

Virginia City, Nevada:
Time, Change and Integrity in an Historic Place

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Virginia City, Nevada, isn't one place, it's four. Instead of a single history, a single era of development and change, there are really four, each distinct and separate. What can make things confusing to the visitor is that these four different places, these four different histories, are all located on the same piece of ground. There are buildings and even man-made landscapes that reflect each of these eras, but they are all intermixed.

These four different places can each be briefly described. The first is the place created during the discovery and early development of Virginia City. The second is the place created by the Big Bonanza and the Great Fire, both in the mid-1870s. The third is a long era of decline and survival, when the two earlier building periods were radically reduced to only a few hundred buildings clinging to the side of Sun Mountain. The fourth is the post-World War II tourism boom, an era that created its own imprint on what was left of old Virginia City and continues to do so even today.

Within ten years, Virginia City changed from a small camp with perhaps a hundred miners in 1858 to a booming city of 11,000 people. The technical accomplishments and the human effort it took to make this happen fill the history books and still boggle the mind. Virginia City was the classic boom town, filled with single men, loose women and even a few noisy journalists like Samuel Clemens who took the pen name Mark Twain while working in Virginia City. As the mines went deeper they moved beyond all previous experience in California and forced a series of innovations in mining techniques that are still used today. A pipeline carried water to Virginia City from Lake Tahoe (over 25 miles away) and still supplies the town its water. Millions of feet of timber used in the mines and in the steam engines that powered all the machinery were brought by a railroad, the Virginia & Truckee, that was an engineering marvel of its day. Underground, it took a university-trained engineer from the old mining district of Germany to invent a system of square-set timbering that made it possible to work the unstable ground and large ore bodies of the Comstock.

Attendant with this boom town was the slow realization that the deeper the exploration, the richer the ore, the more costly the extraction, and the more extensive the capital investment and labor specialization. In a single brief decade Virginia City went from a simple placer-mining town like those in California to a much more complex industrial town with labor and machinery capable of mining 700,000 tons of ore in a single year. Accom-

panying this industrial development came the heterogeneous population, affluence and sense of permanence that set Virginia City apart from all previous Western mining town experience. She became the first real industrial town in the West, a hard-rock town, a deep-mining town with an urban economy to match any other.

Virginia City actually thought the end might be near in the very late 1860s and into 1870 when the rich ore from underground started to "pinch out" or decline in both quantity and value. People began to leave town and some even took their mansions apart and moved them to other cities with seemingly greater promise. In the midst of this beginning pessimism, four Irish miners of humble origin and little previous accomplishment, bought two mines considered worthless, and by 1874 it was clear they were the owners of what has often been called the greatest bonanza of all time. Shares in the Consolidated Virginia jumped from \$1 in July of 1870 to \$700 in early 1875. What followed was the Big Bonanza and the four Irishmen were the "Bonanza Kings". It was a time when money flowed readily and seemingly without end, a time when fresh oyster and champagne parties for thousands were not uncommon and when the population exploded to 25,000 in Virginia City and another 10,000 in Gold Hill. Virginia City became one of those grand and eloquent splashes on the Western landscape that created the impression of permanence and solid affluence in the midst of wilderness and isolation.

With mines producing as much as \$50,000 a day, a building boom in an effort to rebuild after the Great Fire of 1875, thousands of inhabitants jamming the streets, and a world-wide reputation as the richest place on earth, Virginia City and the rest of the Comstock must have been a place to behold. But it is also worth remembering that the vast cemetery at the north end of town provides a different perspective. Men worked hard underground and under incredibly dangerous conditions. As the workings got deeper the dangers of heat and hot water increased to the point that in some areas men could only work a few minutes at a time without collapsing. Many died in accidents and cave-ins, many more from the slow effects of rock dust in their lungs. They were all gamblers of a sort, there to strike it rich or die trying and more died broke than ever left as millionaires.

