

THE DECLINE OF TOLL ROADS

The toll road era was beginning to draw to a close by the middle of the 1870s. Although several more roads were completed during these years, many others passed into governmental ownership or were simply abandoned. A good statistical measure of this trend was the amount of revenue raised through the 2 percent state tax on toll road gross proceeds. Totals recorded at five-year intervals show a consistent downward slide: \$4,124 (1865), \$2,879 (1870), \$832 (1880), and \$434 (1885).³³

Despite some exceptions, the competition brought by the railroads contributed to the general decline of toll roads. Shortly after the Central Pacific's track entered Nevada via the Sierra in late 1867, Wells Fargo ceased staging operations between Nevada and California. Several east-west routes such as the Placerville Road had fallen into disuse well before the 1869 completion of the transcontinental railroad at Promontory Point, Utah. Conditions only worsened as new north-south railroad short lines appeared during the 1870s and 1880s to link such communities as Virginia City, Carson City, Candelaria, Eureka, and Austin to the Central Pacific. Deprived of ore shipments and travelers, the toll roads could no longer stay in business. The unhappy fate of the Elko and Idaho Toll Road, which had cost \$10,000 to complete in 1869, was symptomatic of the trend. Shortly after the last staging lines pulled out, the



Austin, Nevada, c. 1874–1880. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

road was put up for auction at a sheriff's sale in 1874, and sold for \$115.³⁴

Another factor in the decline of toll roads was the mining depression during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Between 1876 and 1881, production on the Comstock plummeted from \$36.7 million to just \$1.2 million. Prospects in other parts of the state became equally bleak and by 1894, total mining production in Nevada was only \$1.9 million. Meanwhile, the population fell from 62,000 in 1880 to only 42,000 in 1900. As many once-thriving communities decayed into ghost towns, the toll roads that had served them withered away.³⁵

Toll roads also suffered from increasingly bad publicity. The most dramatic illustration was the imbroglio over Myron Lake's toll bridge in Reno in 1872 and 1873. Lake had owned the main bridge over the Truckee River since 1861 long before Reno was founded. He secured a franchise from the territorial legislature in 1862. The terms prohibited the building of any other bridge on the Truckee River within one mile in either direction.³⁶

As Reno's population grew so, too, did resentment against Lake and his bridge. Residents presented petitions to the county commissioners to either reduce the tolls or convert the property to a free bridge. Lake's critics protested that they were victims of an "onerous and burdensome monopoly." The crisis culminated in 1872 after the Board of County Commissioners for Washoe County rejected Lake's petition for a five-year extension of the franchise. It then raised the stakes by declaring that his road and bridge were "to be and are a public highway." Lake stood his ground. Armed with a revolver, he defied the order and kept collecting tolls as before. The stand-off continued for several days. Finally, he was arrested and fined by the sheriff after trying to stop a rancher from running his cattle through the toll gate without paying. Appealing to the

Nevada Supreme Court, Lake argued that the county had exceeded its legal authority under the terms of the franchise, but lost.³⁷

The antagonism toward Lake had little apparent economic justification. He had always granted free passage to residents of Reno and charged half rates for people who lived in the valley even though the franchise did not require him to make these concessions. Historian John M. Townley noted that "tolls applied only to the long string of teamsters hauling goods between Reno and the Comstock who gladly paid their silver dollar for use of a smooth, maintained road for themselves and freight." Townley concluded that "most of the clamor [against Lake] was petty resentment against Lake's good fortune in being at the right place at the right time."³⁸

Viewed from another angle, the Lake affair also revealed diminished ideological support for toll roads. Compared to those of the decade earlier, newspaper editors and politicians of the 1870s were less likely to expound on the innate superiority of toll roads. In his annual address for 1871, for example, Governor Henry G. Blasdel devoted part of his message to the subject. While he did not call for the abolition of toll roads, his over-all tone was one of hostility: "the records of no civilized State disclose such reckless, inconsiderate and unwise grants of power, or so little consideration returned for the enormous and unprecedented rates of toll authorized to be taken." This backlash was by no means universal. County commissions still granted numerous franchises during the rest of the decade and praise for toll roads continued to surface in newspapers. Currents in the opposite direction were even more powerful, however. By the 1880s, counties devoted more resources than ever to "free" roads and bridges and increasingly established functioning road districts.³⁹

CONCLUSION

Between the 1850s and the 1870s, private toll roads were critical to Nevada's economic development. The movement to build them arose primarily from pragmatic motivations. By the end of the 1850s, many Nevadans had concluded that the status quo was inadequate to the needs of a booming mining economy, and like other Americans before them, they responded by turning to the private sector. Toll roads brought improvements in quality and reliability and were initially popular. By the 1870s and 1880s, however, a combination of new public attitudes and economic trends, such as the mining depression and competition from the railroads, had tipped the balance in the other direction. This trend was not limited to Nevada. At the turn of the century, few private toll roads still survived in the United States. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that the question of private toll roads once again appeared on public policy agendas.

NOTES

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¹On the nongovernmental provision of services, see Bradley J. Birzer, "The Private West: Voluntary Association in the American West" in *Frontiers of Western History: Origins, Evolution, and the Future of Western History*, Michael Allen and Mary L. Hanneman, eds. (Carmel, Indiana: Simon and Schuster, forthcoming, 1999); *idem*, "Expansive Creative Destruction: Entrepreneurship in the American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* (forthcoming, Spring 1999); Rodman Wilson Paul, *Mining Frontiers of the Far West, 1848-1880* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wilson, 1963), 161-75.

²David Allen Johnson, *Founding the Far West: California, Oregon, and Nevada, 1840-1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 75.

³J. Ross Browne, *A Peep at Washoe and Washoe Revisited* (Balboa Island, Calif.: Paisano Press, 1959), 24-25; Horace Greeley, *An Overland Journey from New York to San Francisco* (New York: C.M. Saxton Barker, 1860), 282. On the development of western trails between the 1840s and 1860, see John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 88, 236-43; W. Turrentine Jackson, *Wagon Roads West: A Study of Federal Road Surveys and Construction in the Trans-Mississippi West, 1846-1869* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1952), 202-6, 216-17, 322-27.

⁴Myron Angel, ed., *History of Nevada, 1881* (1881; rpt. Berkeley: Howell-North, 1958), 542; Nevada State Surveyor General, *Annual Report* (1866), 18.

⁵Hermann Schreiber, *Merchants, Pilgrims and Highwaymen: A History of Roads through the Ages* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1961), 200-1; P.J.G. Ransom, *The Archaeology of the Transport Revolution 1750-1850* (Kingswood, Tadworth, Surrey: World's World LTF, 1984), 21-22.

⁶Hendrik Hartog, *Public Property and Private Power: The Corporation of the City of New York in American Law 1730-1870* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 16-18; U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *America's Highways, 1776-1976: A History of the Federal Aid Program* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1977), 7; Daniel B. Klein, "The Voluntary Provision of Public Goods? The Turnpike Companies of Early America," *Economic Inquiry*, 28 (October 1990), 788-94; Gerald Gunderson, *The Wealth Creators: An Entrepreneurial History of the United States* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1989), 62-63; Angel, *History of Nevada*, 33-34; Unruh, *Plains Across*, 286, 293-94.

⁷Daniel B. Klein and Chi Yin, "Use, Esteem, and Profit in Voluntary Provision: Toll Roads in California, 1850-1902," *Economic Inquiry*, 34 (October 1996), 680-82; *Reese River Reveille* [Austin], 27 June 1868.

⁸*Territorial Enterprise* [Virginia City], 10 December 1859, 3 March 1860.

⁹Eliot Lord, *Comstock Mining and Miners* (1883; rpt. Berkeley: Howell-North, 1959), 191-92; Thomas Frederick Howard, *Sierra Crossing: First Roads to California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 157; and *Gold Hill Daily News*, 2 February 1864.

¹⁰Nevada Legislature, *Laws of the Territory of Nevada* (1864), 1-179; and Nevada State Controller, *Biennial Report* (1869), 7.

¹¹Henry Nash Smith, ed., *Mark Twain of the Enterprise: Newspaper Articles and Other Documents, 1862-1864* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 36-37; Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, Inc., 1953), 135. Andrew J. Marsh, another reporter during the period, made similar satirical comments. Marsh, *Letters from Nevada Territory, 1861-1862* (Carson City: Legislative Counsel Bureau, State of Nevada, 1972), 494-95, 506-7, 530, 551, 568.

¹²I relied heavily on newspapers, such as the *Territorial Enterprise*, *White Pine News*, *Reese River Reveille*, *Elko Independent*, and *Eureka Daily Sentinel*, for information about investments and to confirm whether a proposed road was built. Other sources included the manuscript census; Angel, *History of Nevada*; *First Directory of Nevada Territory* (Virginia City, 1866); *Directory, Storey, Ormsby, Washoe, and Lyon Counties* (Sacramento, 1871); *Annual Report of the Surveyor-General of the State of Nevada* (1864-1895); Roberta Childers, *Magee Station and the Churchill Chronicles* (Reno: Jamison Station Press, 1985); Victor O. Goodwin, *The Humboldt: Nevada's Desert River and Thoroughfare of the*

American West (Washington, D.C., U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1966); William M. Maule, *A Contribution to the Geographic and Economic History of the Carson, Walker and Mono Basins in Nevada and California* (Washington, D.C., U. S. Department of Agriculture, 1938); *Nevada* (various years between 1913 and 1926); and W. Turrentine Jackson, *Treasure Hill: Portrait of a Silver Mining Camp* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1963).

¹³*Elko Independent*, 5 January 1870.

¹⁴Goodwin, *Humboldt*, I, 17; Carson Canyon and Placerville Toll Roads, Robert Allen Collection (Nevada Historical Society, Reno); Angel, *History of Nevada*, 365; and *State ex rel. Haydon v. A. Curry*, 1 Nevada 251 (April 1865), 209.

¹⁵Elbert B. Edwards, *200 Years in Nevada: A Story of People Who Opened, Explored, and Developed the Land* (Salt Lake City: Publishers Press, 1978), 220; *Gold Hill Daily News*, 22 June 1865; and *Daily Inland Empire* [Hamilton], 16 April 1869; *Reese River Reveille*, 12 January 1869; *Esmerelda Daily Union* [Aurora], 21 October 1864, and *Territorial Enterprise*, 5 June 1873. Except for a few superficial references, newspapers and other sources have remarkably little to say about the men who labored on toll roads or their working conditions.

¹⁶John M. Townley, *Tough Little Town on the Truckee: Reno 1868-1900* (Reno: Great Basin Studies Center, 1983), 146-47; and Willa Oldham, *Carson City: Nevada's Capital City* (Genoa, Nevada: Desk Top Publishers, 1991), 15.

¹⁷David F. Myrick, *Railroads of Nevada and Eastern California*, vol. 1 (Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1962), 90, 155, 166, 210-11; *Elko Independent*, 2 June 1869; *Silver Bend Reporter* [Belmont], 11 May 1867, 2 May 1868, 18 July 1868; *Territorial Enterprise*, 29 April 1868, 7 October 1868; and Goodwin, *Humboldt*, II, 8-9, VI, 13.

¹⁸The survey included investors in toll road projects which were actually completed. The reason for the high percentages in some categories is that many individuals listed more than one occupation.

¹⁹*Winnemucca Argent*, 17 September 1868; and *Daily Inland Empire*, 16 April 1869. In some cases, stage companies maintained the stations and paid the owner for use of the road. Lester W. Mills, *A Sagebrush Saga* (Springville, Utah: Art City Publishing Company, 1956), 34.

²⁰*Elko Independent*, 5 January 1870; Goodwin, "Transportation," in Edna B. Patterson, Louise A. Ulph, and Victor O. Goodwin, *Nevada's Northeast Frontier* (Reno: The University of Nevada Press, 1969), 138; Goodwin, *Humboldt*, IV, 1-2; Mills, 34; and *Nye County News* [Ione], 19 August 1865.

²¹*Reese River Reveille*, 28 July 1868, 30 July 1868, 2 October 1868; *Winnemucca Argent*, 23 July 1868; Myrick, *Railroads of Nevada*, 18; *Territorial Enterprise*, 3 September 1875. Much of the analysis in this section is informed by David Schmidt, *The Limits of Government: An Essay on the Public Goods Argument* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991).

²²Howard, *Sierra Crossing*, 170-74.

²³Klein and Yin, 680; Klein, "The Voluntary Provision," 803; *Elko Independent*, 14 August 1869; *Reno Crescent*, 26 August 1871.

²⁴*Winnemucca Argent*, 23 July 1868, 27 August 1868.

²⁵*White Pine News*, 17 April 1869; *Reese River Reveille*, 15 July 1863; *Territorial Enterprise*, 25 May 1873.

²⁶Klein, "Voluntary Provision," 791.

²⁷Lord, *Comstock Mining and Miners*, 192; Angel, *History of Nevada*, 542; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of Nevada 1540-1888* (1890; rpt. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1981), 232; and Oldham, *Carson City*, 17.

²⁸In 1869, a paper in White Pine County reported that some of the locals made a practice of hanging a sack near a mountain gorge "upon which is printed (with axel [sic] grease) the rates of toll, [they] collect a few dollars from the credulous farmers, and have a spree." *White Pine News*, 5 April 1869.

²⁹Klein, "Voluntary Provision," 791.

³⁰Effie O. Read, *White Pine Lang Syne: A True History of White Pine County Nevada* (Denver: Big Mountain Press, 1965), 209; George P. Sanger, ed., *The Statutes at Large Treaties, and Proclamations of the United States of America from December 1865 to March 1867*, vol. 14 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1868), 251-53; and *Territorial Enterprise*, 29 May 1873.

