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# A PEEK BEHIND THE LACE CURTAINS: THE SOCIAL LIVES OF DEATH VALLEY'S BOOM TOWNS

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In the olden days, perhaps five years ago, I thought I knew how a boom town developed. If it were a mining camp, according to the folklore I had picked up, some hardy prospector—or his mule—would uncover a huge body of rich ore and some young men straight out of the Herbert Hoover School of Engineering would rush in and develop the claims and build up a town. Then, according to plan, the ore would be extracted and milled, and finally the mines would play out and everyone would get the hell out of there.

In reality, I found, the mines themselves probably produced more gilt-edged stock certificates than gold-filled ore, the townsite agent or stock speculator commanded more attention than the honest miner, and women and children often outnumbered men.

Ah, but who am I to disillusion you? The myths of the frontier were all too real—at least in the beginning. Around Grass Valley, the center of hard-rock mining in California, men outnumbered women by seventeen to one in 1850. And of the 800 residents of Aurora, Nevada, in early 1861, only twelve were women.

I began to have doubts about the myths I had absorbed only after I had begun doing research on the boom towns of California, especially its deserts. The myths of the frontier began to fade, although some of them died hard.

I found, for example, that families became the dominant unit of society in the American West. Remember, within months of the gold discovery of 1848, men, women and children came pouring into the Golden State, some of them by ship, others by wagon train. In Grass Valley, males outnumbered females by only two to one in 1870; and within a few years of the discovery of the Comstock lode, 1,700 children were living in Virginia City and Gold Hill alone.

The Death Valley region differed little from other areas. At their peak periods, Darwin contained up to 98 children and Ballarat up to 50 youngsters, including 11 Indians. Living in Skidoo in 1907 were 39 children and 19 families. Rhyolite surpassed all the camps, with 250 school-age children.

If families were present, then schools were sure to follow. In 1855, the California legislature finally authorized the formation of school districts. In fact, education seems to have become the secular religion of the frontier. Early in their histories, for instance, Virginia City and Gold Hill came to support 11 schools. And Rhyolite's citizens voted to build a school and hire a teacher even when the district still contained only five children—and only three of them old enough to attend. Later, undaunted by the depression of late 1907, Rhyolite voted to finance and build a two-story, fireproof building, in which instruction through the ninth grade was offered.

I was amazed—I'm still amazed—at the proliferation of schools in such a hostile land. Besides the one at Rhyolite, schools spread throughout Death Valley, to Skidoo, Ballarat, Beatty, Death Valley Junction, Ryan, Tecopa, Shoshone, here at Furnace Creek, and even at Razor Station, on the Tonopah & Tidewater Railroad. School districts seemed to eclipse the importance of mining districts on the mining frontier.

As I researched, I began to learn even more. For instance, after the passage of laws in 1909 and 1911, the California State Library began to aggressively promote the creation of county libraries to serve small towns and rural areas. One county after another, most of them in southern California, jumped at the opportunity. Some branches were simply a corner of a country store or a lonely railroad station, where a few books were stored, but library service proved immensely popular. By World War I, small branches were serving the public in Ludlow, Lanfair, Silver Lake, Atolia, Mojave, Rosamond, Willow Springs, the stations all along the Union Pacific Railroad, and the hamlets around Death Valley.

Does all this still sound like the frontier we've all heard about? Perhaps it does. But from the start, even the most remote districts of the West maintained some tenuous links to civilization. During the early 1860s, remember, Congress organized Nevada Territory, the California

legislature created four counties east of the Sierra Nevada, and Tulare County established a justice-court district in the Owens Valley.

Justice-court districts, officially called townships, most closely touched the citizens of California, in fact, the entire West. Created under California's original constitution, adopted in 1849, townships maintained at least one justice of the peace, one constable, and sometimes a deputy sheriff. A judge might be called upon to preside as a deputy coroner at an inquest; a constable might also serve as a deputy sheriff, a school-census marshall, or even as a tree-disease inspector. For larger communities such as Skidoo and Ballarat, the counties built simple wooden jails, although the jail at Rhyolite was especially imposing: it was made of concrete and contained four cells. It's tempting to consider this form of law and order laughably quaint, but townships remained the basic unit of justice in parts of California as late as 1950.

So I eventually realized that the lynching of Joe Simpson at Skidoo in 1908 was an aberration—what else can I call it? The lynching was unnecessary; the wheels of justice were already well oiled.

Perhaps the best illustration of frontier justice I can think of took place in 1880 at Ivanpah, a silver-mining camp northeast of the present town of Baker. The trouble began in a saloon, where D. C. Sargent accused hotel-keeper L. M. Wilson of cheating at cards. Sargent later took the money back at gunpoint. But when Wilson and two friends wound up confronting Sargent, shooting broke out. Sargent fell dead.