While Virginia City was celebrating its accomplishments in magnums of champagne and bushels of fresh oysters, the ore quietly began to pinch out; production dropped precipitously and Virginia City began to slowly enter a new era in its history. While neither proclaimed in print nor recognized by inhabitants at the time, this new era was to bring a form of lasting permanence quite different from the fate suffered by many other mining towns.

At the same time that mining was going into a depression

that would last until 1934 or after, outsiders were beginning to find Virginia City something of an historical curiosity. A 1920 Stockton Record article was essentially an adventure up the old Geiger Grade in a new Studebaker Six to "Virginia City, the Old Camp That Made Millionaires and Paupers". A 1925 Reno paper travelogue used a seven-passenger Paige touring car and Red Crown gasoline to make the same trip. To peak interest, the article carried the news that Mount Davidson displayed a large crack to the west of the city that portended the ultimate demise of the city, bulit as it was over the deep workings of all the mines. The disappearance of a store (the Wood & Gore store on South C Street) and the entire Chollar hoisting works down its own shaft were cited as proof substantial. Each of these articles offered the history of the Big Bonanza and urged a trip to Virginia City to see the sights before all was lost, either to the elements or into the abyss. During those same years, again to mark the future of such adventures, the Nevada State Legislature passed its first laws regulating highway billboards, prohibiting litter, requiring direction signs at crossroads, calling on the State Highway Department to erect signs calling attention to sites of "natural, scenic, geographical, geological, paleographical, and historical interest and, of course, declaring an excise tax on gasoline. Tourism was coming, but for the moment Virginia City was caught in the deep depression that came early to the Comstock.

Fortunately, as early as 1936 there were reports that, "The present population of nearly 1,500 (that would be three times the official 1930 figure) views coming events with a cheerful spirit, for the district is maintaining a steady, substantial production of gold and silver." Part of that production was through the use of relatively new technologies to work surface ores, the power shovel and the truck. During the mid-1930s, several pits were opened in Virginia City and the surrounding Comstock. The results: the Ophir (Andes) pit above town, the Loring pit across from the Fourth Ward School, and Crown Point in Gold Hill are still clearly visible. In fact, it was this last mining effort that removed the Crown Point trestle, long a symbol of the Comstock and incorporated into the Nevada State Seal, in 1935 to make way for more open pit mining.

The optimism of the mid-1930s was not without foundation. Within a few short years, following nearly a half-century of neglect, WPA and other programs graded and graveled six miles of road within Virginia City, rebuilt the wooden sidewalks of C Street, built a new brick high school building, opened a free library, built a new gym, and then added the total reconstruction of both the Geiger Grade to Reno and the road to Carson City to their accomplishments. Virginia City was now on a "high gear road" to the rest of the world. When the old Virginia and Truckee Railroad finally ground to a halt in 1938, the roads were ready to handle the new traffic, both ore trucks and tourist cars.

All this attention given to Virginia City was to have more than a short-term impact. Outside attention and access by outsiders to Virginia City changed the perception of the city. The State Highway Department, proud of the complete realignment of the Geiger Grade, claimed it would "serve an historic as well as an important mining district." By 1937 a local tourist newspaper, published by Paul Smith, was hoping for the reconstruction of the International Hotel and, more important, an end to more sign-boards on C Street. The falling buildings became tourist attractions, melancholy reminders of bygone days of grandeur.

The final printed text for the WPA, Guide To The Silver State, reflected this same fascination with the fallen and falling structures of the city. "Each year there are a few less buildings, for annually in the spring the undermined earth sags a little more at one spot or the other. Though sidewalks tilt and walls crack, no one is seriously concerned about a collapse of any large section of town." While visitors were waiting for the next building to fall, Virginia City entrepreneurs began to respond to the opportunity of strangers in their midst. "C Street is lined with old places making a mild bid to attract attention from curious visitors; the Only and Original This-and-That offers its faded charms and many windows display huddles of photographs, chunks of Comstock ores, and similar curios." By 1940, this small stream of visitors would assume major proportions, grabbing headlines in newspapers across the West and even holding the world premiere of an Errol Flynn movie, Virginia City. Two years later America would be at war, the young men of the Comstock spread throughout the Atlantic and Pacific, and gold no longer as important as strategic metals. Thus, at virtually the same time that tourism began to assume proportions of economic significance in Virginia City, War Production Board Order L-208 ended mining on the Comstock in 1942. It was a profound shock for a once-isolated mining town and may most clearly explain why the proprietor of the first real tourist attraction in Virginia City, the Museum of Memories, was the son of a mining superintendent.