³¹Fanny G. Hazlett, "Historical Sketches and Reminiscences of Dayton, Nevada," *Nevada Historical Society Papers, 1921-1922* (Reno, 1922), 76; and Victor O. Goodwin, "Transportation," 141,

170.

³²Jackson, *Treasure Hill*, 39; *Ely Record*, 9 September 1872; *Elko Independent*, 5 January 1870; *Inland Empire*, 29 June 1869; *White Pine News*, 16 January 1869, 13 March 1869; *Territorial Enterprise*, 15 May 1867; and *Silver Bend Reporter*, 1 June 1867.

³³Edna B. Patterson, *This Land Was Ours: An In-depth Study of a Frontier Community* (Springville, Utah: Art City Publishing, 1973), 20-21; Goodwin, "Transportation," 141, 145, 172-73; Nevada State Controller, *Annual Report* (1865), (1870), (1875), (1880), (1885)

³⁴Howard, *Sierra Crossing*, 176; Wells Drury, *An Editor on the Comstock Lode* (Reno: University of Nevada Press 1984), 141-42; John Hoyt Williams, *A Great and Shining Road: The Epic Story of the Transcontinental Railroad* (New York: Times Books, 1988), 264-65; Patterson, *This Land Was Ours*, 20-21; and Goodwin, "Transportation," 145, 172-73. Bancroft states that toll road owners opposed the construction of the Central Pacific across the Sierra because it "would absorb their profits on the rich traffic of the Nevada mines." Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft: History of Nevada, Colorado, and Wyoming*, vol. 25 (San Francisco: The History Company, 1890).

³⁵Russell R. Elliott, *History of Nevada* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 151, 172; and James W. Hulse, *The Nevada Adventure: A History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1981), 152.

³⁶Townley, *Tough Little Town*, 52-54, 146-47; Nevada, Territorial Legislature, *Laws of the Territory of Nevada*, Second Session (1862), 19; Washoe County, Board of County Commissioners, *Proceedings*, 4 August 1868; *Reno Crescent*, 30 January 1869.

³⁷Townley, *Tough Little Town*, 146-17; *Reno Crescent*, 21 January 1871, 9 January 1873, 30 January 1873, 6 February 1873; and *Territorial Enterprise*, 31 January 1873, 4 February 1873, 29 May 1873.

³⁸Townley, *Tough Little Town*, 146; *Reno Crescent*, 30 January 1869. "Justice," a defender of Lake, estimated that four-fifths of all teamsters "prefer a toll road in good condition, to a country road, which will necessarily be more or less unfit for travel." *Reno Crescent*, 21 January 1871.

³⁹Nevada State Legislature, *The Journal of the Senate* (1871), 12; *Reno Crescent*, 7 December 1872; *Territorial Enterprise*, 29 December 1874; and Patterson, *This Land Was Ours*, 20-21. For words of praise about toll roads during the 1860s, see *Gold Hill Daily News*, 13 October 1863, 22 June 1865; *Humboldt Register* [Unionville], 20 June 1863; and *Reese River Reveille*, 27 June 1868, 30 November 1868.

AMERICAN FLAT

Stepchild of the Comstock Lode-Part I

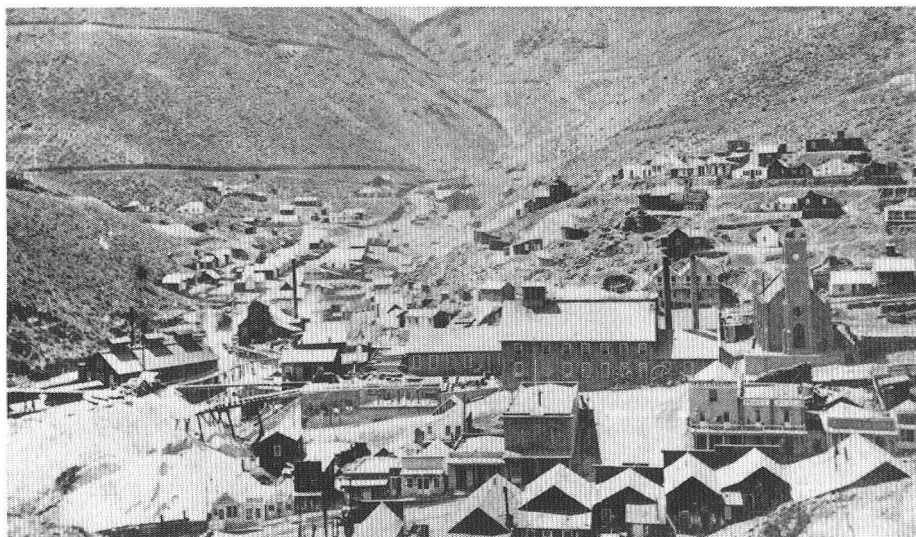
Italo Gavazzi

The mining towns that developed on Nevada's Comstock Lode were necessarily located about the ore-deposit sites. In the case of Virginia City, the town was built on the east slope of Mount Davidson, whereas, Gold Hill and Silver City, to the south, grew up on either side of a steep-sided canyon. None of these locations made for an ideal townsite. Virginia City had precipitous side streets, and was subject to strong winds against the mountain side. Facetiously dubbed "Washoe Zephyrs" by the writers of the day, these winds were the topic of many preposterous stories. Gold Hill and Silver City were on a drainage channel, and in those days some of this drainage carried a considerable stench. But the original ore discoveries proved to be very rich, and the mountainous topography was only a minor inconvenience.

Unlike these communities, the town that materialized to the west of Gold Hill and Silver City was situated on a fairly level area of almost two square miles, known as American Flat. Flat ground in these surroundings was such an anomaly that it had to be labelled as such. This was an ideal townsite, with abundant water. The town was named American City, probably to distinguish it from earlier settlements of placer miners in Gold Canyon.¹ The first of these had been named Johntown, after "John Chinaman," the ubiquitous designation for all Chinese at that time, and farther down was Chinatown, which became present day Dayton. The Chinese who lived and worked in the region had originally been hired by Mormons to dig irrigation ditches.²

During the placer-mining period, Johntown was the major settlement in the area, and its population consisted of miners who panned for gold in the California tradition, with the same devices that had been used there. Gold was

Italo Gavazzi, born in Virginia City in 1922, began his schooling in the town of Comstock (American Flat) in 1927. Later, he and Robert Kendall were friends and schoolmates in Virginia City. He is a graduate of the University of Nevada (1945) and retired from the Nevada Department of Transportation as environmental studies officer in 1981. Prior to that he was a highway engineer. He now resides in Reno.



Gold Hill, Nevada, 1875. (*Nevada Historical Society*)



Silver City, Nevada, 1863. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

the objective, and they weren't looking for silver. However, the brothers Hosea and E. Allen Grosh are given credit by historians as having been aware of silver-bearing ores in the area prior to 1857. They had sunk a shaft and built a rude furnace two hundred feet above American Ravine,³ which leads from lower Silver City to American Flat. Except for this shaft, the sites where the Grosh brothers did their prospecting are unknown. These unfortunate individuals both died young, in 1857, one from a pick wound in his foot and the other from frostbite and gangrene suffered while crossing the Sierra in winter. If they knew the whereabouts of silver ores, the secret died with them.

The traditional placer-mining period ended in 1859 with the discoveries of high grade silver in combination with gold ore in Gold Hill and Virginia City, and the "rush to Washoe" was on. In the words of Henry DeGroot, a contemporary writer,

The surrounding country for a distance of fifty miles or more had been prospected and many new mining districts laid out, in each one of which a great many company claims had been located and upon some of the latter much work had been done The hamlet at Gold Hill had doubled its size while Carson City, which the summer before had drawn to it most of the business from the old Mormon town of Genoa, had grown from some half dozen houses into a good sized village. Numerous town sites had been selected at other supposed eligible points, upon all of which cities of magnificent proportions had been projected.⁴

American City, no less than Gold Hill and Virginia City, was begun with great enthusiasm and every intention of establishing a permanent and flourishing community. It had a number of mines and mills, and several substantial buildings were constructed. In a directory of the Comstock area published in 1864-65, American City was given a listing of its own, alongside Virginia City, Gold Hill, and Silver City.⁵ A century later, avid local historian Walt Mulcahey was able to trace its location from old maps and photographs and to identify the foundation of the American City Hotel. He took photographs of these ruins, and wrote a detailed article for the *Nevada State Journal*, complete with a photo taken in the 1880s of the buildings then remaining.⁶

American City also possessed the main toll road that connected Virginia City with Carson City via Half-Way House (near the present site of Mound House).⁷ The toll road from American City to Half-Way House was built by Waters, Blanchet and Carson in 1861 at a cost of twelve thousand dollars.⁸ Good roads leading to California were needed because of the heavy travel resulting from the silver rush. Built by enterprising individuals instead of the government, these roads produced great profits for their builders, soon paying for their costs. The toll road continuing from Half-Way House to Carson City, built by Mark L. McDonald and Thomas Bedford, was travelled by hundreds of teams. The toll for a loaded wagon with two animals was 50 cents plus 25 cents for each two additional animals. A horseman paid 12 1/2 cents and loose animals were 5 cents each.⁹ These tolls appear ludicrously cheap in terms of late



Baltimore Hoisting Works, 1875. (*J. Schwenk—photographer, Nevada Historical Society*)



Rhode Island Mill, Gold Hill, 1863. (*Nevada Historical Society*)



Freight outfit between Ely and Wells. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

twentieth-century prices. However, a dollar was worth much more then, and the large number of fees collected from the heavy traffic was more than adequate to secure a profit.

It was against this background that political developments in Washoe or The Eastern Slope, as the area was variously known, began to accelerate. Known officially as the western portion of Utah Territory, the area had been settled mainly by Mormons, who termed non-Mormans Gentiles. It was governed from Salt Lake City, but after Brigham Young recalled the Mormons to Utah in 1857 and the rush to Washoe began, the Gentiles were in the majority. They began to clamor for their own government free from Mormon domination.

Eventually, the separation from Utah Territory occurred on March 20, 1861. It was with great rejoicing on that date that the residents learned that President James Buchanan had approved the bill organizing the Territory of Nevada. Shortly afterward James W. Nye was appointed governor by President Abraham Lincoln. In July, in company with most of the federal appointees, Nye arrived in Nevada and selected Carson City as the capital.¹⁰

Up on the Comstock Lode, the bustling mining towns of Virginia City, Gold Hill, American City, and Silver City attracted the bulk of the population in 1863 and 1864. There was much rivalry among these towns, as evidenced by a succession of bills introduced in the legislature. First an attempt was made to consolidate into one municipal government all of the towns of the county of Storey.

Gold Hill, being a sizeable community, wanted its own city government, and squelched that attempt. The town succeeded in establishing its own municipal government; but American City protested that it did not want to be included as part of Gold Hill. The Gold Hill citizens then proposed that they be cut loose from Virginia City and have a separate county of their own. A bill was introduced into the 1864–65 legislature to that effect, but under severe protest from Virginia City, the measure came to naught.

Because Carson City's Ormsby County had offered assembly rooms to the first legislature free of charge, but was now asking a rental of \$4,500 per session for the use of the building, this was seized upon as an excuse to remove the capital to American City in Storey County. Although American City had previously existed as a community, in January 1864, a company organized with plentiful funds laid out an extensive town plat on the site. They then offered \$50,000 as a donation to the territory if it would remove the capital from Carson City to that site. The people of Carson City organized in opposition, and the proposal was defeated.¹¹

Although this attempt failed to make American City the capital in 1864, the town plat designating a plaza as Capitol Park was filed with the Storey County Recorder in that year. This town plat locates American City in the extreme west of American Flat, at the base of the mountains and by the existing toll road.¹² The mine shafts and mills were located in that same area. Already existing properties identified on the town plat are those of Rigby and Co., Boohinger and Boquest, Jones, Childers, and Collins. The name Rigby and Co. referred to a quartz mill, located at the head of American Ravine. The two mills of American Flat are described in detail in Charlie Collins's directory of 1864–65. Reed and Wade's quartz mill was built in 1861, had eight stamps, and had a capacity of eight tons per day. It was operated by a 20-horsepower engine. The Rigby company's mill, erected in 1862, had ten stamps, a capacity of fourteen tons per day, and a 30-horsepower engine.¹³ Because a quartz mill requires a considerable quantity of water, the Rigby mill's location, near the source of the major stream in American Flat, was an excellent natural site.

Not only did American City have mines and mills, but it was a thriving town with a considerable number of businesses. In the business directory of 1864–65, we find the following: one brewery, four blacksmiths and wagon makers, two brokers and mining secretaries, five carpenters, one civil engineer, three grocers, seven hotels, three lumber companies, one millwright, one notary public, one recorder, and five saloons.¹⁴

In spite of this promising beginning, American City had a rather short life. Its post office is reported to have operated from March 1866 to February 1868.¹⁵ However, its major mines, including the Rock Island, Baltimore, and Knickerbocker continued to operate at least through the 1870s. There were a few ranches in the area as late as 1883, and some continued later. A map accompanying Eliot Lord's *Comstock Mining and Miners* shows several ranches, e. g.,

Roux's Ranch, Jones Ranch, and Gardens.¹⁶ Speaking decades later, Judge Frank P. Langan, mentioned Frenchman's Gardens, recalling picnics that were held there in the 1880s.¹⁷

In 1869, the Virginia and Truckee Railroad was constructed between Virginia City and Carson City, under the auspices of William Sharon. The route chosen was through American Flat. This railroad was to supplant many of the horse- and ox-drawn freighters of the earlier toll roads.

