

University of Nevada, Reno

***Rockin' the Comstock: Exploring the Unlikely and Underappreciated Role of a Mid-Nineteenth Century Northern Nevada Ghost Town (Virginia City) in the Development of the 1960s Psychedelic Esthetic and "San Francisco Sound"***

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Geography

by

Engrid Barnett

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May 2014

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University of Nevada, Reno

**THE GRADUATE SCHOOL**

We recommend that the dissertation prepared under  
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**Engrid Barnett**

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Role of a Mid-Nineteenth Century Northern Nevada Ghost Town  
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## ***ABSTRACT***

Virginia City, Nevada, epitomized and continues to epitomize a liminal community — existing on the very limen of the civilized and uncivilized, legitimate and illegitimate, parochial frontier and cosmopolitan metropolis. Throughout a 150-year history, its theaters attracted performers of national and international acclaim who entertained a diverse civic population of Euro-Americans, Asian-Americans, Hispanics, Native Americans, and African Americans. Many Comstock performers found success through the promotion of their own ‘exoticism,’ navigating the seductive ambiguity of cultural liminality. Virginia City historically represented a major crossroads of transformation and innovation defined by its: (1) multi-layered liminality; (2) community-building efforts (music, parades, and theater); (3) interconnectivity to San Francisco and associated amenities; (4) carefully cultivated place myths; and, (5) role as a tourist space for play and fantasy.

A sophisticated nineteenth-century metropolis with a multicultural landscape and wide array of amenities, its twentieth-century shade represented the converse. The population nearly vanished along with any semblances of its former diversity. Amenities were spare: isolation, silence, and expansive vistas. Residents were drawn to the area by Comstock family lineage, the desire to languish in reclusiveness, and/or frontier myths propagated by Popular Culture and perpetuated by local proprietors. Among the latter were colorful Bohemians (e.g. Duncan Emrich, Lucius Beebe, and Charles Clegg) who stemmed the community’s slide into decay while fabricating and performing a Wild West of their own styling. In the 1950s and 60s, *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke* brought tourists; the area celebrated its first tangible economy since the mines and brothels closed in

the early twentieth century. Tourism came at a cost, though, as the Bohemians — increasingly alienated by crowds and kitsch — fled for their eccentric lives. Comstock business owners, nonetheless, spun fabulous legends, independent of any facts, transforming their city and its history. In 1965, however, real legends arrived. Fifty long-haired Bay Area Hipsters came to explore the Comstock’s multi-layered liminality, re-establish the area’s role as San Francisco’s exurb, build an alternate community through ritual and music, and perform their own frontier expectations. Hipsters coalescing around the Red Dog Saloon inadvertently developed many of the primary features of a Counterculture soon to take San Francisco by storm. The result? Virginia City’s ‘Summer of Love’ in 1965.



Figure 0.1 Interior view of Loren Pursel’s Red Dog Saloon looking out toward C Street during Hipsters of the High West 2012. Photograph courtesy of Dennis Loren.

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This work is dedicated to the memory of

*Dr. Gary J. Hausladen,*

who taught me what geography is, convinced me I was a geographer,  
and then showed me how it was done

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## ***Chapter One: Introduction***

### *The Problem*

Standing in Piper's Opera House in the middle of July 2009, covered in a fine film of Comstock dust from the excavation of Virginia City's first opera house, Maguire's, just down the road, I found myself steeped in the history, legend, and ambience of this late-nineteenth-century musical gem. As I perused the theater's vaunted list of nineteenth-century entertainers,<sup>1</sup> many of them of national and even international acclaim, I could not help but wonder: Why did they come here? After watching a documentary by Mary Works entitled *The Life and Times of the Red Dog Saloon*, which delved into Virginia City's role in the development of the psychedelic aesthetic and sound, a similar question, reverberated through my head: Why Virginia City? These questions about two diverse periods of time in the same place (But very different communities) became the basis for this dissertation, which explores the nature of entertainment and musical performance and innovation in the 1860s and the 1960s from a hybridized geographical-historical-musical perspective.

Over time, the aforementioned research question evolved beyond my principal query — why did entertainers and musicians of famed reputation make the stages of the Comstock a primary stopover point? — to more specific questions about the processes and purposes behind these performances. Virginia City, Nevada, today a quasi-ghost town of little more than 800 residents, boasts a rich cultural heritage of Shakespearean theater, high opera, and psychedelic rock that rivaled that of San Francisco (Bureau,

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<sup>1</sup> During the research process, I realized that the list was actually rather exaggerated, yet the performers whose presence on Washoe stages we can confirm are still quite an impressive roster within the context of other nineteenth-century mining towns.

2010). On the surface, this historical reality appears incongruent, especially in the context of the modest community nestled in the shade of Mount Davidson and its place myths depicting a desperado past. But I quickly realized that there was far more to the story.

Virginia City, Nevada, enjoyed two noteworthy episodes of musical and theatrical bloom separated by an interlude of almost exactly 100 years. First, during the mid-nineteenth century, an impressive list of performers and musicians graced the stages of Washoe, some sticking around to construct theaters worthy of their talents (e.g. Mart Taylor, James Stark, Edwin Booth,<sup>2</sup> Lotta Crabtree, Adah Isaacs Menken, Lillie Langtry, and Buffalo Bill and Captain Jack Crawford, to name a few).

Then, jumping 100 years ahead, the 1960s saw a renaissance of Comstock culture when a group of young, long-haired Hipsters from the Bay Area (e.g. the Charlatans, the Wildflowers, and Big Brother and the Holding Company, among others) showed up to rock out, dress in Wild West regalia, and perform their craziest frontier fantasies. Their summer-long stints in the area in 1965 and 1966 would produce the psychedelic esthetic and define many of its principal features, features that would, in turn, birth the “Summer of Love” and the so-called San Francisco Sound upon their return to California.

Again, however, there is far more to the story. Many of these individuals would come back to the Comstock where they experimented in furtive attempts to return to the land; practiced Peyotism under the guidance of the Native American Church to heal Mother Earth’s deep wounds and re-establish a connection; utterly reject “Manifest Des-

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<sup>2</sup> Edwin Booth was, by far, the more famous of the Booth brothers, at least during his own lifetime, despite the notoriety that John Wilkes Booth achieved by successfully assassinating Abraham Lincoln at the theater. In fact, many historians of the theater claim that Edwin Booth was the greatest American actor of the Shakespearean stage and *the* greatest Hamlet in all the world during the nineteenth century (Morrison, 2002, pp. 235-237).

tiny” and the imperialism,<sup>3</sup> consumerism, and materialism that came with it; and, ultimately, create alternative communities where they could opt out of a society from which they felt alienated.

So, who were these performers? Why did they come to Washoe? Who built the theaters? And, how did the community inspire them to experiment, push the envelope, and develop unique styles that would, inevitably, contribute to their popularity on national and even international stages? How did the geography and the history of the area play into these innovations and inspire their creativity? These are but a small handful of the questions that this dissertation attempts to answer. What emerges from the exploration of these questions is a robust history of the Comstock, taking into account voices that are not always the first to be heeded in the telling of histories: the voices of Northern Piute intercessors, Comstock miners, African American saloon owners, Wild West Performers, musical critics, Bohemian railroad buffs, and proto-Hippie longhairs. As a result, this dissertation represents a collection of historical collages tied loosely together with theoretical assertions and reflections where appropriate.

As the historical geographer David Lowenthal acutely notes, “It is so customary to think of narratives, sequences, dates and chronologies that we are apt to suppose these things are attributes of the past itself” (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 219). In my attempt to let eyewitnesses of the area’s multi-layered history speak for themselves, the communicative

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<sup>3</sup> For the intents of this work, American imperialism is defined most fundamentally as the exercise of American influence over other countries vis-à-vis cultural, economic, and military means. First popularized by President James Polk in 1846 during the Mexican-American War, American imperialism implies expansion into foreign territories for the “betterment” of the nation and the establishment of ever increasing empire. According to authors such as Gray Brechin and Alan Trachtenberg, it was a process consciously undertaken during the nineteenth-century by a handful of elite families bent on the establishment of empire (Brechin, 2001; Trachtenberg, 2007).

style of this work is sometimes indirect. When confronted with forks in the road of research, I have generally opted for the scenic route, permitting historical documents, material culture, and academic theory to indirectly elucidate certain patterns inherent to an understanding of this subject. Since this is ultimately a dissertation about geographies of music, it must also be about much more. Or, as David Ake puts it, “Issues of meaning always extend beyond the border of ‘the music itself’ ” (Ake, 2002, p. 3). Inevitably, then, I include a variety of non-sonic elements in this dissertation because the music of the Comstock is best understood within its sociocultural and historical contexts. In this way, my intent is to avoid some of the pitfalls generally associated with how we think about history and the process of writing history. What emerges through the exploration of these two distinct periods of time are historical, socio-cultural, and musical sketches of a rugged yet sophisticated community whose various amenities, curiously, worked in oddly reciprocal ways to attract musicians and entertainers of the first-rate during both its 1860s boom and 1960s bust.

### *Methodology*

The historian Louis Gottschalk wrote:

Most human affairs happen without leaving vestiges or records of any kind behind them. The past, having happened, has perished with only occasional traces. To begin with, although the absolute number of historical writings is staggering, only a small part of what happened in the past was ever observed.... And only a part of what was observed in the past was remembered by those who observed it; only a part of what was remembered was recorded; only a part of what was recorded has survived; only a part of what has survived has come to the historian’s attention; only a part of what is credible has been grasped; and only a part of what has been grasped can be expounded or narrated by the historian. (as cited in Ritchie, 2003, p. 10)

Heeding the words of noted historian Louis Gottschalk, I cast my net wide by using a wide range of methodological tools and examining a varied collection of data in order to answer the major (and minor) research questions of this dissertation. Research has taken me to museums and libraries across northern Nevada and northern California where I have accessed primary documents including newspaper articles, historic photographs, city directories, Sanborn Fire Insurance maps, a wide array of other cartographic resources, and U.S. Census records. It is important to state here that primary sources such as newspaper articles are highly suspect in some instances, but they, nonetheless, tend to provide us with some of the best and most consistent accounts of entertainment in the area on any given day during the 1860s. In fact, Thomas Maguire famously kept a box available in his theater for the journalists of the *Territorial Enterprise*, so they would send favorable musical critiques the way of his theater (Watson, 1964).