War Production Order L 208 terminated precious-metal mining during World War II and the Comstock never really recovered. After the war, with the return of the soldiers and the end of gas rationing, America went "on the road" looking for something and many found it in a new and rather romantic vision of the Old West. Cowboy movies were popular with all ages and the chance to bring home a piece of that Old West to decorate a patio or a den proved irresistible. It also almost proved to be the end of Virginia City. So heavy was the exodus of virtually anything that could be picked up and taken away, a 1946 Nevada Magazine article worried about the complete loss of this historic town.

Attracted by this ruin -- and by the Nevada tax laws --

came one man that was to make the greatest single impact on the town since the Comstock Kings. His name was Lucius Beebe, born a Boston Brahmin, formerly the chief of the New York City Tribune society page, best dressed man in America, portrait on the cover of Life Magazine, and a genuine believer in Virginia City. After he moved in to the Piper House on A Street, Beebe bought the Territorial Enterprise newspaper and proceeded to turn it into the largest weekly circulating west of the Mississippi. Feeding on a sense of the scandalous and blessed with a grand Victorian writing style, Beebe turned Virginia City into a glorious vision of hard-drinking, high-living, heavy-gambling and generally uproarious life, not only in the pages of the Territorial Enterprise but in a shelf full of books co-authored with Clegg on the grand days of the West, particularly Virginia City.

Another fan of Western history, and particularly Virginia City, wrote the script for a cowboy series on television that was to have even greater consequences for the old town. Set in the foothills of the Sierras and focused on a family of ranchers, Bonanza was the first full-color, hour long TV series on the air and its use of a Virginia City theme was extensive. Although the series never shot a foot of film in the actual town, some 350 million people worldwide every week saw what they thought was Virginia City and many of them decided to make that town one of the sights to see on their next vacation. Within a few short years, annual visitation to Virginia City was well over a million.

There was one problem with this new influx. Bonanza fans had already seen what they thought was Virginia City on the TV and it was that Virginia City they came looking for. Unfortunately, the real Virginia City was never the cow town shown on the screen and it had few cowboys wandering the streets. Worse yet, the real Virginia City was a brick, Victorian city -- a big city at that -- and here again Bonanza created a very different impression with its all-wood, flat-front cowboy town. Not ones to disappoint the visitor, many businesses in Virginia City went "cowboy" to satisfy the consumer. Quick-draw contests were staged daily, the Cartwrights became almost a symbol for the town and tens of thousands of people would show up for their annual visits. Brick buildings were covered with rough wood to look more like the TV town and empty spaces on C Street were filled with new structures, again designed to look like what TV watchers expected to see.

While all the "Bonanza-ification" was going on, something more significant was happening as well. Virginia City became a permanent tourist destination with a permanent tourist economy. Instead of Comstock Kings and miners, Virginia City now had big casino owners and waitresses. Most important, many chose to move to Virginia City and fix up some of the old buildings, and Virginia City started growing. Not by much, but growing. Added to this population of tourism-dependent workers was another group

of workers that lived in Virginia City and commuted to Carson City or Reno so they could live in a small town and still work in a city. The combination created a fascinating town with a dual personality, one on busy C Street and the other within the quiet back streets of Virginia City.

Today Virginia City owes much to the hardy individuals that held out in this old mining town until it suddenly became a popular destination for Sunday afternoon drives or a week's vacation. It owes equally as much to the entrepreneurs that realized the fascinating history of Virginia City could be marketed and that such a market could restore or even rebuild some of what had been lost. Those structures that survive, whether miner's shack or elegant superintendent's office and home, were structures capable of matching the demands of necessity with the utility of their shelter for many years, patiently awaiting the discovery of their history and its economic appeal.