The railroad was twenty-one miles long, but was completed in only eight months' time, beginning in April 1869. The first engines arrived in Virginia City on November 12, 1869. With a crew of 1,200 workmen, mostly Chinese, the tracks were laid in six weeks, thirty-eight camps for these toilers having been established between Virginia City and Carson City.¹⁸ Employment of Chinese, even for the purpose of building the railroad, was not taken lightly by the strong miners' unions of Virginia City. On September 29, 1869 about 350 men from the unions marched upon the Chinese camps near American Flat, and the Chinese were dispersed. After eight days, William Sharon obtained a concession from the unions to allow the railroad work to proceed using Chinese labor. However, he had to sign an agreement barring their employment within the limits of Virginia City and Gold Hill.¹⁹

In 1880, Myron Angel's *History of Nevada* had the following retrospective comment about the mines of American Flat:

It has been twenty years since this section ranked high in importance. Large croppings of quartz furnished satisfactory evidence of the extension of the Comstock Lode in this section, and the town of American City grew up in view of the expected valuable mines. The Globe Consolidated is a union of the Globe, Arizona, Jura, and Utah. Its reputation has been at times good, \$2,000,000 having been taken from it in an early day. It is said to contain an immense amount of low grade ore. The Baltimore Consolidated, Maryland, American Flat, and Rock Island have a similar history and character. The prospects of all these mines have been such as to justify a heavy outlay in exploration, which, so far, is barren of any bonanza.²⁰

Indeed, although considerable exploration of these mines did take place, the results proved generally disappointing. Flooding was a consistent problem, as it had also been on the other mines of the Comstock. But the mines of American Flat were outclassed by the richer ones of Gold Hill and Virginia City.

Mining is an enterprise that requires constant optimism and also not a small amount of enterprise capital. There were to be further efforts to develop American Flat: Papers establishing another town, this one to be named Rock Island and grouped about the Rock Island Gold and Silver Mining Company's mine, were filed with the Storey County Recorder in February 1875. John H. Williams was listed as the proprietor of the town plat.²¹

Undoubtedly the most ambitious attempt at reviving the mines of American Flat occurred in 1897, during a period of depression, or *borrasca* on the Comstock. This proposal was highly touted in the *Territorial Enterprise* from

January to July of that year.²² Alf Doten refers to the matter in his diaries:

Jan. 7 . . . Great talk in the papers about the new American Flat boom . . . various local newspapers report a new scheme to extend the Sutro Tunnel laterals westward to drain the old mines (the Baltimore, the Knickerbocker, the Rock Island and the American Flat) which had been unable to handle the water struck at shallow depths in the region west and south of the Gold Hill mines—Excerpts from mining reports of 1875-77 show the mines had been in good ore, but were overshadowed by the big strikes at Virginia and abandoned—A combination is now being formed to reopen them—William E. Sharon, controlling the consolidated Gold Hill mines, is the moving force and signs of a big ledge have been found in a tunnel driven west from the Confidence shaft.²³

The American Flat Development Company, founded by moneyed men of the Comstock, was organized on February 18, 1897. Trustees were H. M. Yerington, William E. Sharon, J.W. Eckley, H.M. Gorham, E.D. Boyle, Albert Lackey, and J.R. Ryan. The plan was to extend the Sutro Tunnel, owned at that time by the Comstock Tunnel Company, from the Alta shaft southwesterly about eight thousand feet to drain the mines of American Flat. The American Flat Development Company owned fifteen thousand lineal feet, or almost all, of the patented claims in American Flat; the company presented a plan for furthering the project to Franklin Leonard, president of the Comstock Tunnel Company. However, no agreement was reached, and the plan was abandoned.²⁴

This was a critical time in the history of the Comstock mines. They were desperately casting about for new ground to explore, and the relatively unexplored mines of American Flat were their first attempt. The controlling interests were undeterred by the 1897 setback, and in 1898 they continued their efforts for new development. In that year the total production on the Comstock had dropped to only \$205,000. In spite of that fact, twenty-nine mines on the Lode were operating in the manner of previous years, with highly paid superintendents and offices in San Francisco. Their next scheme was to mine the deeper levels in the North End mines (the Consolidated Virginia, Ophir, Mexican, Union, and Sierra Nevada). This, of course, required considerable investment to pump the water from those deeper levels. The Comstock Pumping Association, to be supported by all the mines, was organized to accomplish this purpose. With much publicity, and excitement in the San Francisco stock market, the project was set in motion.

It went into operation at the California and Consolidated Virginia shaft in 1899. Like previous Comstock ventures, this project was a gamble, with no assurance of success. Unfortunately, no large ore deposits were found. In fact, returns proved meager in relation to the investment. Although production from four of the leading North End mines from 1899 to 1920 was worth about \$7,000,000, the heavy operating costs proved insurmountable. Assessments on investors holding stock of those mines amounted to nearly \$5,000,000, and those of all the mines totaled about \$14,000,000. Only \$568,790 were paid in dividends.²⁵

Thus, although the American Flat project to drain its mines did not materialize, and was ultimately replaced by pumping the North End mines, in the end the results were disappointing.

During the nineteenth century, a fortuitous set of circumstances came together to make the Comstock Lode a truly remarkable place in the annals of mining. It was not only the several discoveries of large bodies of ore, known as bonanzas, that were responsible, as periods of depression also occurred. But in good times and bad, the capital to finance the mines came from the great speculation in mining stocks on the San Francisco Exchange and from the assessments levied on these stocks. The occurrence of those bonanzas spurred continual development on the lode. And the magnates who had near monopolies not only of mining, but also of milling and related industries, made vast fortunes for themselves.

Altogether, there was an aura of excitement about that period that made a lasting impression. The aura of the times comes through particularly well in the writings of journalists Dan DeQuille and Wells Drury who were on the scene during the heyday.

Although the ore deposits began to dwindle as early as 1877, the legend lived on. Thus the Comstock's allure continued into the twentieth century, and there were to be more mining ventures affecting American Flat.



Sutro Tunnel portal. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

NOTES

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AMERICAN FLAT

Stepchild of the Comstock Lode-Part II

Robert E. Kendall

By the end of the nineteenth century, American Flat, that gently sloping tract of land just west of Gold Canyon on the Comstock Lode, had experienced a checkered and not very successful history. Its mines had never shown a profit, and American City, optimistically laid out in the early 1860s and a candidate for state capital in 1864, had disappeared completely, leaving only the rubble of a few stone foundations.

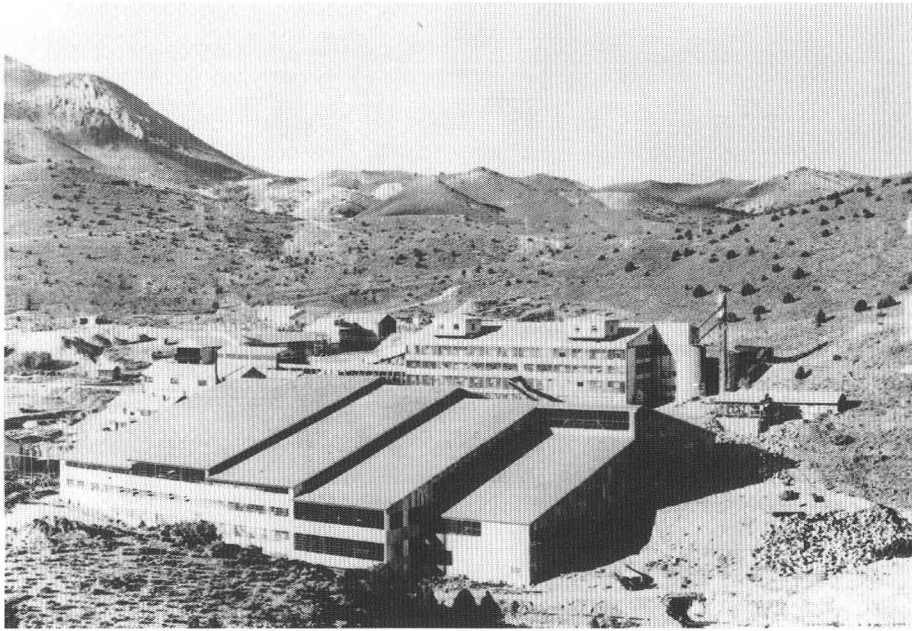
In the twentieth century, American Flat played a major role in two ambitious and abortive attempts to revive the flagging fortunes of the Comstock Lode, each of which left an indelible mark on the landscape of the Lode.

The first, begun in 1920 and the most extensive project ever undertaken on the Comstock, collapsed six years later and left behind the huge Stonehenge-like concrete ruins of the great American Flat mill. Graffiti-covered over its entire enormous bulk, it looms out of the sagebrush in mysterious and skeletal complexity, like a frightening ghost of the past or, as the mood changes, an ominous portent of some star-wars future.

The palmy bonanza days of the Comstock ended in 1880 when production of gold and silver declined to \$4.8 million from \$20.4 million in 1878. The Grand Old Lady kept up appearances with a massive and expensive attempt to find new bonanzas in the 1880s, followed by schemes during 1897–1913 to pump the super-hot water out of the old deep workings. But no new ore bodies of any consequence were ever found and the Comstock limped along, much diminished, at production rates usually lower than \$1 million per year.¹

Such was the condition of the lode when in 1919 two enterprising mining engineers, Alex Wise and Roy Hardy, backed by the rancher and banker Herbert Humphrey, started a program of reopening and sampling the old near-surface bonanza areas of the mines of upper Gold Hill. By 1920 they had acquired

Robert E. Kendall is a retired mining engineer and a graduate of the Mackay School of Mines. He grew up in Virginia City, and during the 1940s worked underground there. His story, "Deep Enough: The Pitfalls and Perils of Deep Mining on the Comstock," appeared in the Fall 1996 edition of the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*.



America Flat Mill, c. late 1920s. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

leases of the upper levels of 8,500 feet of the lode extending from the Exchequer on the north to the Keystone at the south, including all the old Gold Hill bonanza properties such as Con Imperial, site of the Little Gold Hill mines and the original discovery, plus the Confidence, Challenge, Yellow Jacket, Kentuck, Crown Point, Belcher, and Overman mines.²

From its earliest days the Comstock had been financed and controlled by San Francisco-based money and people. After the bonanza days, all attempts to attract eastern capital failed, probably because of the Comstock's then bad reputation for shady financial practices and stock-price rigging. Wise and Hardy must have put together a very persuasive prospectus because they attracted the attention of a highly regarded eastern investment syndicate headed by the wealthy blue-blood Harry Payne Whitney of New York and Boston. Whitney, heir to a fortune of \$24 million and married to the daughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt, was a pillar of New York society. A member and director of almost every organization and charity that counted in New York, including the Metropolitan Opera and the Saratoga Association for the Improvement of the Breed of Horses, he was a big-game hunter, world-class polo player, and owner of one of the largest stables of race horses in the country. One of his business ventures was the Metals Exploration Company, a syndicate of wealthy investors that included Harry Sinclair and Daniel Guggenheim and was organized for the purpose of developing and operating metal mines in the United States

and Canada.³

Whitney's chief lieutenant was a flamboyant mining engineer named Bulkley Wells, a Harvard graduate who came west to make his reputation in the Colorado mines and who became notorious for his extravagant life style. He was a bon vivant who hunted big-game, played polo, and owned a private railroad car complete with valet and cook. In the early 1900s Wells was a vigorous player in the Colorado mineowners' resistance to the Western Federation of Miners' attempts to organize, and in 1908 he narrowly escaped assassination when a bomb exploded under his bed, blowing him as high as the ceiling. He must have been an extraordinarily active man, because in addition to all his other activities he was a general in the Colorado National Guard, and in 1920 was president of the American Mining Congress.⁴

In the spring of 1920, Bulkley Wells, acting for Whitney's Metals Exploration Company, acquired the Wise-Hardy leases and formed the United Comstock Mines Company, with Wells as president, Herbert Humphrey as vice president, and Roy Hardy as general manager. On June 20, 1920, one of the most ambitious and costly mining ventures ever undertaken on the Comstock Lode was announced with great fanfare. The plan called for a 10,000-foot-long electrified haulage tunnel starting in American Flat and intersecting the mining properties at a depth of 450-to-700 feet, a 1,000-ton-per-day cyanide mill to be erected at the mouth of the tunnel (quickly increased to 2,000 tons per day, making it the largest of its kind in North America), and a mining program designed to extract by mass-mining methods the low grade ores remaining in and around the old near surface bonanzas lying above the tunnel.

The Comstock Lode was moribund at the time, and the mineral production of Storey County amounted to only \$550,000 in 1920. The announcement hit the towns of Gold Hill and Virginia City like a bombshell, generating an explosion of optimism. The local press displayed an almost palpable euphoria in their reports of the announcement, and the *Virginia Chronicle* covered the event with banner headlines:

GREAT REVIVAL OF COMSTOCK MINES. Bulkley Wells Associated With Herbert G. Humphrey In Large Operations on Comstock. Biggest Deal Ever Made in the State of Nevada Has Been Consummated—\$2,500,000 Operating Capital—1,000 Ton Mill Will Be Erected.

That the great Comstock Lode, the producer of millions and millionaires . . . is about to enter upon a revival, the magnitude of which bids fair to once again place the old camp in the foremost ranks of gold and silver producers in the country, if not of the world, is officially confirmed today. The announcement follows many months of intensive development work in the mines of the Gold Hill section of the Comstock, centering on the Con. Imperial group, practically the identical scene on which was uncovered over half a century ago, the fabulous riches, the news of which startled mankind, and drew from the four corners of the earth, an endless stream of humanity, which was welded into the most unique and romantic of all mining camps.