Writers such as William Wright (Dan DeQuille) and Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), among others, fabricated news at will. They took to heart an observation of Robert E. Park's: "the newspaper is the great medium of communication within the city, and it is on the basis of the information which it supplies that public opinion rests. The first function which a newspaper supplies is that which was formerly performed by the village gossip" (Park, 1915, p. 605).

Even in the rather bombastic abandon of their writings, however, I argue that there is still historic value and utility. When examined as oral histories (where participants sometimes exaggerate, misrepresent, or forget certain historical 'facts') and, therefore, artifacts of a specific time and place, they comprise incredibly important tools in the Comstock historian's toolbox. Countering positivist critiques of oral history as 'unrelia-

ble memory,' Michael Frisch argues against viewing oral history as "history as it really was" but rather as "personal and historical, individual and generational" (Frisch, 1998; Perks, 1998, p. 3). The same theory places the newspapers of the Comstock in a more appropriate context. They are *impressions* of life in Washoe, *not* reflections of any particular reality. Frisch further argues that oral history is a "powerful tool for discovery, exploring the process of historical memory — how people make sense of the past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them" (Frisch, 1998; Perks, 1998, pp. 3-4). The gob-smacking lies of the Yellow Journalists of Virginia City, perhaps, tell us something about the grandiose, exotic, wild way that they wished to envision their community and, more importantly, their own personal coming-of-age adventures on the Comstock. These exaggerations served many other purposes.

It is intriguing not only to examine what these news articles purport to document, but *why* their authors wanted their readership to believe what they wrote. "Grappling with issues of public memory — from official histories, parades and reenactments to public monuments and designated landmarks — historians have examined how people have constructed the past to make it useful to them in the present" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 12). Many questions spring up from such rich firsthand accounts. For example: How did some exaggerations reflect on the community and its economic successes? How did some drive San Francisco speculators to remain invested in the region in the nineteenth century? How did others give birth to place myths? How did these place myths, in turn, attract tourists to the area in the twentieth century? How did all of these factors impact music and entertainment in the area during both time frames? While these are not questions of primary con-

cern to this dissertation, and, therefore, not explored exhaustively in my writings, I do weigh in on some of them where appropriate.

Primary monographs explored during the research of this work include: Dan DeQuille's *The Big Bonanza* (1876), Myron Angel's *History of Nevada* (1881) for Thompson & West, and Eliot Lord's *Comstock Mining and Miners* (1883). , There is a wealth of secondary sources associated with the Comstock, too. First and foremost, there are vast numbers of historical accounts (again, containing varying degrees of factual material) including but certainly not limited to: Richard G. Lillard's *Desert Challenge: An Interpretation of Nevada* (1942), Margaret G. Watson's *Silver Theatre: Amusements of Nevada's Mining Frontier, 1850 to 1864* (1964), Gilman Ostrander's incredibly unflattering *Nevada: The Great Rotten Borough, 1859-1964* (1966), and Ronald James's *The Roar and the Silence* (1998), to name just a few.

Besides other authors' histories, I explore theoretical underpinnings of the anthropological, cultural, geographical, and musicological currents running through this research in the form of: (1) peer-reviewed articles from academic journals, (2) books from some of the most crucial voices in each theoretical field, (3) contemporary newspaper articles, and (4) a number of historical film documentaries ranging in subject from the archaeology of the Donner-Reed Party, to the 1960s Counterculture in the documentary by Mary Works on the Red Dog. Many of these documents include what we would term revisionist approaches to history, especially the history of the American West.

As historian Anthony Brundage argues, revisionism in historical documentation has existed since the time of the ancient Greeks but has developed a particularly strong currency in the past few decades, especially in terms of social, economic, and political

analyses. “This happens because one of the most fundamental dimensions of our identity is provided by history and, as we change, so must it, too” (Brundage, 2008, p. 4). The past of the frontier, like its lands and waters, is among the most contested areas in the study of American history, which attests to the power still associated with this period and place. American identity is, to varying degree, inextricably bound to how Americans (and the world) perceive the history of this region. The American West is iconic, and so it will always have its iconoclasts. There is no way around it; it remains an attractive and controversial area of exploration. Moreover, by the very nature of historical investigation, “historians constantly search for fresh sources, approaches, methodological tools, and interpretations, in an effort to offer an ever new past to whatever the present is” (Brundage, 2008, p. 3).

As alluded to in the first sentence of this chapter, I enrolled in a summer-long archaeological field school organized by the University of Nevada, Reno’s Anthropology Department in 2009 under the direction of Dr. Donald Hardesty and Ronald James (former State of Nevada Historical Preservation Officer.) For six weeks during July and August, the field school worked two sites, one along Virginia City’s notorious Barbary Coast near the top of C Street, and the other at the site of Maguire’s Opera House on D Street, which burned to the ground during the 1875 fire that destroyed vast segments of the community. This experience provided me with valuable hands-on experience in terms of uncovering, documenting context, properly handling, and identifying cultural material during live excavations.

Later, working on-site and on-campus in the Historical Archaeology lab, I gained further knowledge about artifact handling, recording, cleaning, and assemblage. In con-

junction with these activities, I explored the archaeological record through the writings of Dr. Donald J. Hardesty and Dr. Kelly J. Dixon in terms of Virginia City and the Donner Party and enrolled in Dr. Carolyn White's graduate seminar in 'Prehistoric Archaeology' in fall 2009. That greatly increased my understanding of archaeological processes and material cultural interpretation, both skills associated with my area of research. During the spring semester of 2010, I enrolled in an upper-level history course taught by Ronald James on the history of Virginia City, which included a wonderfully detailed tour of the area with colorful accounts of its past, many of which were drawn from his book, *The Roar and the Silence*. During these field research trips, I documented observations with photographs and copious notes about 'sense of place.'

Wishing to immerse myself in the surroundings associated with the history of the Comstock and to heed W. H. McDowell's observation that, "We are surrounded by the traces of the past, such as buildings, the landscape, artefacts, as well as written, printed and visual records," I made at least two dozen treks (not counting daily trips with the University of Nevada's archaeological field school in 2009) to the Comstock Mining District (McDowell, 2002, p. 3). Each visit centered around the Red Dog Saloon, which is currently celebrating an impressive revival as a psychedelic stopover point for Jerry-Bear-clad pilgrims<sup>4</sup> and wandering Burners<sup>5</sup> under the capable ownership of Loren Pur-

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most iconic symbols associated with the Grateful Dead and its fans (Deadheads) today, the colorful 'Jerry Bear' or dancing bear image is directly tied to one of the band's most influential non-members — former soundman, drug dealer, occasional artist, and intellectual — Owsley Stanley III. Known as 'The Bear' because of his hairy chest, Stanley designed the band's lightning bolt and skull logo, funded the purchase of their first sound system, engineered their 'Wall of Sound' PA system, and encouraged them to permit fans to do live recordings of their concerts, which became a defining feature of the band. In return, the Grateful Dead iconized him in a number of ways from the bear logo to their song "Alice D. Millionaire" (inspired by a newspaper article title about Stanley, "LSD Millionaire") to their 1973 album *History of the Grateful Dead, Volume 1*, which was subtitled 'Bear's Choice' (D. Browne, March 2011; Journal, 2011).

sel. Every fall, the Red Dog holds an event commemorating the 1960s psychedelic scene in Virginia City (formerly ‘Hippie Days’ and now ‘Hipsters of the High West’) that appeals to a large crowd of eyewitness participants to the original ‘scene’ either in Nevada, California, or both.

It is one of the few ways that the town currently acknowledges its psychedelic roots. While living in San Diego, California, with a small baby, I employed Jordan Lubek, an undergraduate geography-journalism dual major, to attend Hippie Days 2011 where he took photos, notes, and conversed with members of the audience in my stead, reporting all of this data collection back to me. Back in Reno by the following year, I attended Hipsters of the High West in 2012 and 2013 where I conducted many informal interviews with locals and tourists alike, who turned out at the Red Dog for the event.

In terms of the 1960s medium-distant history, I approached the research from a distinctly different perspective due to the fairly recent nature of the experiences and ready access to primary participants in the original Red Dog scene. As a result, the focus of this portion of my dissertation research became an oral history project for which I sought and received IRB approval to work with human subjects, which required developing research contacts, preparing interview questions, conducting live and phone interviews, and processing the resulting digital files into transcripts. The interviewing process comprised, by far, the largest chunk of research that I undertook, and I readily admit that I was initially quite intimidated to contact psychedelic rock stars of various celebrity and personality.

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<sup>5</sup> Participants of the Black Rock Desert’s annual ‘Burning Man Festival,’ which takes place every year during the last days of August and first days of September, are known by this moniker. The festival, in its current Black Rock Desert incarnation, dates back to 1986 and is an event of national and international significance that draws tens of thousands of participants to the playa of northern Nevada to create a temporary metropolis, Black Rock City, sanctified to the principles of community, art, self-expression, and self-reliance (Goin, 2010; Rohrmeier, 2014).

As a result, I enrolled in an oral history workshop conducted by Dr. Alicia Barber during fall 2009, and I pored over interview transcripts located at the University of Nevada, Reno's Oral History Program archives located in the History Department (now in the University of Nevada, Reno's Special Collections) to gain insight into what did and did not work during interviews. It was during this research, that I happened upon Duncan Emrich's colorful and unorthodox interviews conducted at the Delta Saloon, and I started to more fully understand the scope of the problem that I faced. The Comstock is richly imbued with folklore, fakelore, and just about everything in between, which makes getting to the bottom of anything incredibly difficult (Dorson, 1977).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Duncan Emrich's egregious interview transgressions highlighted just how difficult collecting oral histories really can be. I quickly realized that an oral history project meant many research landmines to circumnavigate.

As a result, I decided to delve more deeply into the subject feeling the full weight of this research burden. Thankfully, I soon realized that I was not alone: "Practitioners of the craft of posing questions, oral historians also find themselves constantly questioning their own concepts, methods, and applications of new technology. Those who collect the voices of history make their own voices heard on how to do and use oral history" (Ritchie, 2003, p. 12). I studied the history of oral histories, researched best practices, and, inevitably, learned through trial and error. I learned that the acceptance of oral histories by mainstream historians was tentative, at best, well into the 1970s when a number of noted oral historians persuasively proved its utility. Alessandro Portelli asserted that the

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<sup>6</sup> While Emrich's oral histories are definitely entertaining, Alf Doten's journals (and those of several other nineteenth-century Comstock residents) turned out to be far better resources from which to draw information.

very features of oral history that make it different from other kinds of history — namely, subjectivity, orality, features of memory, the narrative form, and the relationship between the researcher and research participant — are actually assets, rather than limitations, of this type of research (Portelli, 1998). Luisa Passerini — whose collection of Italian oral histories focused primarily upon memories of fascism between the world wars — argued that the idiosyncrasies, hesitations, silences, and discrepancies in her interviewees' responses, marked important aspects of 'personal testimonies' rather than signs of the inherent inconsistency of oral history approaches (Passerini, 1987). Finally, Valerie Yow called for a new way of looking at oral history altogether. Rather than throwing out the oral history baby with the bath water, Yow advocated for a more nuanced examination of how the historian is both affected by and affects the interview process. In particular, Yow evoked the words of Victor Turner calling for "an objective relationship to our own subjectivity" and heightened vigilance by researchers (Perks, 1998, p. 5; Yow, 1998).

