

The Comstock ~ An Historical Overview

Ronald M. James, February 2001

In 1859, placer miners and prospectors in the western Great Basin made two remarkable strikes of gold and silver ore breaching a mountain's slope. It was the culmination of regional discoveries and excitement that began a decade before with the famed California Gold Rush of 1849. That earlier phenomenon transformed North American society and politics, forever changing the center of gravity of the maturing nation. The 1859 discovery in the Great Basin provides an epilogue for the California Gold Rush. Still, it was not so much the end of a story as it was an indication of how future mining would change an entire region.

The Comstock Lode, as people soon called the ore body, was distinct in several ways that influenced subsequent development throughout the West. First of all, the Comstock quickly became home to deep, underground, hardrock mining. Although some California operations had also taken this direction, the Comstock established approaches to technology, corporate investment, and community growth imitated internationally for the rest of the century. As part of this new approach, the Comstock had a huge labor force of salaried professionals, breaking with the California pattern of thousands of independent mining entrepreneurs digging for themselves in small groups.

The Comstock was unusual and will always be famous for the presence of silver as well as gold, and especially for the spectacular amount of wealth it generated. Miners retrieved what today would be billions of dollars in riches. Corporations, however, were necessary to exploit a resource requiring an immense, complex infrastructure. This meant that only a few people benefited most from the Comstock mines, but that did not inhibit a worldwide fascination with the discovery. In addition, during the flush times opulence flowed freely and many enjoyed the prosperity.

Unlike the disperse pockets of humanity in the California Gold Country, the Comstock was a highly urbanized, industrial setting. Again, this was the model that all future mining developments generally followed. By the early 1870s, the mining district's capital, Virginia City, together with its smaller neighbor, Gold Hill, reached a population of nearly 25,000, becoming one of the nation's larger communities. It was a thriving place where most residents did well.

Part of the nineteenth-century interest in the Comstock resulted from the millionaires it propelled into the international limelight. Wealthy men, from George Hearst and John Mackay to Adolph Sutro and William Ralston, made fortunes while working or investing in Virginia City. The mines spawned the successes of William Stewart, John P. Jones, William Sharon, and James Fair, each of whom served in the U.S. Senate.

Much of the historical treatment of the Comstock has focused on the impressive technology, the immense wealth, and the men at the center of both. Nevertheless, Virginia City and its mining district were exceedingly complex, attracting immigrants from throughout the world. People from North, South, and Central America, and from Europe, Asia, and Africa came to the district, hoping to capture some of the success that had become a legend.

For over a thousand Chinese immigrants, it was *Yin Shan*, the Silver Mountain. Irish miners from County Cork, on the other hand, typically saw Virginia City as a chance to sidestep the oppressive Appalachian coal mines in favor of a better place to work and a higher wage. Samuel Clemens, who invented his Mark Twain persona while reporting for Virginia City's *Territorial Enterprise*, wrote that "...all the peoples of the earth had representative adventurers in Silver-land." Indeed, the mining district played a pivotal role in giving Nevada one of the largest percentages of foreign born in the nation throughout the nineteenth century.

Still, over half of the Comstock's population was born in North America. The Northern Paiutes, living in the area for centuries before the arrival of others, possessed a culture and society that thousands of gold and silver seekers severely disrupted. Although they confronted oppressive prejudice and treatment, several hundred American Indians eventually settled around the mining district, and like others, they found various means to exploit the many opportunities of the new society. Similarly, a modest number of Spanish-speaking people played an important role in the early development of the mining district.

Thousands of Midwesterners, together with many New Englanders and fewer Southerners, added to the social diversity and complexity of the place. Among these were African Americans who came to the Comstock seeking wealth and opportunity. Many become prosperous, well-respected business owners. Together these diverse groups wove the rich tapestry that made the Comstock the crossroads of the world.

Initially women were rare, but within a few years much of the gender gap had been bridged. By 1880, one third of the population was under eighteen years of age, underscoring the fact that this had become more of a family-based community than a stereotypical mining boomtown. The 4th Ward School, a building constructed in 1876 to serve one of Virginia City's four school precincts, provides dramatic testimony to this important aspect of the community. Designed to serve one thousand students, the innovative building survives as a tribute to a place that was more about raising and educating children than any Hollywood-based image of a rough-and-tumble Wild West.

Mining camps throughout the world pass through an evolution of boom, dramatic growth and excitement, and then decline. The size and nature of each district's ore body define the duration of prosperity. The Comstock was remarkable both for the amount of wealth it produced and for the number of years it was able to thrive. By

the early 1880s, it was becoming clear that the good times were over. It had been years since miners had discovered any new bonanzas, and thousands of people were leaving for better opportunities.

By the time of the Great Depression of the 1930s, Virginia City had declined, shrinking into a town of only several hundred people. These residents became custodians of a remarkable inheritance that included hundreds of nineteenth-century buildings, countless documents and photographs, and abandoned shafts and adits. In addition, thousands of historic archaeological sites are part of the rich heritage of a remarkable mining district, which the National Park Service now recognizes as one of the largest historical landmarks in the fifty states.