It is fitting that at this point there should pivot a new era of Comstock mining activities, and based upon what is described as the largest and most extensive area of gold and silver ores existing anywhere today At the Imperial group, it is officially announced today that there is blocked out 2,200,000 tons of ore of an average value of from \$10 to \$15 per ton, at a conservative estimate, which has been minutely sampled and checked by the most eminent mining engineers of the country. It is the basis on which is founded a new chapter in Comstock mining which is about to be unfolded, and which has brought into this famous mining district a combination of capital and mining talent that will command immediate attention, and that within the year promises to have in operation one of the largest and most up-to-date milling plants in the entire country.⁵

Three days later the *Chronicle* reported on the reaction to the announcement:

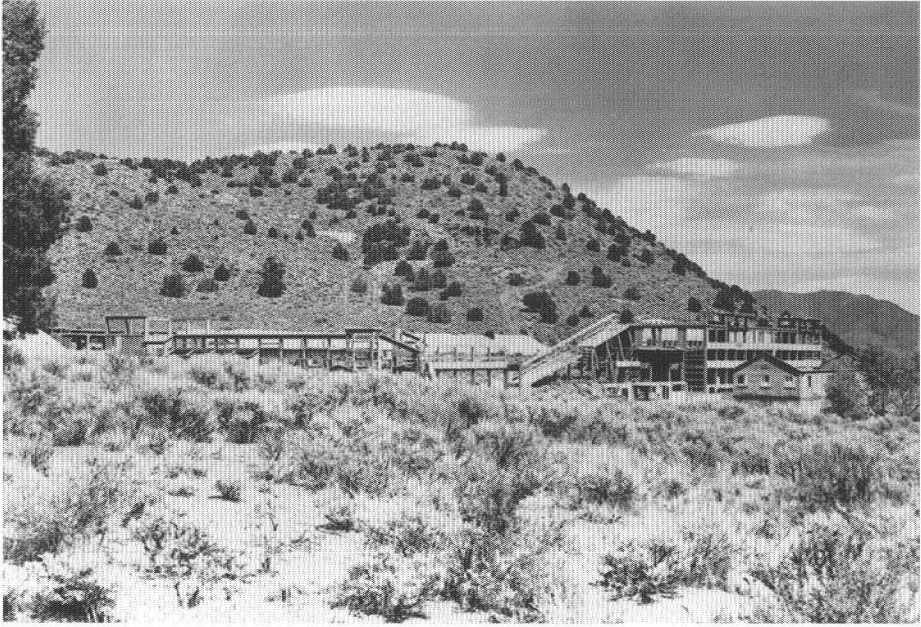
Throughout this city yesterday only extreme optimism and satisfaction was expressed over the remarkable turn of events that has taken place in Comstock mining affairs Not for forty years or more, since the time when the Con. Virginia bonanza was the marvel of the mining world, has an event in this section caused the sensation or caused such a deep impression that capital of such large resources had combined to back a Comstock mining project, and put it through to a successful finish.

The optimism of the day seemed fully justified because Whitney's syndicate, under Wells's direction and operating as the United Comstock Mines Company, immediately launched the most expensive construction and development program ever undertaken on the Comstock. Construction of the two-mile-long haulage tunnel, designed to tap the ore bodies of the Gold Hill group was started in July. No money was spared in the construction of the 2,000-ton-per-day cyanide mill—the largest gold processing mill of its kind in North America. The massive reinforced concrete and steel construction, designed to last many years, reflected the optimism of Bulkley Wells and his financial backers.

The mill was built on a site known years before as Frenchman's Gardens, where earlier children of the Comstock had gathered during spring and summer to hold annual picnics.⁶ Adjacent to the mill, support facilities were constructed, including a machine shop, plate shop, warehouse, assay office, and mine office. A small village, called Comstock, was erected nearby for the accommodation of employees. It comprised cottages, bunk houses, boarding house, school house, general store, and amusement hall.⁷

On September 23, 1922, with great ceremony, the mill began processing ore in what was expected to be a mining operation with a minimum life of twelve years. Tracing the fortunes of the venture from this point forward becomes more difficult because, although the operation encountered serious problems from its inception, the tendency of the local press, and to a lesser extent even the national mining journals, was to display an optimistic boosterism that played up good news and virtually ignored bad.

Barely eleven months after the start-up, the first hint of serious trouble sur-



American Flat ruins, 1972. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

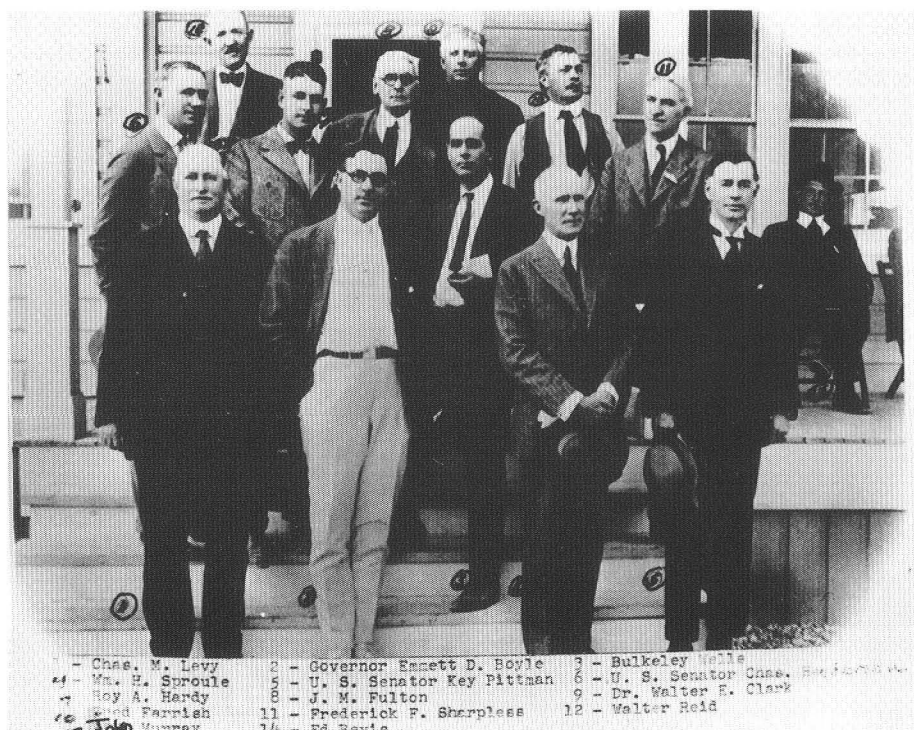
faced: In August 1923, Bulkley Wells suddenly resigned as managing director of Whitney's Metals Exploration Company and as president of the United Comstock Mines Company as well. *The Engineering and Mining Journal* reported that "Dissatisfaction with the results of their large expenditures in financing the United Comstock properties at Virginia City, Nevada, as well as others, led to a break in the friendly relations which have existed for years between Wells and Mr. Whitney, it is believed."⁸ Equally disturbing was the disclosure at about the same time that negotiations for the sale of United Comstock Mines, after less than two years of operation, had been taking place with potential buyers.

After selling his interest in the Gold Hill mines to United Comstock in 1920, the ever active Alex Wise moved north on the lode and consolidated the upper levels of the so-called Middle Mines, consisting of the Gould and Curry, Savage, Hale and Norcross, and Chollar-Potosi, in the bonanza days all major producers from fairly shallow ore bodies. In 1923, this group, known as the Comstock Merger Mines, was acquired by British interests allied with the powerful and rich Consolidated Goldfields of South Africa, which then spent more than half a million dollars on exploration of the upper levels of the properties.

The managers of Comstock Merger Mines saw opportunity in the distress at United Comstock in that if they could purchase United's assets at bargain prices, they would have a newly built mill and a haulage tunnel that needed to be



American Flat – United Comstock's opening day, September 23, 1922. (*Nevada Historical Society*)



American Flat – United Comstock's opening day, September 23, 1922. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

extended only another 2,500 feet to reach their ground.

In December 1924, Merger Mines purchased all the assets of United Comstock for less than \$1 million dollars, a fraction of the original cost.⁹ That it was indeed a fire sale is not surprising considering that the operation barely broke even on direct operating costs and never returned a cent toward retirement of the capital investment. During its twenty-seven months of operation, the United Comstock milled 900,000 tons of ore at a gross yield of \$3,400,000, with a recovery of \$3.77 per ton at the mill. This compares with the June 1920 announcement that the mine had blocked out reserves of 2,200,000 tons of an average value of \$10 to \$15 per ton.¹⁰

After the change of ownership, the new operators continued mining in the Gold Hill area while extending the haulage tunnel into the Middle Mine properties to the north. This work was completed in July 1925 and it opened up what was claimed to be an additional 2,000,000 tons of profitable ore.¹¹

The new management did achieve some success by reducing the previously very high dilution of ore with worthless waste rock, a problem that had plagued operators from the beginning; however, the net impact was not enough to counteract the declining price of silver and the inherent difficulties of mining underground large tonnages of ore by bulk mining methods, given the peculiarities of the Comstock ore bodies. On October 19, 1926, after twenty-two months under the new ownership, the Comstock Merger Mines posted a close-down notice at the mine, and in December the mine and mill closed down for good, thus ending one of the last major attempts to revive the fortunes of the Comstock Lode.

During its two years of operation the Comstock Merger Mines mined and milled 965,000 tons of ore with a recovered value of \$4.34 per ton, and a gross value of \$4,200,000.¹² Only 45,000 tons were mined from the newly opened Middle Mines properties group that had attracted Consolidated Goldfields in the first place. As was the case with the previous operators, the bullion yield only partially covered direct operating expenses, and there was nothing left for return of development costs, capital, or profit.

Shortly after the closing, the mill and all the mine machinery were sold to a machinery dealer who proceeded to strip the mill of everything detachable, leaving only the bones of the reinforced concrete structures.

That such a venture, financed by experienced mining capitalists, and planned and operated by engineers of high standing and national reputation, should have fallen so short of expectations, and collapsed so quickly, calls for an explanation. Most contemporaneous sources attribute the failure exclusively to the declining price of silver. Silver prices did decline from a high of \$1.00 per ounce in 1920 to lows ranging between \$0.56 and \$0.70 per ounce after June 1923, but the decline was predictable because the \$1.00 per ounce price was the result of a government support program that had a known limited life. Although a large reduction in price did occur, a prudent investor calculating the

likely results of such a venture should have taken the risks of price fluctuation into account. There were also other factors that had a serious negative impact on profitability. In discussing the reasons for the closure, the *Engineering and Mining Journal* had this to say:

Failure did not result because costs were higher than anticipated, but principally because ore grades were much lower than what was indicated by sampling and over a year ago the company, realizing the futility of attempting to recover its investment from the mining of the old filled stopes, initiated a campaign in the hope of finding new orebodies. A tremendous amount of work was accomplished, but none gave the slightest encouragement. The United Comstock explored for new orebodies but did not discover any. Apparently there is no such thing as a low-grade orebody on the Comstock, or the early miners mined to the limit below which efficient operation is not possible today.¹³

The mine closure and loss of five hundred jobs was a terrible blow to the economy of Virginia City and Gold Hill. In the years following the shutdown, mining activity was at the lowest level in the Comstock's history, and did not revive until the government raised the price of gold from \$20 to \$35 per ounce in 1934.

After his break with Whitney over the collapse of the United Comstock venture, Bulkley Wells's fortunes also fell; in 1931 he committed suicide in San Francisco by shooting himself in the head. At the height of his career Wells was managing director of sixteen mining companies, a director of many other companies, president of a bank, and president of the American Mining Congress. His suicide note said: "Nothing but bankruptcy is possible as far as my estate is concerned."¹⁴

Production on the lode reached its all time low of \$20,000 in 1932. However, the cost deflation caused by the great depression plus the increase in the price of gold to \$35 per ounce in 1934 led to a healthy mining revival characterized by a number of relatively small but profitable operations. But in 1942 the Comstock received a blow from which it never fully recovered when, by executive order from the White House, the War Production Board ordered all gold mines closed for the duration of the war. Efforts to reopen the mines after the war met with little success because postwar cost inflation wiped out the already thin profit margins. By the end of 1950, virtually all mining on the Comstock had ceased, and the character of Silver City, Gold Hill, and Virginia City underwent a gradual but irreversible change. For almost one hundred years the inhabitants of the Comstock had been totally dependent on the mining industry for their well being. Mining was king, and wherever gold or silver was found it was dug up without the slightest concern for the consequences.

The 1950s and 60s saw changes on the Comstock that profoundly altered the relationship between the people who lived there and the miners who may have wanted to work there. First, the focus of the local economy shifted from mining to tourism and, second, the area became in part a bedroom community for

people who worked in Carson City and Reno but liked the distinctive flavor of life on the Comstock.

The year 1969 was a watershed during which Virginia City, Gold Hill, Silver City, and much of the surrounding area became officially designated as the Comstock Historic District, a state-chartered entity. The designation provided for preservation and restoration of buildings and structures of historic significance, and the accompanying enforcement powers were used to ensure that new construction and modification of existing structures conformed to historic architectural styles. Formation of the historic district signaled a change the community's priorities, away from mining and toward tourism and preservation.

Nevertheless, in the summer of 1978 Diane Gordon awoke to the sound of bulldozers outside her Victorian home in Gold Hill. When she asked the workmen what was going on, she was astounded by the answer, "We've begun mining."¹⁵

Thus began a conflict that pitted a mining company bent on exercising its right to mine in a distinctive, fragile, and famous setting against local residents who opposed the changes in the landscape and destruction of landmarks that could be brought about by the mining operation.