As Donald Ritchie points out in *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, the oral historian is among the only historical researchers who works directly with living participants, which requires building social networks and relationships with interviewees. To facilitate these relationships, the researcher needs to be: (1) incredibly well-researched in the subject area; (2) well-prepared with a list of interview questions; (3) able to think quickly on his/her feet and move fluidly and naturally between the interview question list and spontaneous conversation; and, above all else, (4) capable of inspiring a sense of confidence, comfort, and encouragement in interviewees. Intuitively, the researcher needs to know how to treat interviewees based on their unique personalities and life situations, and they need to be excellent listeners.

For example, in my own research, I found that many non-musician eyewitness participants spoke very sparingly at first and often appeared hurried to conclude the process. But as they relaxed, let down their guards, and simply ‘chatted with me,’ they admitted concern that their observations were not valuable or “what I was looking for.” The majority were unaccustomed to being interviewed, so it was essential for me to encourage them, assuage fears, and build a rapport (sometimes, over many months and many phone calls before they agreed to an in-person interview).

On the other hand, the most famous elements of this group suffered from what I might call “interview exhaustion,” and expressed the general feeling that they had said everything there was about the Red Dog and Virginia City fifty interviews ago. Others expressed this “oral history fatigue” by vetting me with questions about the Red Dog. Once they were satisfied with my responses, they were generally even more interested in my research and the questions that I posed. These varied interviewee responses illustrate what Howard Sacks has noted: “An oral history project involves a variety of participants, each with his or her own needs and interests” (Sacks, 2009, p. 2).

Once I felt more confident about my oral history collection skills, I approached Mary Works (now Mary Works-Covington) for an interview, and she assisted with introductions to other members of the original Red Dog Experience including her father, Don Works, Sam Andrew of Big Brother and the Holding Company, and Mike Wilhelm of the Charlatans. I traveled to Carson City to interview Mary and her father in October 2011, and later voyaged to Marin County on several occasions in 2011 and 2012 to interview Sam Andrew and George Hunter of the Charlatans. I stopped over in Kelseyville to interview Mike Wilhelm on one trip, and then came back to San Francisco to watch him



Figure 1.1 Interviewing Bill Ham at his San Francisco Studio, 2012. Photo courtesy of Vanessa Porter.



Figure 1.2 The author with Bill Ham, George Hunter, and Dan Hicks, 2012. Photo courtesy of Dennis Loren.

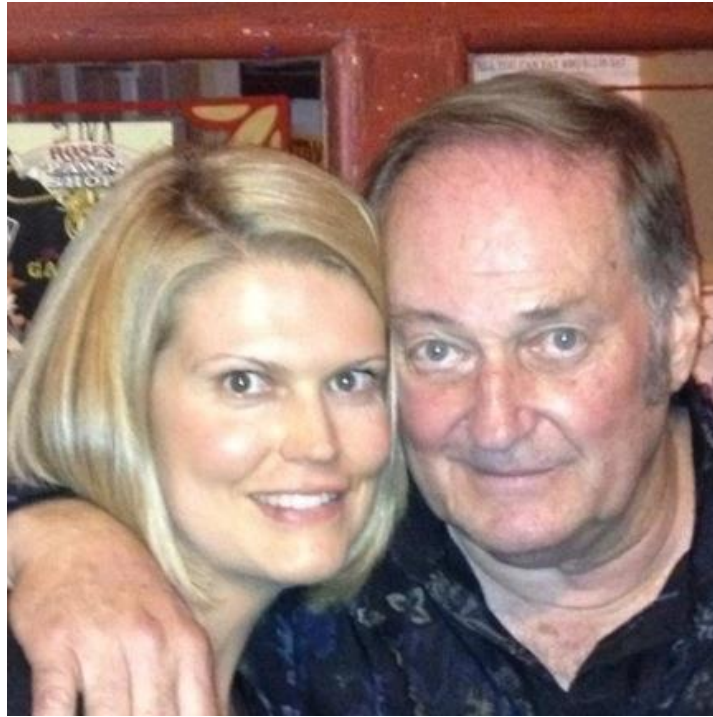


Figure 1.3 The author with Sam Andrew of Big Brother and the Holding Company, 2013

perform during his induction into the Blues Hall of Fame at the Presidio Yacht Club in San Francisco in 2012.

During trips to Virginia City, Gold Hill, and Silver City, I conducted both informal (taking notes, without a digital recorder) and formal interviews (taking notes and using a handheld digital recorder) with a colorful admixture of locals. Among those I interviewed (some on numerous occasions over months) were eyewitnesses to the Red Dog Experience including Pierce Powell (former driver for the New Lost City Ramblers, former bodyguard/roadie for the Charlatans, and former bartender in Sutro, Nevada); Virgil Bucchianeri (former Storey County District Attorney, regular of the Red Dog in 1965 and 1966, and close friends with another eyewitness to the Red Dog, Joe Conforte,

currently tucked away in South American exile) — and an interview I would still very much like to do, someday; Dr. Robert Elston, Sr. (retired archaeologist and eyewitness to the Red Dog in 1966); and, Cashion Callaway (waitress at the Red Dog and midwife during the summer of 1966).

Besides eyewitness accounts, I interviewed and/or informally conversed with local experts of Comstock history and/or entertainment including Michael A. “Bert” Bebeau (District Administrator of the Comstock History Center Commission), Candace Wheeler (Comstock History Center), Rae Maeder (docent at Piper’s Opera House), Andria Daley-Taylor (former resident of the Piper-Beebe house and author of articles about Beebe and Clegg); Barbara “Squeek Steele” LaVake (professional old-time musician and music teacher in Storey County); Guy Rocha (notable Nevada archivist-historian and columnist); and, Patricia Cafferata (lawyer and politician turned amateur Nevada historian and author of the most recent book on Piper’s Opera House), among MANY others.

At Hipsters of the High West in 2012, I met Dennis Loren, a famed psychedelic poster artist based in San Francisco who had just finished revamping the Charlatans’ original psychedelic poster “the Seed” to commemorate Moonalice’s performance that weekend. Loren not only gave me an interview, but introduced me to Bill Ham, *the* father of the psychedelic light show, who I interviewed over the phone and later visited in San Francisco in fall 2012. Loren invited me to the TRPS 2012 Festival, a psychedelic poster art show, where he introduced me to an eclectic array of psychedelic poster artists including Stanley Mouse, Wes Wilson, and Victor Moscoso. I would later conduct an informal telephone interview with Victor Moscoso who is quite a character although he, much to his own regret, missed the Red Dog scene.



Figure 1.4 Stanley Mouse at The Rock Poster Society (TRPS) in San Francisco, 2012. Photo courtesy of Dennis Loren.



Figure 1.5 Wes Wilson at TRPS 2012. Photo courtesy of Dennis Loren.

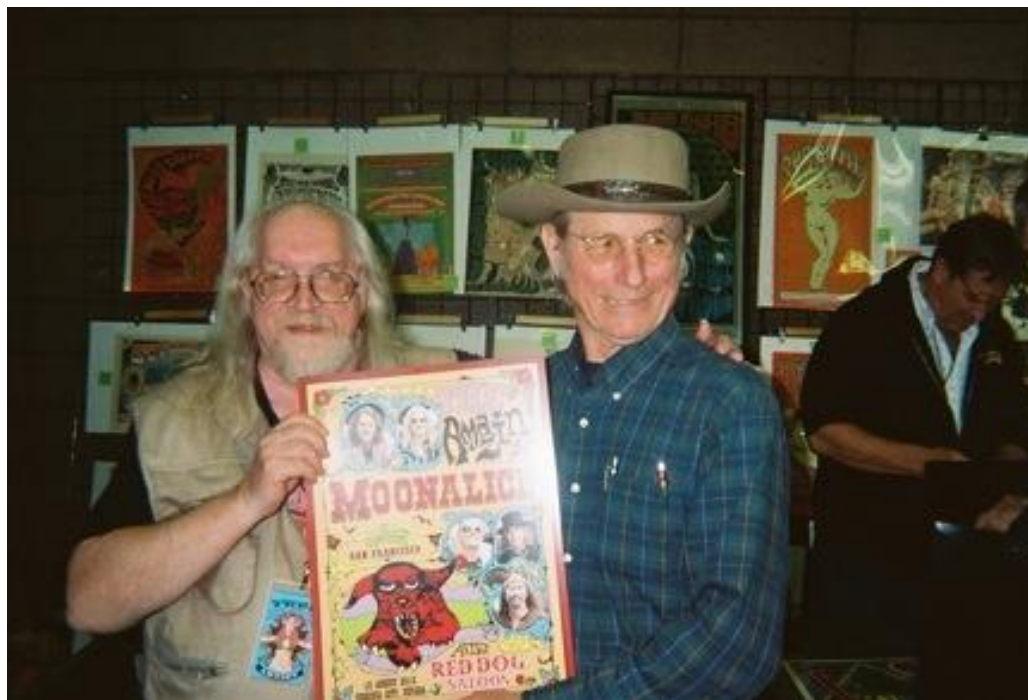


Figure 1.6 Dennis Loren and George Hunter holding Dennis's revamp of "The Seed" for Hipsters of the High West 2012.

Besides these individuals, I formally interviewed Dan Hicks (and attended his Virginia City concert with the Hot Licks), Ellen Harmon of Family Dog fame,<sup>7</sup> and spoke informally with Richard Olsen (the Charlatans), Peter Albin (Big Brother and the Holding Company), David Getz (Big Brother and the Holding Company), Nick Gravenites,<sup>8</sup> Linda and David LaFlamme (It's a Beautiful Day), Pete Sears (Rod Stewart, Jefferson Starship, Moonalice), Peter Kraemer (Sopwith Camel), and Jorma Kaukonen (the Jefferson Airplane), among others. The vast majority of these formal interviews and non-

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<sup>7</sup> Transcripts for the digitally recorded materials were created and edited in keeping with the standard practices that I learned in Dr. Barber's oral history course.

