

Dead Mining Camps and Ghost Towns

By Walter Chalfant



While the California Argonaut and his successors mined beside rushing rivers, and his campfire smoke rose through pine boughs in a land "where every prospect pleases and only man is vile," mineral treasures of the Great Basin were seldom found amid scenic beauty. The hills were, devoid of greenery, and music of running waters was rarely to be heard near the ledges of gold and silver.

A strike, if of promise, quickly became known throughout the country between the great ranges. The lucky finder, if secretive regarding the site of his discovery, was persistently trailed to find the source of his rich specimens. Once locating began, prospectors flocked into the neighborhood, often leaving good claims or situations in the hope that the uncertainty they followed would pay still better.

Probably the first settler in a camp sat beside an outdoor fire, without any sort of shelter. Then came tents or habitations of a sort, along the canyon floor or on the sage-covered "flat." Dugouts, brush hovels not a shade better than those of the Indians, cabins made of packing boxes and roofed with tin cans flattened into sheets, made up the beginnings. Two historic domiciles in two well-known camps were made of beer bottles - then not hard to get - laid head and bottom alternately, and cemented in place with native mud. In time came board shanties and a "Main Street" marked by rows of single-story frame, buildings. Saloons loomed large in the business center. Their freedom of action and outpouring of noise, if the place became lively, lasted twenty-four hours daily, seven days in the week. Their moral tone was equaled by that of other dens, all advertising their presence not only by the looseness of alcoholized tongues but also by the tinkle of abused pianos, pounded by waifs who had seen better surroundings, and by the sound of violins, guitars, and harps. Here and there a wooden sidewalk afforded better footing than the street, with its soil crushed to powder by hoofs and wheels.

In time there came brick and stone buildings, the more conspicuous by their contrast with the wooden shacks at their elbows. Then too came all the advantages of the period, so far as open purses could bring them. Sometimes there was some slight degree of social classification, but rarely such close drawing of lines as to prevent the judge and the gambler, the legislator and the barkeeper from fraternizing at the, gaming table in the common quest for excitement as much as for wealth. If the mines continued to be worked, and were not forsaken for some other "excitement," the place took on all the features of an established town, or even merited the term "city," which was usually made a part of its name even before a single lot had been surveyed.

The camp that "went down," or failed, became a melancholy monument, until time and the elements erased its site and even its very name from general knowledge. An observer who traveled through much of Nevada over forty years ago wrote: "It is already strewn with ruins that seem as gray and time-worn as if the civilization to which they belonged had perished centuries ago. I think I have seen at least five of these deserted towns and villages for every one in ordinary life."

Processes of decay were not infrequently hastened by fire. An upset kerosene lamp, a treacherous oil stove, a neglected stovepipe, occasionally afforded legitimate explanation. Now and then some individual's desire to convert high-priced insurance into ready assets produced a scene of grand destruction among the tinder-dry and unprotected wooden structures.

If the mines were productive and located in close proximity, trespasses occurred; gun fights, which were not important in hastening the end, and litigation, which was sometimes very important, followed, and the knell of that camp was sounded. Those who could do so moved on to a fresh “excitement,” and town lots which a few months earlier sold at thousands of dollars could be had for the cost of the nails in the buildings standing upon them.

The site of an abandoned camp, the graveyard of many buoyant hopes, is full of interest. It sits in the pure desert air, in the silence of the tomb. There may be a tall smokestack of solid masonry, still successfully defying the elements. There are masses of rusted iron, once machinery hauled to the place at heavy expense; perhaps it became useless by the development of better methods, perhaps abandoned because its transportation to another field was not justified. In such a situation, one cannot help reflecting on the waste of money through such abandonments.

There are rusted heaps where were dumped the cans in which came the “fresh fruits” and “cream” served in “The Palace,” “Delmonico's,” and other high-titled restaurants – “hash houses” in usual parlance - where clouds of flies freely shared with humanity in food inspection and consumption. There may be the “big mill,” from the roof of which rises an iron smokestack reddened beyond the power of any fire at its base, and the silent whistle. Within, rough boards and earthen floor alike will reveal, when the covering sand is scraped away, dust from the ores which the batteries, with demoniac clatter, crushed to powder.

There are a few cabins, their material too poor to justify having been taken away. Such doors as wanderers have not appropriated for other uses still sag drunkenly, unless their strap-leather hinges have rotted to the breaking point. The floors are covered with drifting sands, and rough tables and bunks show on their dust-laden surfaces prints of the feet of tiny creatures of the wild. The shack's single window, long devoid of glass if it ever had any, looks out, an empty socket. Unpainted wooden walls have weathered until the lumber's grain stands out in longitudinal ribs. Each nail is the nucleus of a black comet, from which rains have washed an iron-stained tail earthward. Each nail hole might be an eye dripping black tears for the desolation which has taken the place of once-brisk activity in the scene before it.

If larger buildings yet remain, it may be that a search in one-mayhap the “Magnolia,” “Temple of Folly,” or “Bank Exchange” (all bona fide names of such places) - will disclose punctures made by stray bullets in the course of arguments which the fires of alcohol helped to heat. The doorways stand open more continuously than in the days of service, and with Omar we realize that “the lion and the lizard keep the courts where Jamshyd reveled and drank deep.”

Imagination can picture these streets, now silent as death, once teeming with the affairs of men; stages from one place or another rolling in, bringing the calico of virtue and the silk of vice, the solid businessman and the jackal gambler, passengers, vehicles, and animals alike grimed with the dust of the road; ore wagons moving to the mill, their drivers masked by dirt caked with perspiration, and the team a uniform gray whatever their original colors; the saloons with roaring crowds of men; the gambling house, with its green-eyeshaded minions in attire as faultless as the camp afforded, its click of chips and clink of coin its elation and its despair.

If one is lucky enough to find a surviving resident, one of those optimistic souls who did not join in the migration and who insists that “the old camp is shore to come back,” he will point out this place and that of interest. In doing so he will bear out the statement on an earlier page, that only the exciting events are recalled; he will say little about the solid facts of the place, and that little not altogether to be relied upon. More stress is

apt to be laid on the place where Shorty laid for Tex, where the superintendent of the True Blue was killed by a drunken and disgruntled employee, and where the pole stood on which the unwise employee expiated his crime.

Such are some of the characteristics of the dead camps. More or less of this description will fit each of them. In time, the old survivor-perhaps virtually pensioned in the guise of a watchman's pay-will be buried with his hopes. Nature's work of removing the puny intrusions of mankind will advance without interference and the place will become almost as if it had never been. Bits of glass glittering in the sand a scrap of rusted iron, a partly filled old excavation, an old ore dump, or the yawning mouth of a tunnel will cause some wanderer to "wonder what camp this was." Sagebrush will grow in the soil that fills the ruts of old-time traffic, and the coyote and lizard will have the solitude for their own.

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