In the 1970s, Houston Oil and Minerals Corporation, a Texas-based company backed by oil and gas money, began taking up leases in the old bonanza properties in upper Gold Hill, from the Yellow Jacket to the Con. Imperial—the very same piece of ground that had attracted Bulkley Wells and Harry Payne Whitney and had produced such disastrous results fifty-nine years before. However, optimism was in the air because gold and silver prices were rising to all-time historic highs, and in 1979 construction began on a 1,000-ton cyanide mill just to the northwest of the ill-fated and abandoned American Flat mill of the 1920s. Preparations began for an open pit mine at the old Con. Imperial property in upper Gold Hill.

What followed was almost a repeat of the United Comstock fiasco of the 1920s—with one major variation. This time the mine was to be a huge open pit which meant that for every ton of ore mined, between seven and ten tons of overburden and waste had to be dug up and removed also. Before long the mine was a gaping hole just west of Greiner's Bend, a famous Comstock landmark on the road between Gold Hill and Virginia City, and flanked by eight Victorian houses.

The mining project was driven by an unprecedented rise in gold and silver prices during the 1970s. The original ore reserve calculated in 1978 was based on a gold price of \$140 per ounce and a silver price of \$4.50 per ounce. A year later, prices had risen to \$325 per ounce for gold and \$12 per ounce for silver, which gave a calculated recoverable value of \$69 per ton, and for the 1.4 million tons of ore reserves, a total yield of \$97 million, all for an anticipated capital investment of around \$15 million.¹⁶



Main Street in Virginia City, Nevada, 1960s. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

The mining plan called for the pit walls to extend beyond the houses and road at Greiner's Bend, requiring their removal, and Houston, claiming right of condemnation under the 1872 mining law, announced that it planned to force the removal of the houses and relocation of the road. By the end of 1979 and before the mill had begun processing ore, five million tons of overburden had already been removed, and the occurrence of a million-ton slide had caused cracks in the road, threatened the houses at Greiner's Bend, and endangered the town's water-supply pipeline, which lay on the hillside above the pit to the northwest.

Houston's act, whose effect was exacerbated by a closemouthed and uncommunicative public relations posture, caused a firestorm of local opposition. The ire of the residents peaked in November 1979 during a meeting at the Storey County Courthouse when the mining company declared its intent to close and reroute the road and remove the eight houses. The residents' anger was further inflamed when the company's legal representative told the crowd that if the houses didn't sell, Houston Oil would condemn them through eminent domain. Shortly thereafter, the Storey County Commissioners voted to go to court to stop the mining activity, and it went on record as opposing any relocation of the highway.¹⁷

Houston's handling of the situation had become so bad that it prompted Nevada's Congressman Jim Santini to telephone the company's president, rousing him from bed at 6 AM, to tell him of the inexcusable blunders his firm had made in dealing with the people of northern Nevada and specifically Storey County. The pressure worked, because at a meeting in Reno soon after, Allen Cluck, public relations manager for Houston, said, "We have a public relations disaster here . . . these people in those homes will not be disturbed unless they want to be."¹⁸

The furor was so great that Houston was finally jolted into a spirit of accommodation, and it did make some progress in repairing its damaged image. In the spring of 1980 the company offered to contribute \$1 million to a proposed Storey County foundation and to make annual payments of \$35,000 while the mine operated, but the offer came at a price—relocation of the road at Greiner's Bend and removal of the houses there. This deal was never consummated and in 1981 Houston withdrew it, saying the economics of the mine did not warrant it.¹⁸

In fact, in November 1981 the open pit-mine was closed down, and in June 1982 the mill was closed and mothballed. In 1983 the mill was sold to the United Mining Corporation, which had holdings in the Middle Mines area in Virginia City. Attempts to operate the mill from dumps and old stockpiles were not successful and the mill shut down for good in 1985. The following year, the buildings and mill equipment were sold piecemeal at a public sale.

The reasons for the failure of the Houston Oil and Mineral operation are similar to those leading to the United Comstock collapse in the 1920s. Both

companies relied on what turned out to be unrealistically optimistic forecasts of the grade and tonnage of ore available for mining and milling. It is not surprising that little of value remained, since the Con. Imperial, located at the site of the original discovery of the Comstock, had been mined and remined repeatedly since 1859, and for ever decreasing grades of ore.

In Houston's case, the actual value of the ore at the mill turned out to be far below the projected value even though gold and silver prices, at their highest levels in history, held up well during the two-year period of operation. That the Houston operation's open pit threatened a Comstock landmark was an additional burden, and in spite of the company's strong legal position as holder of valid mineral rights, as a practical matter, it became impossible in the face of so much opposition to expand the pit in order to extract the whole of the projected ore body.

Thus ended the second of two expensive and disastrous attempts at large scale mining on the Comstock in the twentieth century. Of the Houston venture, only the empty shells of a few buildings now remain at American Flat, but the enduring legacy of that operation is the immense Con. Imperial pit, its unstable walls still capable of failing and engulfing Greiner's Bend.

After seventy years, the ruins of the great mill at American Flat still stand, covered end to end with graffiti, monstrous and seemingly indestructible. In its silence and isolation it exudes an almost sinister aura. Over the years these ruins have attracted many—it has been a rendezvous, a painting gallery and a shooting range. But in 1997, continuing vandalism and unsafe conditions prompted the Bureau of Land Management to close public access to the site.

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NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

Family Legacy

Steven W. Pelligrini

Through the years Tony and Emma Glock transformed acreage that had defeated other hard-working farmers into a Mason Valley showpiece, and they did so against all odds. Hills leveled with horse-powered equipment became verdant fields of alfalfa and barley. Neighbors marveled at the magnitude of the adventure and that it was accomplished by two people working alone. The ranch metamorphosed from a patchwork of sand hills, greasewood, and alkaline soils into a showplace where three generations of family made frequent pilgrimages to be with my grandparents and to enjoy the oasis they created.

One spring day in 1998 I ventured onto my grandparents' ranch for the first time in thirty-three years to revisit memories grown dim with time. It proved a difficult and nostalgic journey. I timed my arrival for noon, the time Grandpa would have arrived from the fields for lunch. It was my favorite time of day back then. Things have changed, but pulling into the yard I see faint traces of the lane that led to the corral and to the barns, the horse barn and the milk barn. In those days it was gray graveled, well used, and smoothly continuous with a narrow bridge that crossed the Greenwood Ditch. Time travel, a return to scenes all but forgotten, I refocus to events of another day. Things seem to be in some proximity to their old order, but I can't find them. A world of discrepant events. If I squint down, engage my memory, I can see Grandpa's old blue Chevy pickup, can almost hear and smell it, loaded to the brim with bailing wire, shovels, and tools. It crosses the bridge and clatters off toward the hog pasture. I could never quite figure out where the hog pasture was. Today weeds overgrow everything, and the sun, stark and invasive without the cottonwoods that once grew there, glares obtrusively upon this scene that is both familiar and foreign. The bridge is gone, but I find where it was. Behind a mound of dirt piled across the lane I find its footing. Cement blocks huddle in shallow green

A biology teacher at Yerington High School, Steven W. Pelligrini has had three previous articles in the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, in which he connects the natural history of the Mason Valley with his family's history.



Mason Valley ranch. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

water of the Greenwood, cower there like hesitant memories, reluctant to meet head on this ruined apparition of a cherished memory. Water sucks and laps around the meager blocks, and I remember Grandpa towing a bailer over the bridge. Is this all that held him up, these brittle pilings?

My grandparents took over operation of the ranch as sharecroppers in December of 1924. One third of the profit from crops and the dairy would be theirs. It was the Coolidge period of prosperity, and to finance their move from Wabuska they probably had little trouble borrowing money from the Federal Land Bank. Trouble, of course, followed in many disguises such as when a local land bank administrator declared my grandfather an incompetent irrigator. The bureaucrat appointed someone to irrigate the ranch for him, but when things began drying up control was returned to my grandfather. It proved to be but the first round in a forty-year battle to coax water onto fields that had been leveled by Fresno scrapers.

In 1939, against the advice of nearly everyone, they bought the ranch. First item of business was to increase the dairy herd. Cream was gold, and their chief income. Money was short, and times were hard, but my grandpa was a stubbornly persistent man. When financial woes did not break him, nature tried her hand. An outbreak of anthrax should have ended the venture, but he cremated his dead cattle according to rules established by the sheriff, rolled up his sleeves, bought more stock, and carried on. Through the years his herd grew modestly. He took great pride in both his dairy and stock cows. Cattle and the ranch were his pride, but my mother remembers, during the depression, occasions when he sacrificed a cow for three dollars so he could take his family to

Yerington to see a movie. He placed his wife and children above all else.

I wonder if he ever considered the legacy that was sprouting with each step he took, the traditions he was birthing that would become known in Mason Valley as the Glock work ethic? Probably not. He was a man without pretensions, a man who asked for little but who always considered it necessary to give all he had, especially if his children or grandchildren were recipients.

It was here, on the Glock ranch, we grew up, grew together, and grew old. Three generations of us including my grandparents' brothers and sisters, who were frequent visitors to the ranch. Every occasion from Christmas to pheasant season brought family and their guests to the ranch, and Grandma never failed to find room at the table for anyone who crossed the cattle guard at the head of their lane. Every visit timed to miss the three main meals was occasion for a snack that consisted of enough food to qualify as a feast. And Sunday night suppers were a ritual none of us, all three generations of us, would have dreamed of missing. Picnics in cool shade of veteran cottonwoods, horseshoes in the back yard, baseball, laughter, and fun were all part of the ritual. And, of course, there was conversation, the true sharing variety of conversation where people talked long into darkness on the porch, and others listened around the polite music of a thousand crickets.

There were quiet moments, too, when the ranch revealed what I always believed was its true personality. Early morning, when cold shadows stuck to the house in gray sheets and the ranch yard rested, bathed in blue light the sun had not yet penetrated, I loved best of all. Grandma bustling in the kitchen, floor squeaking under her steps. Puffed rice, toast you buttered yourself — hurry before it cools! — and coffee that smelled so good it made you want to eat the air. Grandpa, ready for the fields, would slam the door on the old pickup somewhere outside. It smacked like a dropped pot then smacked again. Fifties machinery, the doors never shut exactly right. The engine would roar as he pumped the gas. There never seemed enough time to put mufflers on the equipment. I would watch him turn and drive past an older, abandoned house outside the kitchen window on his way to irrigate and then to mow hay. The bed of the old pickup was a perpetual litter of torn burlap sacks, shovels, pitchforks, greasy worn-out machinery parts, and discarded tractor and bailer organs. It had no window on the passenger side, and nearly all the needles on the dash gauges had broken off. Holes gaped in the bed where its boards had been broken. The old truck was the mechanical counterpart of my grandparents, a functional machine streamlined of all pretenses and hard-working despite rigors of many long and difficult years.

After his departure, things at the house always settled into a routine. It was my privilege, when I got old enough, to gather the eggs. A morning job and a good way to start the day. The ranch yard smelled sweetly of coffee grounds rotting into the soil and mown hay aging in a field beyond the fence. Thick stands of sunflower and ironweed lined the picket fence out back between the



Haying in Yerington, Nevada. (*Nevada Historical Society*)

yard and adjoining fields. A good place to gather grasshoppers. A plank near the chicken pen bridged a shallow ditch, and a metal latch secured the gate. Chickens bunched on the other side like hungry bums at a soup kitchen. I carried the bucket that made me their important person. A miracle of nature, eggs, brown and fresh, lay warm in clean straw nests. Grandma loved her chickens, as evidenced by the care they enjoyed.

An old woodshed outside the kitchen door and off the open porch was birthing ground for what was always a bumper crop of ranch cats. Any day and any season I could find litters of kittens in every imaginable stage of development. Some were old enough to be wild and skittish like their parents; others squirmed in furry, mewling balls, their eyes still sealed. Because they were more feral than friendly, I was discouraged from making pets of them, but I tried anyway. Despite kindness I showed them, they always reverted to the wild. Every time I thought I had won one over, I would find it prowling the granary for mice and running from me like the squirrels that lived in the milk barn.

Near the silos a hay mower, rusty and gone as those days when horses powered it across alfalfa fields, melted slowly back into the earth. Sometimes I strung strings on it, bridle and stirrups, and rode it through badlands of my imagination.

In a dilapidated building beside the Greenwood stood an abandoned combine. A remarkable device in its day, it was reputed to be the first self-propelled combine in Mason Valley. As far back as I can remember, though, it collected dust and cat litters in a small shed that fit it like a cocoon. I spent hours sitting on its iron seat reaching for pedals and pulling levers that connected to its dead

heart. Benches once occupied by men who sewed grain sacks lined a short galley behind me, and behind that was a short slide through which they sent full sacks to the ground to be picked up later by a truck. I loved sitting there, pushing levers and turning the wheel as, in my imagination, men talked and sweated and recognized me as master of the machine. It had secret doors and abandoned tool boxes where forgotten pliers in cradles of dust caked hard by time vainly awaited the next job. For variety I occasionally slicked up the slide with wax paper and spent afternoons scooting down it. My own personal amusement park in the deep summer shade of behemoth cottonwoods. Up the ladder, through the galley, down the slide like a sack of barley.

Noon, Grandma set the table and Grandpa would click on the radio to hear the news and livestock report. Hired hands, kids, other family, even Grandma held their thoughts so he could hear. Lunch at the long table was a feast. Always a cooked meal, it was more like what we called supper in our house. Baked potatoes, pork chops, steaming vegetables, rice pudding, and people crowded elbow to elbow. Every day the Koolaid pitcher was a different color, a different flavor. It frosted in the hot summer air, an inviting two-quart oasis at that table of busy people. Nobody cooked quite like Grandma. No conversation was ever more appealing than idle talk of tired men nooning from their labor in the field. They smelled sweetly of sweat, alfalfa, grease, and honesty.