<sup>8</sup> Popular music critic and writer Joel Selvin has argued that Nick Gravenites represents *the* musical conduit between the San Francisco and Chicago sounds. Both talented and versatile, Gravenites assisted, performed, and/or wrote songs for the Quicksilver Messenger Service, Janis Joplin's Kosmic Blues Band, and the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. When Big Brother and the Holding Company briefly reunited from 1969 to 1972 *sans* Janis, Gravenites was their lead singer. Finally, with guitarist Mike Bloomfield (formerly of the Paul Butterfield Blues Band), Gravenites formed the Electric Flag.

formal conversations followed the form of what Kvale and Brinkmann describe as a “semi-structured life world interview... defined as an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 2009, p. 3).

Besides exploring the documentary record, the archaeological record, secondary sources, and conducting interviews, I have listened to enormous amounts of music — ranging from English ballads to pioneer songs to 1940s and 1960s folk music to psychedelic rock — thereby immersing this project in an appropriately musical context.

That said, the Comstock lays no claim to the development of a unique regional sound.<sup>9</sup> It did not give birth to a folk music tradition like that of the Appalachians or Deep South. In the nineteenth century, its stages were graced by imported performers, musicians, and their musical and theatrical contributions. During the twentieth century, the area did not even evolve a regionally unique psychedelic sound, although it did inspire many of its visual esthetic features and communal aspects. As a result, musicological analyses of songs performed in the area yielded little distinct data about the nature of the community itself. After all, Comstockers prided themselves on listening to what *everyone else* was listening to despite the remoteness of their city’s geography; they wanted their stages graced by the best performers from around the nation and even the world, and so they were not concerned about inventing regionalized styles. Perhaps, this marks, ultimately, the downside of the area’s intense interconnectivity with California and the East? That, however, is a question for another paper. What is clearly evident, however, is that during

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<sup>9</sup> In this distinction, I do not wish to invalidate or ignore the important contributions made by Native American performers to the music of what would become Nevada. But, from a purely geographical perspective, the pre-contact area that would later be named “the Comstock” was not known as a major geographical center for Native American occupation or musical endeavor.

both periods, the music and theatrical performances in the area tended to reflect nationally popular patterns of consumption.

According to George O. Carney, Professor of Geography at Oklahoma State University, the study of music geography yields naturally to certain subdivisions or themes: (1) the spatial variation of music, (2) the evolution of musical styles through interactions with place, (3) the origin and diffusion of music, (4) the psychological and symbolic effects of music on “sense of place,” (5) the impact of music on the cultural landscape, (6) the spatial organization of music and musical production, (7) the relationship of music to the natural environment, and (8) the interrelated nature of music with other cultural phenomena in a spatial sense (Carney, 1994, pp. 3-4). This work tends to focus on the themes of cultural diffusion as music moved with immigrants and emigrants to the Comstock from cultural centers such the Bay Area and the East Coast; the effect of music on the cultural landscape (perhaps best highlighted in Virginia City’s early and enthusiastic construction of music halls, dance halls, melodeons,<sup>10</sup> and theaters); the relationship of music to the environment, especially in the examination of Native American music, particularly the traditions of the Northern Piute; and, the interrelationships of music with other cultural manifestations as exemplified in Chapter Three’s discussion of Cultural identity and performance on the Comstock.

Although music and performance are themes returned to time and again, this dissertation focuses more broadly on the history of the community and the amenities that it offered (including entertainment, theaters, and music) in both the 1860s and the 1960s.

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<sup>10</sup> While a number of instruments can be referred to as melodeons including the pump organ and a type of button accordion, within this context, the term refers to nineteenth-century musical theaters that specialized in farces, dances, and songs and often incorporated humor of a vulgar nature. As a result, the only women typically allowed on the premises were the women employed there, namely entertainers and waitresses.

As Watson observes, “The story of Nevada entertainment cannot be told without occasionally digressing into the political, economic, social, and general background of the people. No one phase of living exists except in relation to everything else. To understand the kinds of amusements and the types of theatres that attracted Washoites, a view of the stage in a historical setting is needed so that all aspects of daily living appear in the correct perspective” (Watson, 1964, p. 1).

### *Literature Review*

During the process of researching and writing this dissertation, I realized very quickly that I needed to re-envision the way that I look at the history of northern Nevada and, for that matter, the history of the American West. With this in mind, I turned to the revisionist histories of the New American Historians. Patricia Limericks’s *The Legacy of Conquest* most particularly captured my attention: “The American West was an important meeting ground, the point where Indian America, Latin America, Anglo-America, Afro-America, and Asia intersected. In race relations, the West could make the turn-of-the-century Northeastern urban confrontation between European immigrants and American nativists look like a family reunion. Similarly, in the diversity of languages, religions, and cultures, it surpassed the South” (Limerick, 1987, p. 27). The complexity she describes astounded and excited a thirst to study more. Yet, ironically, for such a complex, vast, and unrivaled region, I soon determined that many historians traditionally tended to oversimplify the history of the American West rendering it somewhat mundane. D. W. Meinig describes this anomaly rather succinctly by alluding to Frederic de Saussure’s

semiotics and the inherent conflict between signifier and signified.<sup>11</sup> “[The West] is a powerful symbol within the national mythology, but as soon as we attempt to connect symbol with substance, to assess the relationships between the West as a place in the imagination and the West as a piece of the American continent, we are confronted with great variation from place to place” (Hausladen, 2003b, p. 19).

The ever changing history of the American West — which (if we are to heed Frederick Jackson Turner) really represents, to varying degree, the story of the generation configuring it — represents an unparalleled kaleidoscope of many different visions. Oftentimes, these divergent images met in collision, sometimes in parallel, and, more often than not, in a thousand variations in between — variations of desire, betrayal, avarice, and perseverance. The historical collages carefully placed throughout this work are meant to assist the reader in becoming better acquainted with the voices and perspectives of both the more mainstream and more disenfranchised voices that comprise but a very small slice of the socio-cultural, ethnic, and moral complexity of the frontier experience in the nineteenth century. Some of the key figures behind these voices include members of the Winnemucca tribe (namely, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins) and members of the Donner-Reed Party, each of which would go on to become iconic components of the Wild West myth.

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<sup>11</sup> Without wanting to digress too deeply here, it is worth noting that Meinig’s “sign” explanation alludes not only to Frederic de Saussure’s dyadic conceptualization of semiotics and the inherent relationship (and tension) between signifier and signified, but perhaps, even more fittingly, to Charles Sanders Peirce’s triadic definition whereby signs can be classified — as icons, indices, or symbols — based upon the type of relationship that holds the sign relation together. Peirce noted that the semiotic elements needed to discern said relationships were based on interactions between the sign, object, and interpretant with signs mediating between the other two elements, object and interpretant.

Certain themes return time and again throughout this work, and so it is important to briefly list them here. When viewed as a place of major cultural crossroads, an area of transformation and innovation, the Comstock is defined by: (1) the geographical and historical circumstances whereby Nevada (and, the Comstock by extension) came to be viewed as a “liminal” or “in-between” place where liminoid activities abound(ed); (2) the diverse nature of the community that developed and how this was expressed through musical and theatrical performances (3) the inescapable interconnectivity between Virginia City and San Francisco and the possibilities of place promised therein, many of a musical and/or theatrical nature; (4) the place myth surrounding Virginia City’s early and consistent role as a Wild West playground for San Francisco and the nation at large; and, (5) finally, the way that the aforementioned factors contributed to the 1960s Red Dog scene and the invention of the psychedelic esthetic, a product of musicking,<sup>12</sup> fantasy, play, ritual, and, inevitably, tourism. To achieve this end, I will employ a verb that typifies the phenomenon produced at the Red Dog in 1965, “touristing.” Just as “musicking” refers to every act involved in the performance, production, and appreciation of a musical performance, so “touristing” refers to every act in the performance, production, and apprecia-

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to clearly assert here that music, in this regard, does not refer to an abstract concept such as a quantity of notes on a page or a vintage vinyl recording. It does not refer to a *thing* at all. Rather, music is an action. It is uniquely tied to physicality, and this does not simply refer to the bodily actions associated with singing a song or playing an instrument. It refers more broadly to what Christopher Small terms *musicking*.

The word *musicking* does not appear in any English dictionary, but it is too useful a conceptual tool to lie unused. It is the present participle, or gerund, of the verb *to music*. This verb does have an obscure existence in some larger dictionaries, but its potential goes unexploited because when it does appear it is used to mean roughly the same as “to perform” or “to make music” — a meaning that is already well covered by those two words. I have larger ambitions for this neglected verb. I have proposed this definition: *To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composing,) or by dancing.* (Small, 1998, p. 9)

tion of a tourist place and experience or what Gourdine argues is “traveler behavior and/or performance in response to the industry” (Gourdine, 2006, pp. 80-81; Light, 2009, p. 241; Small, 1998, p. 9). Moreover, Gourdine describes touring as a “ritualized behavior” whereby travelers can head back in time to a “premodern historically frozen place, hoping to explore both internal and external unknowns” (Gourdine, 2006, p. 82). Many of the most potent visions of Virginia City’s history come from its earliest (in some instances, even prehistoric) days, and so this is a logical place to begin the dissertation, on the edge of the “Great Desert.”