Even though this was Ivanpah's first killing, the machinery of the law was set into motion at once. Mine operator John McFarlane, serving as foreman, held a coroner's inquest, a doctor also examined Sargent's body, and the three suspects were arrested, placed in irons, and taken under heavy guard to the county jail in San Bernardino, at least 200 miles away. They were duly tried; one man was convicted of manslaughter, the other two were acquitted.

This was no isolated case. The same year that Joe Simpson was lynched, an unsavory miner named Johnny Cyty killed the recorder of the Keane Wonder mining district in a dispute over a claim. But Keane Wonder would not turn out to be a Skidoo. Cyty was taken to Independence, tried, and convicted of manslaughter. He appealed his conviction and was

later released. Meanwhile, Rhyolite was usually so dull that its police force languished for lack of business. Certainly, life in the mining camps was hardly a pleasure. Epidemics, aggravated by torrid summers and brutal winters, swept Calico, Randsburg, Skidoo, and Greenwater. When one journalist visited Calico during its mature years, he joked that it would "take a four-horse cart to carry away all the cards swept out of the saloons," although he conceded there was little drunkenness, "and any serious breach of the peace is rare."

As you notice from the previous sentence, I quoted a writer for a newspaper, in this case the Ontario Record. I had long overlooked newspapers and magazines as sources of information; I had underestimated their value, feeling they were probably mere journals of opinion. How wrong I was: the pioneer press provided far more information than opinion. The original Sacramento Union, the Alta California, and the San Francisco Bulletin excelled at providing first-hand reports from even the most obscure mining and farming districts. And such magazines as the Los Angeles Mining Review and the Mining & Scientific Press of San Francisco would reprint valuable summaries of mining news, often from long-gone newspapers. The only photos we have of the Crackerjack district, for example, appeared in the Los Angeles Mining Review, and the only description of the camp of Eldoradoville, in the San Gabriel Canyon, appeared as a one-sentence item in the Los Angeles Star in 1859.

Mining magazines—the better ones, anyway—also played an important critical role. The Mining & Scientific Press, in particular, warned investors—and anyone who would listen—of the folly of putting money into such shady districts as High Grade, in Modoc County, and Greenwater, near here. The Mining & Scientific Press caught a lot of flak for being so downbeat, but the magazine said what needed to be said.

Happily, the press in desert camps was as ever-present as water was scarce. Weekly newspapers were published in Beatty, Darwin, Skidoo, Greenwater, Lee, and even in little Gold Center, Crackerjack, and Silver Lake. Rhyolite supported one daily, two weeklies, and a magazine; Greenwater had two weeklies and a magazine.

Rhyolite's two weeklies, the Bullfrog Miner and the Rhyolite Herald, were immense operations. Mining news, stock quotes, and poster-size ads inflated the newspapers so much--the Herald was running 24 pages an

issue—that quite early their owners freighted in, with great difficulty and at great expense, typesetting machines and power presses.

I have some familiarity with one such social institution, the Rhyolite Herald, for in the early 1960's, I met Elizabeth Clemens, the widow of the paper's founder, Earle Clemens. Clemens, who had founded the Herald when he was only 27 or 28, was a true believer in the Bullfrog district--perhaps to a fault. To Clemens, the district's mines were real: the gilt-edged stocks he bought were investments. A religious man, Clemens lived modestly, plowing most his profits into his newspaper, spending it on the typesetting machine, presses, and binding equipment. Clemens had a telephone installed—but in his office, not in his home. When he went on assignment, he usually walked, sometimes several miles to a mine, although he would occasionally splurge and rent a horse. He kept his staff small, relying on a few assistants, including his wife, and sometimes worked at night, perhaps even on Sundays. So it wasn't surprising that when it finally dawned on Clemens that Rhyolite was finished—or soon would be—he was crushed. He finally sold the Herald to his mining editor in April 1911.

"The boom came, and the boom went," Clemens wrote in his farewell. "Fortunes were made and spent, towns were built and torn down again. And nothing has occurred to stem the fatal tide.... I have no disposition to depreciate the honest efforts that have been made here in the development of properties, nor to condone the foolhardy waste of money and the mistakes of the many." Perhaps, he hoped, "some prospector, more courageous than his brother, may dig deeper into these veins and uncover the precious metal below.... May prosperity again reign in Rhyolite, the prettiest, cosiest mining town in the great American desert."

The Herald, alas, died a year later. Clemens continued to pay taxes on his deserted house for several years—only to learn with dismay that it had been moved away. It wasn't until 1939 that his wife could persuade him to visit the ruined city. And even then, Earle Clemens kept the faith.