Morning spawned memories in the shade of the ranch yard and afternoon memories incubated in a white stare of sun on the west side of the house. Sometimes when summer baked alfalfa fields to droopy dry patches, I would be permitted to play in the ditch that ran by the house. White foam collected on edges of the concrete walk that passed over the ditch and swirled away in chocolate-brown eddies. Don't let the water suck you into the pipe! It was only three feet through, but a wild ride that would be. I floated and explored all the way beyond the garage, twenty yards in delicious coolness of East Walker water that would eventually creep between levees like thin slime-mold to rejuvenate heat-stressed alfalfa plants. I watched Grandpa set canvas and stop up ditch-bank gopher holes enough to know he cherished his water. Nevada sun blazing on my bare shoulders reminded me this was a treasured resource that spelled the difference between survival and famine. Bad years for farming were synonymous with bad water years. Drought was always the most feared adversary.

Nights when darkness entwined fields and fence lines with the netherland of my imagination, the ranch became a surrealistic world, isolated in a black void where one's insignificance was brought home. When the house was enveloped in darkness, like a nestling under the fat belly of a raven, we congregated in warm glow of the living room. Adults played canasta, and I listened to the comforting warmth of their stories until shuffling cards lulled me to sleep. Eventually I would awake, and everyone would reconvene in the kitchen. A window above the table hung black and forbidding, but the warmth of our

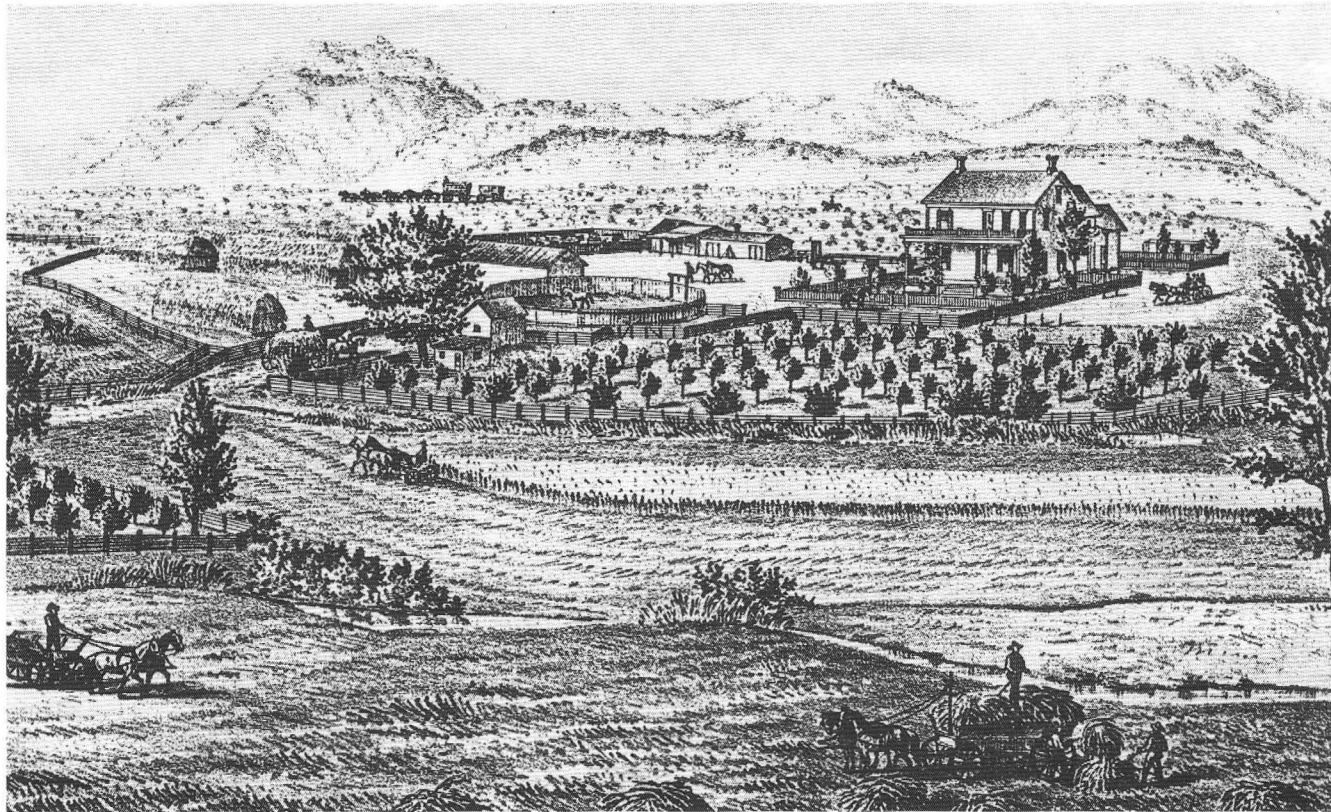
company and love in that home held at bay my notion something sinister lurked outside in the darkness. Coyotes whistled and hooted on hills behind the ranch, and Grandpa said there were probably only a couple even though they sounded like many. Grandma poured steaming hot chocolate from a saucepan, and Grandpa enchanted the night with stories. I found great lessons in those stories. Nights when work was finished spawned my best memories of the ranch. Oppression of night that almost smothered the house and the happiness within that was more than its match, taught me the power of love and family.

Grandma and Grandpa sold the ranch in 1965. Changes the new owners made, of course, met with some family resentment. Tampering with perfection begets imperfection; that was how we saw it. Grandpa died in 1976, but his presence is still very evident on the old property. Fence posts he set still hold sagging wire, seemingly too time-worn to be straight and crisp anymore. From the highway, cottonwoods along the Greenwood Ditch look much like they did when I played under them all those years ago, and the dirt lane still bisects jade fields of alfalfa. In the distance, the house huddles forlornly in a sickly grove of aged elms. Grandma, now in her late nineties, rides by each day and shakes her head. Drought and neglect have taken their toll.

So it was with some trepidation that I finally revisited the ranch, set foot again on its soil, one spring day in 1998. I returned in a vortex of memories both pleasant and heart rending. I found Grandpa near to heart that day, as close as ever. He was there in the sun's warmth and fragrant richness of sprouting soil. I heard his voice in the soft breeze and pleasant chatter of magpies. Except for physical decay of the place itself, time had stopped, and this day embraced warmly as did those days some thirty-five ago when Grandpa and the ranch were one being.

I visited his memory at the grain silo, twin oxidized tanks some fifteen feet tall that resemble the Tin Man's hat. Time has shrunk them. They brood, elevated on a three-foot concrete pad he poured on October 14, 1953. I know the date because he carved his name in the concrete: "FA Glock 10-14-53." I don't know how he formed it or how concrete arrived in those days. Brought it in a truck, I suppose, all two hundred cubic yards of it. Or did he fill his forms with rock first? I have no idea; I was only six then, and I don't remember. But I know I was somewhere nearby when he and my Uncle Don formed and poured it. I was never farther from him than necessary. I had probably been sent to the house to help Grandma; concrete jobs pose dangers for small boys.

I sit on the concrete slab alone with my memories, and I can almost relive that day all those forty-five years ago. October 14 and my cousin Linda's fourth birthday. I know Grandma and Grandpa went to her house that night. Their grandchildren celebrated nothing without them. I look at the finish on the concrete; it is an adequate job but no more. Rocks that should have been troweled in show rough faces, and some edges have crumbled. He was a farmer, after all, not a contractor. The concrete is not perfect, but it's honest. I see myself in



Residence and partial view of Home Ranch of John Carling, Lyon Co., Nevada
(etching from J. Ross Brown, *The Big Bonanza*)

the rough finish: time has taught me one's best efforts often fall short of perfection. But it was a man-sized job for a half dozen men, and they no doubt did it all by themselves. He and his son, Don. And then, the warm sun whispers, he walked on stiff and tired muscles to the house where Grandma was waiting supper. It never occurred to me, but he and Grandma must have eaten many weekday meals alone without the busy company of their family. I smell pork chops, fresh coffee, mashed potatoes, and gravy. He probably did other chores, irrigated, tended the garden after cleaning his tools. Then he would have bathed, put on a clean shirt and tie. He went nowhere without a tie. Despite his weariness he would have donned his hat and driven the ten miles to help Linda turn four. And I am sure I was there, and I know he told us stories, stories about growing up in the Pinenut Mountains, Masonic, and Bridgeport. Big events in a soft voice.

I ventured to cross the lane where the corral should have been and stopped where his shop stood. A squat, red building only ten by twelve that held more marvels and sensory stimuli than a pharaoh's tomb. It had one perennially open door and a bench where bolts, nuts, sickles, bailer teeth, and bits and pieces of dead machines lay strewn in provocative heaps. Leaves of giant cottonwoods that shaded it blew in each fall, and the rank aroma of their decay around sharp smells of grease and oil and baby kittens born in secret holes under the bench wafted like earth blood. Near the back wall sat a forge and bellows, and outside was a grinding wheel where I used to watch him grind mower sickles. A rough, white wheel powered by what I don't remember would send showers of sparks into the sunlit sky like a rooster tail of orange stars. It was a wonderful thing to see.

I locate where the old shop once stood, but a raised spot on the earth is all that remains. A raised, discolored hump of earth littered with rusted nuts and bolts and, nearby, one of the cottonwoods that shaded it. The tree seems unlike the one I remember, but perhaps it was smaller forty-five years ago. I kneel on the shop's old floor and touch the soil, soil that never used to see light of day. Memories race along my fingers to my heart, and I see him again at the grinding wheel, his hat pushed back, chambray sleeves pushed up on brawny, bleached forearms where massive brown hands hold the sickle he is sharpening. Sparks fly. I find a rounded piece of metal from one of his machines. A nugget. It has been cut by a torch on two sides; it is rounded on another. Something he was making? Something he excised from an ailing mower? It is warm in my hand, just the right size. I hold it to my cheek and its warmth is a memory. Poignant longing to tell him who I am, what I've been, nearly suffocates me.

The house both beckons and forbids. I remember it as large, white, and blue trimmed with windows that burned warmly on winter evenings. Cornucopic meals materialized from its kitchen, and myriad dogs and cats rested from blistering sun in shelter of its porches. Today it seems shriveled. Without its canopy of cottonwoods and cave-like shelter they afforded, it sits small and

baked in the ruin of what was once a yard where raspberries and greengage plums bloated us on warm summer days. It was a refuge where hammocks and yard swings invited weary nooning hayhands and spawned stories under harvest moons. It sits alone, a skeleton with hollow eyes that watch vacantly those vestiges of memories that wilt in its shade.

I push the door, and it groans in on ancient hinges. Carted down Aldridge Grade in two pieces by twenty-mule teams in the 'teens, it has been an old house for many years. It is ancient now, ancient and sick with melancholy. Musk of disuse and wood decay hangs in its confines like crushed mushrooms. Cobwebs and ruined carpet tell me the loving hands that once maintained it are gone. I inspect each room, hunting something I recognize, something tangible to hang my memories on. Memories flood like river rapids. The bedrooms where my aunts and uncle slept, the one that was my mother's. I stand in my grandparents' bedroom; it is too small. I remember it as a large room, the one where Grandma lay sick with tick fever. The memory is dim, but I see her there still, in her bed, putting a good face, for our benefit, on misery she no doubt suffered. Her dresser sat in that corner. The dresser where she cold creamed her cheeks before driving us to town to buy groceries. There was always time and enough left over to buy me something at Rosaschi's Five-and-Dime.

Back to the living room, I marvel at the chill there. It is an iciness that has nothing to do with the fact someone has removed the stove. It is because they are not there anymore. There's a great vacancy where Grandpa's chair once occupied a corner, and the kitchen is quiet. No one bustling, fixing gem-colored, frosted pitchers of lunch Koolaid even though my watch tells me it is noon. No squeak of the floor, no slap of cards on the card table. All is silent. And cold. What love remains from their years here is driven to walls and to dusty floors where decadence and all kinds of loneliness wait for someone to return and make this a home once again. It waits in vain, because only my family could accomplish this, and now it is too late. For the first time I understand; it is too late. All that remains are memories, and they are sorry conveyances for my desire to transport myself into the past, back to them the way they used to be.

I hear KOH, tendrils of sound from the corner once occupied by the radio. I return to a cold morning in 1952, and the oil stove ticks pleasantly, emits a sweet perfume of diesel. KOH, Cactus Tom, and Hank Williams fill the room. Lefty Frizzel and Hank Snow are there too.

There was no television, wouldn't have been time for it even if it had existed back then. There was no need for escape; everyone was too busy with life and working a ranch. There were no struggles with reality. Reality was cows to milk before sunup, irrigating at midnight, and the joy of early dandelions in late February. First sign of spring, the promise of summer, and of course, each other. Everything they did they did for their family, and their family shared equally in the work, the fun, the tragedies they suffered. Rain-ruined hay, light-

ning-burned haystacks, poor water years, and death. Death of their animals and death of their people. Reality so expansive one couldn't go around it; one had to go through it to survive. And they survived, and they thrived, and they became strong together.

I stand in their cold, vacant house and remember. I hear Grandpa's voice, his stories. A snippet of lost warmth tendrils from dusty spaces between the walls. My happiest and my saddest moments embrace in the time-distorted mirror of my memory, two estranged sisters who come to realize one exists only in the presence of the other. I leave enriched although sad time can't be undone. Childhood memories reconciled with adult perspective brings realization that all things pass. Tiny, tree-lined fields they worked with primitive equipment have succumbed to large, sterile expanses of laser-leveled mass producers. New owners and operators have little interest in ghosts that dwell there. What remains, and what matters, is the legacy two people left their family. Two hard working Nevada ranchers. It is a legacy bought with sweat, sacrifice and conviction—the conviction their children and grandchildren would honor forever their work ethic and their love for each other.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Great Midland. By Alexander Saxton. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

When I received a copy of this remarkable novel for review my thoughts while reading were so burdened with reminiscence that I almost declined the task. But I could not for reasons that shall presently become clear.