Chapter Two, thus, lays the groundwork for the historical view of northern Nevada and the Comstock, by extension, as liminal<sup>13</sup> or “in-between” places, whether this be “betwixt and between”: (1) California and the East Coast; (2) that which was considered to be the “savage” (Native Americans) and the “civilized” (whites) in the dominant Euro-American discourse; (3) San Francisco mining speculators and the rich quartz ore of the Comstock Lode; (4) life and death (e.g. Virginia City, in this case, the gatekeeper between above ground civilization and the underground mines so notorious for their indus-

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<sup>13</sup> By liminality, I refer to the anthropological term describing the ambiguous qualities associated with participation in the middle phase of a ritual, and, by later extension, the disorientation of living during times of great political and/or cultural upheaval or transition. Liminality is a term first used by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in his book *Rites of Passage* (1918). In its purest form, it describes various stages of a ritual ceremony in small communities such as a “rite of passage.” More specifically, he defined three steps in the ceremonial process: 1) separation from one’s identity, community, and past; 2) limen, or the state between the past and present where the initiand steps over the threshold (limen) temporarily existing in a disorienting sphere outside of the bounds of his/her previous and/or future identities; and, 3) reaggregation, where the initiand is reintroduced to the community and first comes to benefit from his/her change in status, the direct result of the ritual through which he/she has passed. Liminality was later popularized and expanded upon by Victor Turner in the 1960s where he broadened its scope to include various states and places “betwixt or between” including the sense of cultural liminality that individuals belonging to minority groups such as Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins experienced (Gennep, 1960, p. 11; Lape, 1998, pp. 259-269; V. Turner, 1969, pp. 94-95; Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994).

trial accidents); (5) work and play (or, the liminoid)<sup>14</sup> as represented by a constant thirst for first-rate music and musicians, actors and actresses, pomp and parades, and other amenities; and, (6) the long distant past (nineteenth century) and medium distance present (twentieth century), which quickly became blurred through touring and the liminoid. I provide a very brief history of northern Nevada with a particular focus on the Comstock, which would develop in the mid-nineteenth century into one of the most important epicenters of industrial mining boom in the American West. While this is certainly no exhaustive examination of Virginia City's, let alone Nevada's history, this chapter provides fundamental context for the entire dissertation.

Every history is a story, and this story says as much about the person and society producing it as the actual events and historical personages being described. Just as a skilled cartographer draws on a variety of sources from demographic statistics to topographic maps to road atlases (depending upon their ultimate purpose) picking and choosing which essential data from each needs to appear on his/her visual representation of geographical information, so the historian must sift through the documentary record, analyses of material culture, and a vast array of secondary sources in order to present a 'history,' which, no matter how scrupulous the work, ever remains his *story* or her *story* of a time, place, and civilization. What catches the historian's eye, which data is most tantalizing, and which information is deemed unnecessary or in error or passé all stem from an admixture of conscious and subconscious decisions to include and/or exclude.

Fully recognizing and accepting this fact, I start this history with the "Great Northern

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<sup>14</sup> Liminality stands in contrast to Victor Turner's neologism "liminoid," which refers more specifically to transformative features and experiences of the modern, industrial and post-industrial worlds, such as the theater and tourist activities. The liminoid tends to stand in contrast to activities associated with work and industry.

Mystery,” a place that the first conquistadors apparently chose to exclude from their understanding of the world, leaving it largely unexplored.

The “Northern Mystery” is the traditional homeland of the Numic (or, Northern Piute) people. Living on the edge of the “Great Desert,” they sustained a delicate coexistence with the flora and fauna of the Great Basin following a nomadic lifestyle that placed them seasonally in the best areas to harvest local resources including fish, piñon pines, roots, and desert hares. Despite a Spanish presence along the Pacific Coast, where temperatures tended to remain both mild and pleasant year round, the Numa remained largely unaffected by the Spanish colonization of the West Coast. As Paul F. Starrs points out in *Black Rock*, the often rather radical contrasts between the East and the extreme West Coast were not only psychological and political, but landscape-based. On one hand, the West Coast was dotted with sleepy little Spanish missions that tended to cling stubbornly to the coast never venturing very far inland. Thus, the “Northern Mystery” remained, indeed, a mystery for many decades. On the other hand, the East Coast represented the ever-expanding antebellum United States, pushing impatiently and irreverently further inland each and every year. Among its few constraints were Mexico’s land holdings in the southwest and west. But this would change with the Mexican-American War and, more specifically, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo signed in 1848, which ceded vast tracts of land including Alta California and a portion of Santa Fe de Nuevo México (parts of modern day New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, and California) to the United States. But the contrasts were even more pronounced within the Northern Mystery’s incredible landscapes, which would, with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, fall squarely in the path of pioneers’ emigration westward.

On the western margin of the Great Basin lay, of course, the Sierra Nevada, and near the foot of this massive cordillera was some of the strangest land of all: the sagebrush desert of Nevada and eastern California. Within eyesight of the highest peak in the Sierra Nevada lay Death Valley, the lowest basin. This was a land of earthquakes and recently active volcanoes; here were salts crusting the ground in great profusion and water that went by the Spanish name *amargosa*, or bitter. (Starrs, 2010, p. 118)

Unlike Spanish-Mexican rule, however, the lives of the Northern Piute would be dramatically altered following encounters with white explorers, trappers, and, eventually, settlers on the overland route to California via the California Trail. The clash between the Numic people and the ill-fated Donner-Reed Party aptly demonstrates patterns of misunderstanding, hostility, and violence that would plague Native American-white relations in northern Nevada throughout the 1860s.

By 1879, the story of the Donner-Reed Party entered American literature when C.F. McGlashan's book *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra* was published. The story of the Northern Piute would follow in 1883 as the autobiography of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins entitled *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*. The way that each story made its way into the mythology of the America West attested, to a degree, to the challenges then facing the American people with regard to imperialism, expansion, uncontrolled immigration, and the earliest pangs of national conscience<sup>15</sup> over the wrongs done to Native Americans during the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Conveniently, as societal guilt often tends to do, however, nagging doubt and remorse came long after the majority of the wrongs done could be practically reversed and well after the first fruits of the spoil had been collected and enjoyed.

<sup>16</sup> Manifest Destiny helped, to a degree. Certainly, placing a moral imperative and religious spin on the taking of the west made the average American feel a bit better about blatantly violating numerous commandments of the Decalogue through the total disenfranchisement and slaughter of Native American populations. In fact, it permitted some individuals to go as far as believing that the extinction of the Native Americans of the west would be a natural consequence of fulfilling this "God-ordained destiny." But the

While some read the Donner-Reed Party tale, and, in particular, its episodes of cannibalism as illustrating the very real possibility that settlers, confronted with a lack of civilization could de-evolve, reverting to savage roots, others employed the metaphor as a cautionary tale about exuberant American expansionism and imperialism. With regard to the first interpretation, which represents the antithesis of Turner's Frontier Thesis, there were certainly authors who emphasized the inherent dangers of leaving the civilized behind. The way that Ludwig Kieseberg, in particular, was depicted by authors such as Dan DeQuille coincides with this notion of the frontier's ability to render civilized individuals savage. Ironically, such notions made the American impetus to tame the savage west even more powerful.

Scholars such as UCSB English professor Kathryn Dolan see another side to all of this, however. She argues that the Donner-Reed Party, and more specifically, the episodes in their narrative involving cannibalism, became one of the key myths of the American frontier — a graphic metaphor of American expansionism, imperialism, and conquest — wherein whole nations would be gobbled according to the “organic laws of growth” (Sundquist, 1995, pp. 12-14). Eric J. Sundquist argues that Europe's discovery of North America, and its resultant strains of colonization and imperialism, were aided and abetted by the Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution, which linked ideas of “progress” and superiority squarely with scientific advances.

As a result, both revolutions and the paradigm shift that they brought with them made it impossible for Europe's explorers and colonizers to appreciate the achievements

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calloused “practicality” of Manifest Destiny was a sorry substitute for basic human decency, especially among immigrants and lower classes who quickly found themselves enslaved (along with their children) to the factories and the machines of industry.

of the peoples whom they encountered in the New World and Africa. The post-Roman global playing field was no longer level. Moreover, the extravagant optimism of the Enlightenment, with its inherent presuppositions of European superiority, drove the first explorers and colonizers to convert “alien populations” through what was deemed a natural or “organic” expansion, both politically and economically. Over time, as the optimism of the Enlightenment wore off, and Americans began to concede that, perhaps, humans were not necessarily perfectible but rather bound by certain genetic limitations — a thought taken to frightening extremes in the twentieth century — efforts at conversion yielded to efforts to intimidate, repress, and even exterminate groups considered to be genetically inferior. Lady Liberty would march on to *manifest* destiny at all cost.

Eventually, however, a nation that consumes everything in its path, will consume itself, the very essence of cannibalism, and this was not lost on a number of highly influential nineteenth-century American authors such as Winnemucca and Twain as well as those who I do not have time to analyze including Herman Melville and Henry David Thoreau. Like Leo Marx’s *machine in the garden* (1956), cannibals on the frontier symbolized a culture in crisis, an ever expanding America on the cusp of imperial domination of parts of the Pacific and Atlantic in the name of consumption. “The Donner Party tragedy, and the cannibalism that was part of their story, became one of the primary symbols of the danger of nineteenth-century expansion involved in the concept of ‘manifest destiny’” (Dolan, 2010, p. 1).

Authors such as Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and Mark Twain would, in fact, use the Donner-Reed Party and the theme of cannibalism to illustrate the dark side of American imperialism and consumerism. “Twain... portrayed cannibal man serving his ‘savage

hunger' by utilizing the civilities and refinements of civilization" (Branch, 1983, p. 591). Dolan takes this one step further contending that between the binarism of civilized and savage there exists a third, transitional state "the hybridization of 'civilized-savage,' represented by the nation as it consumes land, borders, people, and cultures for the sake of demonstrating its democratic civilization" (Dolan, 2010, p. 94). Sarah Winnemucca Hopkin's portrayal of the Donner-Reed Party is particularly crucial as it implicates members of the party in destroying the Numa's winter foodstuffs on their way through Nevada, nearly cursing their whole village to winter starvation, which is, ironically, the very fate that befell the pioneers a few months later. This underscores an important but largely unlearned nineteenth-century lesson of American history. Inevitably, acts of savagery, even by the most seemingly "civilized, enlightened group" make that group savage, and so the other concept expressed here by authors such as Twain and Winnemucca is that Americans are at risk of becoming that which they wish to "tame." They transform themselves, through brutal acts against other peoples and nations, into a brutal nation, even when democracy marks a primary means of justifying those actions.

Besides considering the Donner-Reed Party within a symbolic context, this incident represents a cautionary tale about: (1) the dangers of becoming stuck in a liminal space and (2) the absolute necessity of interconnectivity to urban centers during the settling of the American West. In the first regard, liminality experienced on a large scale by members of a group, such as the Donner-Reed Party, is quite different than the liminality described during small-scale tribal rituals where there is a clear way in and out. Such is simply not the case on the group scale, however, where there is no "Master of Ceremonies" able to guide members of a community through transitional events, and the future is

unknown. To members of the community experiencing liminality, there may appear to be no ready means of escape, and such was certainly the case for the Donner-Reed Party. According to anthropologist Victor Turner, liminality is not a state to be long endured without the re-establishment of societal structure or order, and this is clearly demonstrated by the disintegration of the community even before they reached their worst travails in the Sierra. In the second regard, the interconnectivity of small hinterland communities of the west to larger urban centers represented a vital link in the chain of survival, growth, and, ultimately, conquest. For Comstockers, many of whom long associated their own history with that of the Donners and Reeds, they knew all too well that a month or more break in the constant stream of packers and teamsters that brought fresh supplies to the area from California or in the ingenious Schussler pipes that delivered water to the city would spell disaster and desperation, too.