It is really that transformation spread over the four different eras of Virginia City history that make it the place it is today. With the population of Virginia City higher than it has been since the 1920s and the deeply-felt impact of nearly two million visitors a year, Virginia City may well be on the edge of another era in its history. It is the remnant historic place, the place that fascinated Mark Twain, experienced the fast high of the Big Bonanza and then endured the long, slow period of decline and survival only to be recognized finally as something important, not only to Nevada, but to the nation that now must be maintained. As a National Historic Landmark and a tourist destination with considerable honesty and integrity (which must include a few ragged edges!), Virginia City ties us all to a heritage both enduring and remarkably fresh.

Note: This paper is drawn from work in progress. References or further information may be obtained from the author, P.O. Box 382, Virginia City, NV USA 89440.

Abstract

Virginia City, Nevada: Time, Change and Integrity in an Historic Place

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Virginia City, Nevada, is an historic mining town in the West. Started like most other mining towns as a temporary place to be exploited only until the ore ran out, Virginia City soon became a major industrial city with all the capital investment, labor specialization and urban development typical of an industrial city.

Following two periods of sequential, even explosive, growth, the city then entered a half-century of decline and survival in which as much as 98 percent of the population moved away and the physical structure declined dramatically. Following World War II, the popular appeal of the West and particularly the West of mining millionaires, loose women and Victorian excess created a new era for Virginia City. This growth of tourism, stimulated by the Bonanza television series, literally created a whole new economy for the town, bringing millions of visitors yearly and moving entrepreneurs to create a TV version of the historic town.

Today the historic place is really a series of layers, each scattered throughout the same location yet each speaking to a separate era in Virginia City history. Recognized as a National Historic Landmark by the federal government, the town still struggles to allow the freedom to make money on tourism while also maintaining the legacy of the past, which is its major tourist attraction. Existing within a state and a local culture hostile to planning and control by government, Virginia City presents a classic confrontation in which both historic preservation and development are in the clear self-interest of the private sector. It is a constant search for balance.

Resumen

Ciudad de Virginia, Nevada: Tiempo, Cambio e Integridad en un Lugar Histórico

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La Ciudad de Virginia (Virginia City), Nevada, es un pueblo minero histórico en el oeste. Fundada como la mayoría de los pueblos mineros como un lugar para explotar provisionalmente hasta que se agotara el mineral, la Ciudad de Virginia pronto se convirtió en una ciudad industrial principal con todos las inversiones de capital, especialización de trabajo y desarrollo urbano de una ciudad industrial.

Después de dos períodos de explosivo crecimiento en secuencia, la ciudad luego comenzó medio siglo de descenso y supervivencia en los cuales hasta el 98 por ciento de la población se trasladó y la estructura física declinó dramáticamente. Después de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, el atractivo popular del oeste y particularment el oeste de los millonarios mineros, las mujeres fáciles y los excesos victorianos crearon una nueva época para la Ciudad de Virginia. El crecimiento del turismo, estimulado por el programa Bonanza en la televisión, creó de veras toda una nueva economía para la ciudad, atrayendo a millones de visitantes anualmente y estimulando a los entrepreneurs para que crearan una versión al estilo de la televisión de la ciudad histórica.

Hoy el lugar histórico es en realidad una serie de capas, cada una esparcida por el lugar y sin embargo cada una habla de una época distinta en la historia de la Ciudad de Virginia. Reconocida como Monumento Histórico Nacional por el Gobierno Federal, la Ciudad sigue luchando por permitir la libertad de ganar dinero del turismo mientras al mismo tiempo se mantiene el legajo del pasado, el cual es su mayor atractivo turístico. Ya que existe dentro de un estado y una cultura local en que hay hostilidad a la planificación y al control del gobierno, la Ciudad de Virginia presenta una confrontación clásica en que tanto la preservación histórica como el desarrollo están claramente en el interés del sector privado. Es una búsqueda constante del equilibrio.