I met Al Saxton some fifty years ago in San Francisco during the great maritime strike of 1946-48. He was a ship's radio operator in the American Communications Association, and I was a seaman in the National Maritime Union. Both organizations were among the seven unions allied in the Committee for Maritime Unity. His name was familiar on the waterfront and on ships as the author of a pamphlet, *CMU Looks Ahead*, a copy of which I found among my old papers as well as a faded photograph of him as a speaker at one of our noon rallies at the foot of Clay Street on the Embarcadero. He was also an active campaigner for the Independent Progressive Party in the area and I was chairman of the Seamen For Wallace Committee during the strike. But my most vivid recollection of Saxton is in connection with the Writers' Workshop that met periodically at the California Labor School. Among the small group of novelists and journalists who came together to read and discuss their work in 1948, he had the distinction of having just published *The Great Midland*, a novel about the organizational struggles of Chicago railroad workers in which communists are depicted in heroic roles. This was his second published work, and to many of us aspiring writers on "the front" his success against the odds was deeply encouraging.

We were in the midst of a momentous maritime strike just as the post-war assault on the American left was mounting in full force. Unemployment and labor unrest were increasing throughout the country, while the established press regularly denounced our unions as communist led. The leaders of the Communist Party were indicted under the notorious Smith Act for alleged conspiracy to overthrow the government by force and violence. Advocacy of black civil rights at home or support of democratic insurgency abroad was declared to be on an agenda directed from Moscow, and that redoubtable trade unionist Harry Bridges was once again facing loss of citizenship and deportation. It was a heady time, and partisanship was intense.

In this social climate it was to be expected that reviews of *The Great Midland* in the standard media were sparse, and for the most part, hostile or priggish

critiques of what was deemed to be class propaganda. In what there was of a labor or radical press, however, it was generally lauded as a major working class novel. Those of us who knew Al Saxton felt that he was on the way to joining the ranks of Sinclair Lewis, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Howard Fast and the rest. As for me, though I did not know him well, I identified with the fact that he had come from a small rural town, had graduated from a large urban university just before the war, shipped out as a merchant seaman where he honed his social awareness in work and labor organization, and eventually joined the Communist Party. Moreover, he was a writer and a class-conscious observer of the world about him.

In 1949 I left the waterfront to look for work ashore. Not only were the prospects of shipping out becoming bleak, due to the political screening of seamen and a declining maritime industry, but I now had a family to support and a long-delayed commitment to make the change. With a series of nondescript jobs and a supportive working wife, I was finally able to enter graduate studies at the University of California in Berkeley part-time. Most of my old comrades and acquaintances from the waterfront were scattered, and the last I heard of Al Saxton was that he had been called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951. Of course, he declined to cooperate, enhancing my recollection of him. That was all of fifty years ago. And now, like a stray echo from the past, I have received a copy of *The Great Midland* for review. After the good part of a lifetime, a second edition has been brought out by the University of Illinois Press in its ground-breaking series, *The Radical Novel Reconsidered*. This novel, along with a host of writings of social disclosure or dissent from that period, is reclaimed after more than a generation of timorous neglect.

Here, in a fine introduction by Saxton, I learn that he had worked as a construction carpenter during the remainder of the 1950s while managing to write a number of short stories, and a third novel, *Bright Web in the Darkness* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1958) about black shipyard workers. This was produced ten years after Appleton-Century Crofts had published *The Great Midland* and then withdrew it from circulation during the Cold War. Though translations of his work did well in Europe, he realized he would not be able to make a living as a writer in the political climate of the time. In 1962 he began graduate studies in history at U.C. Berkeley and received the doctorate in 1967. His dissertation was published by the University of California Press under the title of *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California*. Another scholarly work, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1990) followed. And though he had dropped out of the Communist Party in 1959, he remained politically active in opposition to nuclear armament, white supremacy, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and United States policy toward the Cuban revolution.

It must be clear at this point that my rediscovery of Al Saxton as a person, writer and scholar has become the central theme of this review. I could not

approach the task otherwise, for in my view the resurrection of his early novel at this time is also a belated recognition of all the men and women of that era who were driven to expose the inequities in their society, and who paid a price for their vision of an enlightened human future. My reading of Saxton's retrospective introduction to the new edition of *The Great Midland*, and a re-reading of the long-lost novel evoked a haunting nostalgia about a time when great expectations and a confidence that collective effort could engender positive social change flourished in the midst of poverty and conflict.

The people of *The Great Midland* are mainly railroad workers living in the multi-ethnic cauldron of Chicago between two world wars. Caught up in the Great Depression and mounting racial and labor unrest, the families of European immigrants, of entrenched American laborers, of ethnic minorities, and the dispossessed contributed traditions to a working-class culture of survival and dissent. Thousands from the middle classes were cast adrift. Students, scholars, businessmen, lawyers and artisans were thrust into the grim proletarian job-market along with the millions of unemployed. Countless others were being driven from the Midwestern dustbowls, creating swarms of migrants in search of work and a better life. It was also a time of profound intellectual ferment. Early socialists, anarchists, Wobblies, Eugene Debs unionists and Christian evangelists vied for a hearing among desperately seeking constituencies. Radical political thought was the norm, and the struggle against predatory capitalism was variously pressed in movements for salvation, reform or revolution, while the exploiters moved to quell mounting discord by force and violence at home—or by war abroad.

Within this teaming milieu, the protagonists of *The Great Midland* enact a segment of their lives, each confronting singular circumstances imposed by birth and station. It was a time when racial discrimination and inter-ethnic antagonism prevailed in every aspect of American society, taken for granted or endured by most and resisted and exposed only by a radical minority. The early struggles of industrial unionism often cut across class and ethnic lines in alliances exemplified by Saxton in the friendship between Dave Spaas, a communist union activist, and Pledger McAdams, the vigilant leader of a black repair crew. Few writers have succeeded in dealing so credibly with the day-to-day realities of workers' lives, and fewer still have depicted the pragmatic mutuality or rare bonding that can develop in the workplace. This author has done so with simplicity and in the light of personal experience.

This is also the venue in which Saxton plays out the drama of a troubled relationship between Dave Spaas and Stephanie Koviak, a young woman from a Polish railroad working family who is determined to improve her life as a student at the university. Their marriage, despite an intense mutual attraction, is torn by emotional conflict as they struggle to understand one another's commitments and goals. For Dave, the course is set. As a former seaman, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, a Communist and militant trade unionist, his love of

Stephanie cannot overcome an impatience with what he perceives as her middle-class aspirations. For Stephanie, though she generally shares his convictions, Dave's unswerving devotion to a cause and mere toleration of her interests impairs their marriage.

But they can neither end it or make it work, for they are at once drawn together and repelled by forces within and without which they can neither comprehend nor control. The portrayal of this quest for a meaningful life in the environs of mid-century Illinois, its neighborhoods and rural precincts, and a world on the brink of another war, is the central theme of *The Great Midland*. Its power lies in the authenticity of historical detail that Saxton is able to convey and the lucid delineation of character in a complex social arena. Stephanie, in particular, emerges as a memorable personality as the narrative unfolds. This is noted by Constance Coiner in her posthumous preface to the new edition, where she states that she had "puzzled over how a fiction writer—especially a male writer—could have produced a female character such as Stephanie Koviak . . . before feminism's second wave." Like many of her contemporaries, she had assumed that the women's movement eroded away after the suffragist victory in 1920 not arising again until the 1960s with the civil rights movement.

But her fortuitous discovery of the out-of-print novels by Saxton prompted a period of intensive research concerning the historical context of radical writings from the 1930s to the 1950s. She came to the unexpected conclusion that during the interval between the "Old Left" and the "New Left," it was the policy of the Communist Party and its rank-and-file membership that sustained the basic issues of "the woman question," of civil rights and black liberation through the "conformist years," issues that would be revived in the rhetoric and strategies of the radical 1960s. The fact that such an insight was regarded by a promising young scholar of American literature in the 1990s as a discovery is a reminder of how the political climate of the past five decades or so has skewed the historical record.

Saxton acknowledges in his moving tribute to Constance Coiner that it was from her that he came to realize that Stephanie was really the central character of the novel. He reflects further about this in his introduction:

I had not thought of Stephanie and Dave as making antithetical statements. Dave has so fully internalized his class experience that he adheres without ambivalence to values drawn from that experience . . . Stephanie by contrast is always revaluing. It falls to Stephanie not only to establish the intellectual and scientific premises of their commitment but also to assess the emotional costs that Dave dismisses as irrelevant.

It troubled him that some early reviewers had thought the novel's outstanding achievement was the rare depiction of a "believable" Communist hero, and that Stephanie was a victim of bourgeois hang-ups impeding his dedicated efforts. This misreading of Stephanie's role when the novel first appeared in the late 1940s may well reflect not only the gender bias current and only dimly

recognized at the time, but also the doctrinaire bent among some sectors of the partisan left. As the author points out, Stephanie and Dave were each actively involved in the social liberation movements of their time. The conflicts in their relationship probed deeper ambivalences of personality and credo than any surface account of their respective conduct could reveal.

As for Dave Spaas, Saxton asserts that he deliberately strove to portray him and other party members positively and accurately. "Although well acquainted with some of the worst," he writes, "I understood then, and know now, that many of the most admirable people I ever met were members of the Communist party." Such a declaration by the author of a work published over fifty years ago is like fresh air from a newly opened window. It is a hopeful sign that something remarkable is taking place in the American literary scene, and that politically controversial and disparaged writings of the recent past may soon be in print again. A meritorious effort in this direction has been made by the University of Illinois Press in its new series. The *Great Midland* is one of the first and we look forward to more.

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Searchlight: The Camp That Didn't Fail. By Harry Reid. (Reno and Las Vegas University of Nevada Press, 1998. xxix + 233 pp., foreword, introduction, and prefaces).

This book is important news—and, like most news, demands consideration on more than one level. It is a study of a Nevada mining camp and must be placed within a historical and historiographical context. It is written by one of that camp's progeny—Senator Harry Reid, who has left and continues to leave an indelible mark on the final third of twentieth-century Nevada—and merits analysis for what it says or does not say about the state's recent history.

Searchlight: The Camp That Didn't Fail traces the Southern Nevada mining town's evolution from its founding and boom times to its failures and continued survival as an appealing community for retirees and a pit stop for travelers along Interstate 95. Reid goes beyond the boom-and-bust cycle of mining to describe and analyze Searchlight's businesses, climate, society, culture, and characters.

Reid's thesis is embodied in the title. "Searchlight never became a ghost town, but it tried," he writes, adding, "Searchlight is now prosperous again, not be-

cause of mining but because of the beauty of its landscape, the influx of retirees, and the tourism road, upon which the camp without a failure stands. Not all mining camps in Nevada survived," but Searchlight did (187-88). Indeed, Reid calls Searchlight "a microcosm of a frontier settlement worthy of historical study" (5).

Searchlight contains the material, detailed and analyzed, associated with just such a study. Reid examines the primary sources, mostly newspaper accounts, separating the fact and fiction as much as possible. He traces the lives of those who were locally powerful and of the hard-rock miners and employees at the other jobs and businesses that are crucial to a mining town.

To the average reader or Nevada history buff, that may seem dry. Happily, Reid peppers the manuscript with accounts of famous and not-so-famous Searchlight residents and characters, from Academy Award-winning costume designer Edith Head to a locally better-known movie couple, Clara Bow and Rex Bell. He recounts the saga of Queho, an Indian believed to have committed several murders in the vicinity. He explains the origins of Scott Joplin's "The Searchlight Rag." And Reid clearly enjoyed writing the chapter that begins, "Many commercial enterprises rose and fell over the years in Searchlight. Mining had its peaks, but there were more bad days than good. The one business that held steady and that was always present in Searchlight was prostitution," whose history he traces (178).

Among those associated with Searchlight, one important name missing from the manuscript is Harry Reid. In a few places, he mentions his family, longtime Searchlight residents. A couple of first-person references appear, but, as a good historian should, Reid avoids making himself bigger than the story he is telling.

On the other hand, Reid really is bigger than the story that he is telling. Surely Searchlight's most famous and important native, he was born and raised there, and went to school there until the eighth grade. Since Searchlight had no high school, he attended Basic High School in Henderson, and the rest, indeed, is history—Reid's history. He went on to college and law school, then into politics, carving out an impressive career: Henderson city attorney, Clark County hospital trustee, assemblyman, lieutenant governor, gaming commission chairman, two-term U.S. representative, and now two-term U.S. senator.

A foreword by former Governor Mike O'Callaghan and an introduction by University of Nevada, Reno history professor James Hulse put Reid and his book into additional perspective. O'Callaghan offers a warm and admiring account of Reid's life, recalling when he was the senator's government teacher and boxing coach, and pointing out, "That's why this historical tribute to Searchlight is so important; it gives insight into the man who wrote it" (xvii). Hulse provides insight into the man, his book, and its place in the study of Nevada history. "Senator Reid obviously enjoyed appending the ironic subtitle. In a sense, Searchlight was 'the camp that didn't fail' because it was never really a

great success as a mining town in the context of Nevada history, except in the anticipation of those who lived there and bonded to it," Hulse writes (xxv). But "its story embraces a kind of experience in the development of the Far West that was as much a part of the historical tapestry as those accounts of the more frequently chronicled towns," and offers a "wry verification" of that subtitle in the position that Reid has achieved (xxix).