Chapter Two and Three spend much time exploring Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, a woman who understood the ‘civilized-savage’ well as she spent much of her life suspended in cultural liminality ‘betwixt and between’ whites and Piutes.<sup>17</sup> As the sole voice and intercessor on behalf of her people, she relied on education by whites and an intimate knowledge of their ‘civilized’ ways in order to speak and live among them as her peoples’ advocate. She encountered both friends and foes in this world and mourned casualties on both sides including her benefactor and caretaker, William Ormsby, killed in 1860 during the Pyramid Lake Indian War and the massacre of many of her people, including her mother and infant brother, at Lake Winnemucca five years later.

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<sup>17</sup> Deciding which group truly was the savage and which group truly was the civilized, incidentally, was far more complicated than many Euro-Americans were willing to admit, a theme strongly emphasized in Winnemucca’s work as well as in Twain’s writings about American imperialism in the Philippines.

During five years from 1860 to 1865, Sarah would grace the stages of Washoe and California performing with her family in what can accurately be called some of the very first Wild West shows. Onstage, the Winnemucca Troupe found success by performing to the expectations of the miners thereby contributing, to various degrees, to longstanding stereotypes about her people. Buffalo Bill would later do the same with his “Wild West,” and both represented some of the only means for natives to maintain decently paying jobs, at the time. As a result, I delve into notions of the “Other”<sup>18</sup> and ambivalent desire in the context of entertainment in Chapter Three touching on the theories of Structuralism and Post-Colonialism including the work of Edward Saïd and Homi K. Bhabha. Not unlike the first African American performers in minstrel shows, Wild West stagings both exploited and empowered Native American performers. While stereotypes were certainly reinforced, these performances allowed many Euro-Americans to see Native Americans of the “Wild West” for the first time, and the enlightened few among them quickly realized that Native Americans were, indeed, human beings. The humanization of Native Americans (in stark contrast to the dangerous rhetoric of Manifest Destiny and Social Darwinism) was enormously assisted by the publication in 1893 of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins’s autobiography. In many respects, this work could almost be termed an autobiography of the Northern Piute, because she focused less on her individu-

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<sup>18</sup> The “Other” is a concept central to Post-Colonialism and based in Structuralism’s notion of binary duality or binarism. “Forms of binarism are present in human thought from the earliest times. Dualisms in philosophy and religion (subject and object, God and man, mind and external world, organic and mechanical, temporal and eternal, and so on) are the foundations of entire world-views” (Selden, 1989a, p. 55). “Otherness” was first formally explored by Emmanuel Levinas and then popularized by Edward Saïd in his iconic masterpiece *Orientalism*. “Otherness” implies a defining relationship to an individual and/or a group. Defining self — in both the psychological and philosophical senses — and/or a subject group in terms of perceived “otherness” or that which exists outside of the self or group, it is an identification wrought just as much by that which one is not as by that which one is (Levinas, 1998). Saïd builds on this to argue that “Otherness” is used by groups in power to buttress their perceived “strengths” through emphasis of the alleged “weaknesses” of those they marginalize (Saïd, 1978).

al experiences and more on giving voice to her collective people. *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* was received with mixed reactions much like McGlashan's account of the Donner-Reed Party.

On one hand, some individuals argued that the Piute needed to be educated, converted, and "reformed" like their spokeswoman, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins. Others argued that they were a genetically inferior group — perhaps, capable of nobility, but nonetheless, inherently naïve — who would "naturally" fall victim to and be exterminated by the more robust race of Euro-Americans tasked with bringing to fruition Manifest Destiny. (They pointed to recent memory for evidence of this trend without examining American culpability in the matter.) By 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner, America's "Darwin," attempted to define this new "American race" and identify the natural mechanisms at work in molding it. President Theodore Roosevelt would cast his own vote with a mythological, racist telling of history entitled *The Winning of the West*, dedicated in 1896.

In her work, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins highlights one of the great conflicts between the Numic people and Euro-American settlers, prospectors, and miners that flooded into the region as soon as the 1840s and in far greater numbers after the 1859 silver strike: how each group viewed and, subsequently, exploited the land. While the Numa mastered how to survive within the Great Basin's stark landscapes and extreme aridity, Forty-Niners turned Comstockers came to pass through, take what they could, and leave the environment in a state far worse than when they arrived. These settlers tended to see the area that would become modern-day Nevada as only valuable insofar as the land was useful, and their eyes were entirely unskilled at identifying the utility of the Great Basin,

that is, until they found mineral wealth. Even then, it represented a temporary mining camp, a place to be worked and then left in all haste. The landscape of the Great Basin represents an essential key to unlocking the psychology of nineteenth-century adventurers, settlers, and prospectors in the area because, “it had no equivalent in the eastern United States or Europe. If the expanse of the Great Plains was like nothing nineteenth-century settlers had ever seen before, and in its unfamiliarity frightening, then the decidedly unsylvan Great Basin was way weirder. Difficult of access and excruciatingly subtle of charm” (Starrs, 2010, p. 118).

As the rich quartz ore veins of the Comstock gave rise to fantasies that Sun Mountain<sup>19</sup> itself was a gigantic gold and silver mountain, San Franciscans began to hope against hope that the mineral wealth would never run out, and during its fifteen year boom, nearly anything seemed possible. As a result, the Comstock became more than a flash in the pan — to embrace the placer miner’s term. In Chapter Two, I explore how San Franciscans, excited by the prospects being uncovered on the Comstock, invested more and more capital, machinery, and manpower into the region thereby inextricably binding their community to the Comstock.

The story of San Francisco’s empire and its relationship to smaller communities swept broadly across its hinterland fills in important pieces of the Comstock puzzle. In fact, as Gray Brechin argues in his monumental work *Imperial San Francisco: Earthly Power, Urban Ruin*, one cannot truly understand the history of Virginia City without

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<sup>19</sup> Throughout this paper, I make references to Sun Mountain, which was an early name for Mount Davidson. Although it is unclear why Mount Davidson was originally named “Sun Mountain,” some residents have suggested that it is for the saffron-colored wildflowers that sometimes briefly cover the peak during the spring. As early as 1863, however, Mark Twain was referring to the peak as Mount Davidson, and so the appearance of both names in the nineteenth century appears to be somewhat interchangeable.

delving into its complex relationship with the San Francisco Bay Area, namely what he describes as the San Francisco Mining Pyramid. Brechin's concept of the San Francisco Mining Pyramid is crucial to my analysis of linkages between the refined, sophisticated city by the bay and its industrial, land-locked behemoth "colony."

The concept of the San Francisco Mining Pyramid elaborates upon a thesis that Lewis Mumford first presented in his works *Technics and Civilization* and *The Pentagon of Power*. In these works, Mumford describes an ancient system dominated by a small handful of elites to gain mastery over the natural world with increasing efficiency. He defines this as the "Megamachine" and argues that it is constructed upon a foundation of the following industries: mechanization, metallurgy, militarism, moneymaking (or finance), and mining. Mining, above all the others, asserts ultimate authority, and so Brechin suggests that this "Megamachine" is perhaps most easily envisioned as a "mining pyramid." While Mumford's "Megamachine" belies conspiratorial implications, the empires that mining buttressed (e.g. Athens, Rome) are well-documented as are the handful of elites associated with San Francisco empire-building during the nineteenth century described in vivid detail by Brechin.

With the discovery of vast, condensed silver deposits in 1859 in the mountains near Virginia City, the "rush to Washoe" or, rather, the "backwash from California" began, encouraging and fostering the historical ties that would come to typify the relationship between the Comstock and San Francisco and the varied amenities that the area could offer: (1) close proximity to well-paying jobs, San Francisco, and the gold and silver lying somewhere below the surface; (2) a great degree of ethnic diversity with many saloons catering specifically to niche groups; (3) excellent entertainment and a wide vari-

ety of theaters; (4) some of the finest businesses, restaurants, and saloons in the west; and, (5) fantastical place myths associated with “getting rich quick” spread via word-of-mouth communications to those who had yet to start out on their Washoe adventure.

The California Gold Rush set the stage and selected the actors who would later be involved in the “rush to Washoe” inaugurated by overly enthusiastic, fable-weaving journalists. To sustain mining activity in an otherwise brutal geographic location, Comstock miners relied on San Francisco investors, stockholders, and bankers to raise the capital necessary for investing in community building; infrastructure development, assembly, and maintenance; and, deep, hard rock mining. These practical concerns led to an early, clear, and consistent relationship between the Comstock and San Francisco. Moreover, because of the interconnectivity to and interdependence of San Francisco’s economy on the mines of the Comstock, Virginia City witnessed a boom of frenetic industrial growth as its denizens attempted to access tantalizingly rich, impossibly deep veins of silver and gold. As a result, a deep and abiding relationship tied San Francisco and the Comstock together with cords of economy, technology, and industry.

This interconnectivity was acknowledged very early on in Virginia City’s history and described in detail in terms of California Bank ownership (and, eventually, corporatization and, I daresay, monopoly) of Comstock mines and lands, in Eliot Lord’s *Comstock Mining and Miners* (1883). In fact, the interconnectivity between California and Nevada, in this respect, was largely taken for granted. After all, Nevada — and, more specifically, Virginia City — relied on Sierra lumber, California manufactured goods, and San Francisco banking capital to float its ambitious industrial projects. San Francisco and its urban network relied on Comstock ore to keep mining stocks up and bank coffers full. Former

Forty-Niners turned members of the Society of California Pioneers filled the former mining camps turned urban-industrial centers.

In his article “The Comstock Urban Network” (1997), UNLV historian Eugene Moehring examines the sophisticated network of small towns whose resources supported larger urban centers such as San Francisco and, on a smaller scale, even Virginia City. Moehring argues that many American West scholars including the New Western Historians<sup>20</sup> have tended to overlook the vital relationship between urban centers of the Western United States and their hinterlands. Moehring argues for a careful reexamination of the interconnectivity of Western urban centers to their hinterland, and he uses the example of the Comstock Urban Network to illustrate his point, thereby expanding upon work done in the early to mid-1990s on the significance of the hinterland areas to major metropolises (Abbott, 1992; May, 1994).

Part of the reason that the historical geography of the urbanized American West and its hinterlands has traditionally been overlooked is the powerful romantic underpinnings of Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis. In his article “Revisiting the Vanishing Frontier: The Legacy of Frederick Jackson Turner,” William Cronon sums up his take on the 1890s Frontier Thesis.

According to Turner, the West was a place where easterners and Europeans experience a return to a time before civilization when the energies of the race were young. Once the descent to the primitive was complete, frontier communities underwent an evolution which recapitulated the development of civilization itself, tracing the path from hunter to trader to farmer to town. In that process of descent and revolution — as the frontier successively emerged and vanished — a special

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<sup>20</sup> The “New Western Historians” include Richard White author of *It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (1991), Donald Worster author of *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (1985), and Patricia Limerick author of *Legacy of Conquest* (1987).

American character was forged, marked by fierce individualism, pragmatism, and egalitarianism. Thus, fundamentally transformed as a people, Americans built their commitment to democracy, escaped the perils of class conflict, and overran a continent. Now, in the 1890s, the frontier was gone, and a new foundation for American life must somehow be discovered. So ran Turner's Argument. (Cronon, 1987, p. 157)

Turner's concept of the frontier attributed the conquest of the West to the exploits of a small group of rugged individuals (Euro-American males) while overlooking the hugely cooperative nature of settlement (and its well-established diversity) across the furthest western portions of the United States.

While Turner claimed that robust individuals living at the crossroads between civilization and savagery forged the unique character of the American West during the conquest of the frontier, the actual pattern of seizure and settlement mirrors historical attempts at empire-building such as Alexander the Great's vision of the Greco-Oriental city and its hinterlands or the Roman Empire's infrastructural vanquishing of vast parts of Europe and the Middle East. Successful empire building requires the development (or further development) of hub cities and their hinterlands through expansion, investment, and exploitation. Alexander the Great was particularly aware of this fact, and, although he is known mainly as a conqueror and warrior, it is noteworthy that he established more than seventy cities during his conquest of the known world. Each city represented a namesake, and they were intended to unite his empire under one vast cosmopolitan world culture, language, educational system, and economy. "Alexander's most enduring legacy to the Hellenistic world was his new image of the city. The city is as old as civilization, since urban life is by definition a component of civilized existence. For Alexander, cities were keystones holding together his diverse and vast empire — serving as centers of gov-

ernment, trade, and culture and radiating Greco-Oriental civilization into the hinterland” (Matthews, 2010, p. 87).

The Turnerian concept of Europeans transplanted into vast, unknown realms where they were forced to start over, literally building civilization from its very primitive beginnings, is true only in the earliest and most extreme cases. The truth is, Americans were excellent at building cities in a jiffy, and they used all of the force of the industrial revolution to make some of those cities into marvels. Virginia City, Nevada, is a prime example of how quickly a Western settlement might go from inconsequential mining camp to the “Megamachine” of the Western world — 3,000 feet deep mines, Cornish pumps straining twenty-four hours a day, ground-shaking 100- and 120-stamp mills, vast water works, Iron Horses defying steep terrain, and all.

While Cronon provides early groundwork for future research into core and periphery relations as they relate to urban centers of the American West, an examination of the vast urban networks of the West remained largely overlooked or even neglected by many academics including those specializing in urban histories and geographies and American West studies until the late 1990s. In *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, William Cronon argues that, “urban historians rarely look beyond the outskirts of cities to the hinterlands beyond; western and frontier and even environmental historians usually concentrate far more attention on rural and wild places than on urban ones” (Cronon, 1991, p. xiv). As a result, focus on the urban network that “*simultaneously* promoted the related processes of territorial formation and Indian conquest” have been inadequately explored (Cronon, 1991, p. xiv). During the late 1990s, however, a group of scholars started to place much greater focus on San Francisco’s “colonization” of the

Comstock, underscored by the construction of the vast Comstock Urban Network (Brechtin, 2001; James, 1998; Lillard, 1969).

The monopolization of lands and resources on the Comstock by a handful of San Franciscans and the Bank of California betrayed the city by the bay's grandiose goal of localized imperialism, which it attempted to realize through increasingly calculated efforts to dominate parts of the Pacific during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Exploring the parasitic relationship between San Francisco's urban core and its hinterlands is best described as colonization, or in D.W. Meinig's larger usage, imperialism, which is generally applicable to the greater American West.

The concept of the colonization of the American West is one that numerous authors have explored over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For example, Richard G. Lillard delves into this topic in his expansive popular history of Nevada entitled *Desert Challenge: An Interpretation of Nevada*, and Howard R. Lamar comes to similar conclusions about the relationship between the eastern states and the western North American territories in his book *The Far Southwest, 1846-1912: A Territorial History*. The New Western Historians have explored this phenomenon in great detail, and there are really far too many names to mention here. But certainly, Patty Limerick's groundbreaking work *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (1987) must be mentioned yet again as well as William Robbins' *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West* (1994), and Meinig's four-volume *The Shaping of America* (1986–2004).

More specifically, Robbins asserts that a handful of elite American families engineered a devastatingly ambitious takeover of the American frontier in under a century.

Robbins' book turns Turner's Frontier Thesis on its head, by placing the impetus for Western settlement in the hands of a core elite centered in major urban centers rather than the precarious palms of rough-hewn rugged individuals such as Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett. In particular, Robbins argues that the conquest of the frontier was consciously masterminded rather than a natural progression, which I develop further in Chapter Three. His assertions are particularly well-illustrated in the context of the Bank of California's monopolization of Comstock lands, mines, and railways through the rough dealings of men like William Sharon and William C. Ralston, both denizens of San Francisco (Robbins, 1994)

Whereas California struggled to integrate images of above-ground, independent placer miners with the realities of industrialized mining, the Comstock Mining District moved relatively rapidly onto an industrial footing. In his article "The Silver Legacy: San Francisco and the Comstock Lode," Jon Christensen observes, "While the Gold Rush expressed itself largely as freelance unaccountable anarchy that changed much of the world economy but built little within this region, the silver boom was all about organizing the regional economy" (Christensen, 1998, p. 90). Yet, Christensen sees the relationship between the Comstock and San Francisco as more nuanced. The Comstock was not merely a collection of communities that were repeatedly victimized and, eventually, martyred by the city by the bay. Rather, savvy Comstock business owners quickly learned how to ply San Franciscans with drinks, prostitution, gambling, and various other forms of entertainment. "Control was bought and utilized for the purposes of 'rigging the market' and for the salaries, luxurious offices in San Francisco, and other perquisites that opportunity

afforded. It should be said, however, that as San Franciscans milked the Comstock, they also fed it” (Christensen, 1998, p. 98).

Following in the footsteps of geographical historians such as Gray Brechin, Ronald James, Richard Lillard, Gunther Peck, and Alan Trachtenberg, I ultimately argue that Virginia City represented a suburb or exurb<sup>21</sup> of San Francisco. In this case, the use of the term exurb is particularly well suited to the Comstock, which represented a quasi-bedroom community of San Francisco as the 1860s drew to a close. There was an extremely high degree of travel between both cities despite the obstacle of the Sierra Nevada, and by May 10, 1869, even this geographical challenge was successfully surmounted. With the driving of the “Last Spike” at Promontory Summit, Utah, the First Transcontinental Railroad successfully opened, and convenient, comfortable, and relatively rapid travel between the two metropolises commenced via Reno.

The term exurb implies a certain level of economic success (Spectorsky, 1955). Since Virginia City had a reputation to maintain as the “Richest Place on Earth,” its residents (many of whom lived in both the Bay Area and the Comstock at various points in their lives) fostered an image of great affluence and sophistication. This is underscored by the fact that many San Franciscans alternately lived, worked, and played in both communities. This means, then, that the place myth that I examine in Chapter Five is inextricably tied back to the history of liminality and the liminoid, performance and theater discussed in Chapters Two, Three, and Four.. In many respects, the Comstock was just as

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<sup>21</sup> The term exurb or “extra-urban” was first used by Auguste Comte Spectorsky in his book *The Exurbanites* (1955) to describe the emergence of prosperous communities beyond suburbs that functioned as commuter towns or bedroom communities for those working in major urban centers. In general, exurbs are characterized by their high level of affluence and, in some cases, high level of education. In a nod to the rapid popularity of Spectorsky’s work, an episode of *Gunsmoke* released on April 9, 1960, featured the title “The Exurbanites.”

much San Francisco's playground as it was the crown jewel of her mighty industrial empire. Moreover, making it big in Comstock mining might secure one a place in San Francisco's upper crust years down the road (e.g. Adolph Sutro and George Hearst). Those of particularly high renown, such as John Mackay, would launch even higher into the upper echelons of New York high society as a result of their days as a Virginian.<sup>22</sup>

In Chapter Three, I focus on entertainment, ethnic identity, and the role of performance on the Comstock. Throughout the Comstock's 150-year history, the Virginia City theaters attracted performers of national and international acclaim, and its restaurants and saloons provided exceptionally sophisticated amenities including fine dining, filtered water, and gas lighting. Permanent structures such as the opulent Maguire's Opera House and the Fourth Ward School (with a full musical curriculum by 1864) bear witness to those who sought community stability and longevity. Census records testify to the surprising diversity of Virginia City, which included immigrants from the Germanies, Ireland, Great Britain, China, and Italy, just to name a few. The archaeological record further corroborates this diversity strongly suggesting that one of the most cosmopolitan establishments in the city, the Boston Saloon, was actually owned by an African American and was predominantly patronized by African American clientele, and, therefore African American performers, although by no means segregated.

Musical scholarship demonstrates that performers and musicians of Germanic, Irish, African American, and even Native American descent generally exploited their ethnicity to attract larger audiences while the exotic strains of Chinese Celestial bands

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<sup>22</sup> In the documentary record and first historical accounts of their city, Virginia City residents consistently referred to themselves as "Virginians." For the purposes of simplicity and clarity, however, I use the term "Comstockers" throughout this work.

and even Italian itinerant musicians tended to warrant mockery. Exploring the musical life of the nineteenth-century Comstock allows us to measure the long term vision of its citizens, its community building goals, its national and international prestige, and the degree to which various ethnic groups were accepted or excluded. This is underpinned by theories of music as social life developed in the work of Gregory Bateson, William H. McNeill, and Thomas Turino.: “Through moving and sounding together in synchrony, people can experience a feeling of oneness with others” (Turino, 2008, p. 3). These elements would prove particularly powerful during the twentieth-century Red Dog days, something recognized and transported to the Bay Area by Family Dog.