Therein lies the importance of Reid's book. More sophisticated historians have produced better books about more important mining towns, including several in Nevada. But Reid has written a good book that makes a significant and an important contribution to Nevada's historical literature by providing a detailed study of one of the towns in the early twentieth-century mining boom that revitalized the state. Many recent works have added to Russell Elliott's important study of the boom: Sally Zanjani's history of Goldfield, Jack Fleming's work on copper towns, Elizabeth Raymond's biography of George Wingfield, and Elliott's own memoir of growing up in White Pine County have enriched our knowledge of the era and its short-term and long-term effects. *Searchlight* is a worthy addition to that list.

Furthermore, as the history of late twentieth-century Nevada is written, Reid's name looms large. *Searchlight* offers a valuable insight into Reid—his love of the area, knowledge of and interest in mining, admiration for the pioneers, and, indeed, personality and actions. For students of the Nevada experience, for scholars of western and mining towns, and for general readers curious about Nevada mining camps and, yes, how one of them could produce not only some ore but a United States senator, *Searchlight: The Camp That Didn't Fail* is a success.

Michel S. Green

Community College of Southern Nevada

Re-Imagining the Modern American West: A Century of Fiction, History, and Art.
By Richard W. Etulain. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996).

Richard Etulain's *Re-Imagining the Modern American West* provides for students of American culture an overview of Western fiction, history, and art—more specifically, painting. The three sections of the book examine the West as frontier, region, and post-region. Etulain realizes the potential dangers of oversimplification with the divisions and with such an overview. However, he does a thorough job. His work brings together discussions of subjects not usually

considered in the same text. Most of the time, fiction stands alone, as do historiography and painting. Combining this thoroughness with an engaging writing style makes for a book that would serve well in a Western history class or literature class, or for the average reader to gain knowledge on many fronts.

Literary turns are part of Etulain's style. Of the Western frontier historian, Frederick Jackson Turner, Etulain asserts that he "climbed back into his historiographic pulpit" after presenting his famous frontier thesis (38). When discussing the painter Charles Russell, Etulain writes that the artist "took to Montana and the frontier West like a hungry trout chasing a new lure" (60).

Re-Imagining the Modern American West is much stronger in the first two sections, which look at the West as frontier and region. Students of history can gain much insight into the historiography of the West from carefully examining Etulain's assessments of Frederick Jackson Turner and Walter Prescott Webb. Etulain reveals some overlooked individuals, such as Mary Hallock Foote, without discounting the more widely known Jack London, Frank Norris, or Willa Cather. Foote is credited with a vision of the frontier, including women and families, that "could have amplified understanding of the frontier" had she been better known (75).

The West as post-region, the third section of the text, lacks the same deftness of language applied in the earlier sections and reads like a smorgasbord of writers, historians, and artists without the same level of analysis and scrutiny applied. One is treated here to strings of environmentalists, Indians, women, and ethnic groups, in addition to subregional ity.

Also, while Etulain asserts that he is looking at art, which implies sculpture and painting, he examines only painting. Such a distinction was developed for writers. Rather than touch on poetry and general non-fiction work, he focuses on fiction. Therefore, a better subtitle of the book would be *A Century of Fiction, History, and Painting*, reflecting more accurately what the book contains. More illustrations would increase the quality of the work, enhancing Etulain's discussion of particular works. Additionally, while the author includes Willa Cather as a western writer, he does not include some writers from the Dakotas, like Douglas Under (*The Turkey War*), or Montana resident Rick Bass (*The Nine-Mile Wolves*).

Despite these minor problems, *Re-Imagining the Modern American West* does provide an overview that adds to the increasing number of cultural studies of America and more especially fills a gap in scholarship on the American West.

DeAnna E. Beachley
Community College of Southern Nevada

A History of Hispanics in Southern Nevada. By M.L. Miranda. (Reno and Las Vegas: University of Nevada Press, 1997. 262 pages).

Last year, Anna Maria Davis, a member of the Board of Directors of the Las Vegas International Film Festival and a descendant of Basque immigrants, won a Governors Award as the first native Nevadan to film a major motion picture in her home state. Davis and her former husband produced *Fools Rush In* (1997), a semi-autobiographical romantic comedy about the tumultuous relationship of a third-generation Mexican-American woman and an Anglo-American businessman. Amidst the sprawling suburban tracts and stucco strip malls of contemporary Las Vegas, the film's characters struggle to overcome cultural differences and find passion, bliss and everlasting love.

Despite its clichéd story line and crude stereotypes, *Fools Rush In* testifies to the growing presence of Hispanics in Hollywood, southern Nevada and the United States as a whole. As the Hispanic population continues to swell within the Silver State and across the nation, M.L. Miranda's *A History of Hispanics in Southern Nevada* is an important and welcome addition to not only the burgeoning field of Latina/o studies, but to American studies in general and western American studies in particular. Miranda, professor and chair of the Department of Anthropology and Ethnic Studies at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, documents Hispanics' contributions to the settlement and growth of southern Nevada—from the Spanish and Mexican explorers of the eighteenth century, to the undocumented Latina/o immigrants who currently labor in hotels and casinos along the Vegas Strip.

Indeed, the text's wide historical and demographic scope is its greatest strength. With a focus on "Hispanics"—as opposed to "Chicanas/os" or "Latinas/os"—Miranda's study includes the Castilian creoles of the eighteenth century, Basque ranchers of the nineteenth century, World War II-era Mexican *braceros*, post-1960 Cuban émigrés, Puerto Ricans and, the most recent group of Hispanic immigrants to the United States, Central Americans. As Miranda illustrates, Nevada's Hispanic community is surprisingly diverse. Unlike California, Arizona, New Mexico, Texas and Colorado, where most Hispanics are of Mexican descent, he points out that 41.4 percent of Nevada's Hispanic population is non-Mexican. On the fringe of the American Southwest, Nevada has received little attention from most historians in Latina/o studies. At the same time, many Nevada historians have overlooked the state's Hispanic population. By highlighting the struggles and accomplishments of several Hispanic groups over three centuries, *A History of Hispanics in Southern Nevada* adds to, distinguishes itself from and bridges scholarship in both fields.

While Miranda's sweeping perspective is ambitious and comprehensive, it sometimes leaves little room for particularities and reflection. Although the first five chapters of *A History of Hispanics in Southern Nevada* are rich with col-

orful tales of the men and women who helped build Nevada via exploration, mining, ranching and the construction of its railroads, the second half of the text often reads as a laundry list of the activities of various Hispanic organizations from the 1960s to the present. Here, the author's excessive use of the passive voice obfuscates the detail and insight that define the first half of the text:

Hispanic law enforcement officers can be seen patrolling the streets of the state's cities, and many more Hispanic lawyers have come to Nevada, some of whom have been elected to judgeships. Moreover, a Hispanic senior citizens center has been built. And finally, without funds from any external source, a history of Hispanics has been written (164).

Behind each sentence lies a story about Hispanic police officers, lawyers, judges, senior citizens, and, lastly, a scholar. Yet, because of the passive voice, the sentences fail to provide adequate information about their subjects and the reader is left with a number of questions, some of which are never answered. *Who* sees more Hispanic law enforcement officers? *Where*? In what cities exactly? *Who* elected *whom* to judgeships? *Who* built a senior citizens center for Hispanics? How, when and where? And, finally, *who* wrote a history of Hispanics without funds from any external source? Is the author referring to himself here?

Clearly, *A History of Hispanics in Southern Nevada* opens doors to those who wish to build upon Miranda's scholarship. A pathbreaking work, it succeeds in introducing its readers to the long history and growing presence of Hispanics in the place christened "snowfall" (*nevada*) in Spanish. As Clark County continues to expand and more Hispanics flock to the Silver State for work and pleasure, *A History of Hispanics in Southern Nevada* will become increasingly significant in understanding the deterioration of the border that divides the United States from Latin America and the ongoing transformation of the West.

Catherine S. Ramirez
University of California, Berkeley

TO THE EDITOR

Editor:

I enjoyed the most recent *Quarterly*, dated Fall 1997, and always especially look forward to reading anything on Nevada's railroads.

And this issue had two distinct articles, one on the "Atlantic and Pacific Railroad Survey," which I read and enjoyed, and the other on "Mining and Railroads in West Central Nevada." It is the latter article that I wish to address.

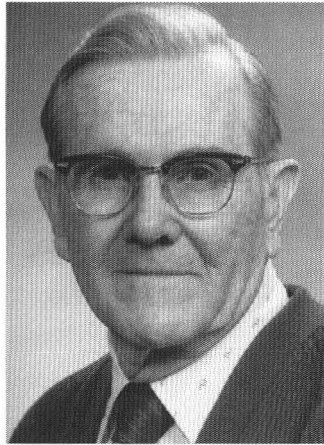
I found it to be notorious with misinformation. Though the author continually listed David Myrick's *Railroads of Nevada and Eastern California* and other railroad literature, in all probability he never used them for reference enough. Two errors that come to mind right now concern (1) the V&T did not connect Carson City to Reno until 1872—not the 1870 that he mentioned, and (2) the Eureka Nevada was not abandoned until 1938—not the year 1930 that he listed. And I cannot find any of his two dates in any of the books that he has mentioned.

My problem with all of the material is that it is in the *Quarterly* and that it will be researched by others over the years, quoted as authentic, and we will have misinformation becoming the gospel truth.

May I make a suggestion? The next time you have anything on railroads in Nevada, that you send the manuscript to the Nevada State Railroad Museum for checking. The museum has a full-time historian and can clean up sloppy information that doesn't exist anywhere else. Keep Nevada's historical information correct for future reference.

Jack Gibson
Carson City

IN MEMORIAM



Russell R. Elliot

1912–1998

Russell R. Elliott, historian of Nevada and a longtime friend and supporter of the Nevada Historical Society, died March 15, 1998. Elliott was born in the copper camp and company town of McGill, Nevada in 1912. He grew up in a large family in McGill, where he attended public schools, graduating from high school in Ely in 1930.

Russ went on to the University of Nevada from 1930 to 1934, under the encouragement and financial support of his older sister Sadie. He majored in history as a part of his original ambition to become a public high school teacher. During his undergraduate career Jeanne Wier, of the University of Nevada History Department and founder of the Nevada Historical Society, directed his interests toward Nevada and western history. After graduating, he taught at White Pine High School for four years. But during the summers he studied for a master's degree in history at the University of Washington, under the direction of prominent historian Merrill Jensen. The topic for his thesis was a history of Hamilton, Nevada. In 1938 he began attending the University of California at Berkeley to study for the Ph.D. in history. His three-year stint as an officer in the United States Army Air Corps during World War II interrupted his studies, which he completed in 1946. His Ph.D. dissertation, written under

the direction of the important western historian, Frederick Logan Paxson, was on the Tonopah-Goldfield Mining Boom from 1900 to 1915. He later published much of this work in *Nevada's Twentieth Century Mining Boom, Tonopah, Goldfield, Ely* (1966).

He assumed his first college teaching position at Southern Oregon Teachers College in Ashland, Oregon from 1946 to 1949. In the fall of 1949 he came back to the University of Nevada as a faculty member in the History Department, where he taught until his retirement in 1976. In the summers after retirement he remained active teaching his popular "History of Nevada" class until 1991. He chaired the combined History and Political Science Department (later the History Department) for eight years in the 1950s and 1960s. His chief devotion, however, was toward his students, who literally numbered in the thousands over the years. Many of his graduate students, James Hulse, Harlan Hague, Phillip Earl, Mary Ellen Glass, Harold Smith, and Ann Smith went on to positions in higher education and public history. Undergraduate student Richard Bryan, who eventually sought high political office as governor and United States senator from Nevada, acknowledged his indebtedness to him.

Russ was active in the affairs of the Nevada Historical Society, serving as a member of its Board of Directors for many years. He was as instrumental in revitalizing the organization as Jeanne Wier was in its founding. He played an important role in launching the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* in 1957. Professor Elliott was a charter member of the Western History Association in 1962, was a president of the Mining History Association, and he was a key person in founding the Nevada Corral of the Westerners International after his retirement.

Russ's books are a testament to his outstanding position in the ranks of Nevada's historians. Early in his career at Nevada he cooperated with librarian Helen Poulton to produce a pioneering bibliography of Nevada writings: *Writings on Nevada: A Selected Bibliography* (1963). In addition to the aforementioned *Nevada's Twentieth-Century Mining Boom, Tonopah, Goldfield, Ely* (1966), his books include *History of Nevada* (1973, rev. ed., 1987), a pathmarking work on the subject, with a heavy emphasis on economic and political matters, and still the most comprehensive treatment of the state's history; *Servant of Power; a Political Biography of Senator William M. Stewart* (1983); and *Growing Up in a Company Town, A Family in the Copper Camp of McGill, Nevada* (1990), an affectionate memoir of his youth and a significant contribution to our understanding of family amidst the demands of an industrialized mining and smelting operation.

Russell Elliott truly loved his native state. He particularly loved the Nevada he had grown up in, and he was attuned to its mountains, its desert, its mining landscapes. He loved the Nevada represented by the paintings of Craig Sheppard and the "old" Nevada of small towns, ranching, neighborliness. He never quite came to terms with the "new" Nevada of gambling and tourism. He was a dedicated, distinguished scholar and his life's work as a teacher at

the University of Nevada, Reno was devoted to understanding Nevada's historical experience and in imparting that understanding to others. These attributes engendered the high esteem and deep affection for him on the part of colleagues, students, and Nevadans in general.

Jerome E. Edwards
William D. Rowley

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Founded in 1904, the Nevada Historical Society seeks to advance the study of the heritage of Nevada. The Society publishes scholarly studies, indexes, guidebooks, bibliographies, and the *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*; it collects manuscripts, rare books, artifacts, historical photographs and maps, and makes its collections available for research; it maintains a museum at its Reno facility; and it is engaged in the development and publication of educational materials for use in the public schools.