While the riches of the mines became quickly locked up in the hands of a small number of mine owners, bank owners, and stock holders (the majority of whom resided primarily in San Francisco), enterprising locals rapidly realized that the *real* wealth lay in “mining the miners...” *and* mine owners *and* stock holders *and* basically anyone else who wished to stop by for a visit, and so the area quickly gained a reputation as a nexus for entertainments ranging from alcohol and prostitutes to Shakespearean theater and champagne. Liberally sprinkled therein were heavy doses of minstrelsy, ethnically “exotic” musical manifestations, comedic operettas, and even high opera. In true Victorian style, Virginia City quickly enjoyed a reputation as *the* premier playground of San Francisco, a place where societal norms and strictures were subverted with abandon, and so the furtive blossoming of what would become an enclavic<sup>23</sup> tourist zone in the twentieth century were already at work as early as the mid-nineteenth century.

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<sup>23</sup> An enclavic tourist spot is a destination completely organized and regulated around the industry of tourism. They are sometimes set apart from other economic activities and may even be more heavily policed (Light, 2009).

Comstock mining enterprises of the nineteenth century were experimental in so many ways, and this includes the way that the area's workforce was inspired, rejuvenated, and emboldened by a constant deluge of liminoid experiences. Of particular importance was the constant affirmation and reaffirmation of the miners' affinity for risk, which is something that Eliot Lord was both impressed and disgusted by in his great history of the Comstock and its mines. Instead of relying on religious faith to assist them in returning to the mines day after day, Lord noted that Comstock miners looked at the venture as a gamble just like any other. He wrote, "[The miners'] fondness for gambling leads them also to regard the possibility of death with instilled *sang froid*, as a risk which every gamester must face, and they stake their lives on the cast because they consider the chances in favor of their preservation" (Lord, 1959, p. 405). Instead of worrying about whether or not to participate in the game, they simply focused on the hand that they were dealt. This became wildly apparent to Lord when, during his research, he watched a Cornish miner accidentally fall down a 1,300 foot shaft. Lord was horrified and thought that the man must surely be dead, battered about as his body plunged more than one thousand feet to the bottom of the shaft. Yet, about twenty feet down, the Cornishman managed to grab hold of the pumpbob nose, which he clung to with a certain amount of stoic deference while he called up to fellow miners for assistance. Despite having dangled over a 1,300 foot precipice for some time, the miner returned to the surface both cool and calm to exclaim, "By the bloody 'ell! If I hadn't caught hold of the bob I'd 'a been scattered all abroad!" Lord was stunned that the man was not petrified, quivering, or rolled up in a ball of prayerful thanksgiving, and he noted that "the temper shown by this miner is an ex-

treme illustration of the ordinary mode of thought among the men of his class” (Lord, 1959, p. 405).

Part of the reason for this is that Comstock miners were supremely professional and among the best and most seasoned subterranean workers in the world. Unlike other industrialized mining towns, the miners of the Comstock were well paid because experience and expertise were essential to successful deep hard rock mining. These men worked under incredibly difficult circumstances, circumstances thought nearly impossible in other parts of the world, and they did so proudly, bravely, and stalwartly. Living in a place that rewarded their efforts with a thousand sensual pleasures — from various types of alcohol to exotic prostitutes to a full panoply of musical entertainment to excessive gambling — occupied their leisure time marking some of the first truly liminoid experiences in the rapidly industrializing United States. Furthermore, gambling reinforced the entire vision around which they organized their lives... lucky today and tomorrow, perhaps, unlucky the next. They realized that brooding over the vast number of bad hands that they might be dealt would only keep them from collecting the table’s earnings, and so they chose, instead, to look at all risk as fundamentally necessary to existence. In the last two chapters, I examine how this spirit of risk inspired members of the 1960s psychedelic Red Doggers to experiment in groundbreaking new ways on the Comstock, too. After all, the two mottos of Silverland,<sup>24</sup> both past and present, would most certainly have to be: (1) “Nothing ventured, nothing gained” and (2) “It’s none of your business!”

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<sup>24</sup> A term whimsically used by Comstockers to describe the entire mining district, this nomenclature referred to communities as far afield as Dayton and Carson City.

Americans needed a fantasy upon which to place their focus, hopes, and dreams while toiling their lives away in factories, and the Wild West provided the materials. Chapter Five explores the potent role of place myth in the American West. The most nostalgic strains of Romanticism provided the perfect framework, and it is one that remains incalculably significant in the United States, even today. “Conquest took another route into national memory. In the popular imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness... The subject of conquest was the domain of mass entertainment and the occasion for lighthearted national escapism” (Limerick, 1987, p. 19). Against the great Romantic swell of Western propaganda that placed white American settlers on the cusp of heroism and progress and Native Americans along a vanishing margin — one that many nineteenth century Americans thought was at best inevitable and at worst deserved — the harsh and sometimes very ugly realities of conquest in the American West were often hidden. Even in more recent times, the poor treatment of Native Americans by whites during the settlement of the west gets a cursory glance at best. It provides background for the “real” stories of gunslingers and soiled doves. “An element of regret for ‘what we did to the Indians’ had entered the picture, but the dominant feature of conquest remained ‘adventure’” (Limerick, 1987, p. 19).

Moreover, I examine the evolution of the Comstock’s public image during the twentieth century versus its historical, sociocultural, and economic realities. Although this dissertation certainly aims to poke some large holes in the textile that is Frederick Jackson Turner’s Frontier Thesis, I heed William Cronon’s caution about either completely vilifying or rejecting Turner’s work:

Turner's notion of the "frontier" may be so muddled as to be useless, but if Turner's "free land" is a special case of Potter's American Abundance, then the general direction of Turner's approach remains sound. In his commitment to ignoring the walls between disciplines, in his faith that history must in large measure be the story of ordinary people, in his emphasis on the importance of regional environments to our understanding the course of American history — in all these ways, he remains one of the pathfinders whose well-blazed trail we continue to follow. And whether or not we ultimately abandon the frontier thesis, we are unlikely to escape its narrative implications. In fashioning a rhetorical framework for telling the history of the first continental republic, Frederick Jackson Turner, almost in spite of himself, gave American history its central and most persistent story. However much we may modify the details and outline of that story, we are unlikely ever to break entirely free of it. (Cronon, 1987, pp. 174-175)

As Cronon suggests, Turner's Frontier Thesis has become indelibly, inextricably embedded within the bedrock of American history and culture. Nowhere is this more apparent than in popular culture depictions of the American frontier, whether filmed on Hollywood soundstages, recorded in Los Angeles music studios, or printed by New York publishing houses. These perceptions have multiplied and expanded, creating new realities and ways of perceiving the West, past and present. Moreover, they have inspired and continue to inspire countless tourists each year to visit western locales where they can commemorate (and act out) their wildest frontier fantasies, thereby engaging in the liminoid experience of touring.

Certainly, part of the problem with the geography and history of the American West remains *what remains*. After all, what Americans and international tourists tend to believe about the American West of the nineteenth century is largely configured by mass communications and what they are currently able to engage with in the physical world. For example, Chapter Three of this dissertation is devoted to the ethnic diversity of the Comstock, which was generally embraced by denizens of the area's nineteenth-century

community as a reality of the American West. Today, however, the diverse, multicultural nature of the location is sometimes forgotten. Television shows and movies certainly have had much to do with that as have western novels. But the characteristics of semi-ghost towns like Virginia City influenced who stays around, how the structures of the community get preserved, and which portions of the area's history are emphasized. A nineteenth-century city of rich ethnicity whose founding population was comprised of 30% foreign-born residents, by the 1960s, the converse was true. The psychedelic rockers of 1965 stumbled into a town with a greatly diminished population (reduced to just 1–3% of its population from the Comstock's 1870s highpoint) where ethnic diversity had all but disappeared. A ghost of its former self, Virginia City was predominantly populated by Caucasians and a very small handful of Native Americans.

The amenities had changed radically, too. Even before the Red Doggers arrived on the scene, the community became a magnet for Bohemians in the interwar years and thereafter. Edward Ullman's observations about amenity communities in the 1950s provide particularly useful theory for this portion of the dissertation. In particular, the "other amenity factors" that Ullman cites — including "word of mouth inducement" and "legend" — attracted members of the Bohemian community who, in turn, attracted more (Ullman, 1954). "The presence of a significant bohemian concentration signals a regional environment or milieu that reflects an underlying openness to innovation and creativity. This milieu is both open to and attractive to other talented and creative individuals" (Florida, 2002, p. 56). During Prohibition, a scarce law enforcement presence, a number of brazen local bootleggers, and inventive speakeasies kept the Comstock anything but

dry (James, 1998, p. 252). With only 667 people in all of Storey County according to the 1930 U.S. Census, the town surely wintered in a deep slumber, and nearing hibernation.

Some of these residents were drawn to the area by the myth of the frontier, and some traced their family lineage back to the original inhabitants of the nineteenth-century Comstock Mining District. But the rent was extremely cheap, the scenic vistas expansive, and the place-myth decidedly entertaining. The area was, moreover, conveniently located within an hour's drive of the divorce capital of the world, Reno. Many Bohemians and well-to-dos, biding their time to Nevada residency and divorce, found themselves rubbing elbows at the saloons of the Comstock as a result of these mixed amenities, and new creative communities emerged.

By 1949, Duncan Emrich's poorly executed interviews with local residents more or less schooled them in what would sell to the rest of the nation, and these lessons could not have come at a better time because the post-World War II years saw the American middle class ride an unprecedented wave of prosperity that made tourism possible for many families for the first time. The Comstock, with its reviving Bohemian presence, was clearly poised to surf the nationwide swell in tourism.

This was also a generation of Americans who owned automobiles in larger numbers than ever before and were excited by the adventure of driving from coast to coast. Of course, the American road trip marked a major theme of the 1950s and 1960s largely because of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, the Beat movement, and, later on, the nomadic wanderings of members of the Counterculture including the Merry Pranksters. Virginia City marked a stopover point, especially for the pranksters. Clearly, the Comstock had colorful characters, dramatic place myths to exploit, and just enough of a naughty reputa-

tion for visitors to indulge in taboo-breaking of various stripes. They had lots of media coverage as well because, under the stewardship of Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg, the *Territorial Enterprise* was enjoying its highest circulation, and the Beebe and Clegg histories and pictorial train albums were selling like mad.

Twentieth-century echoes of the rapport between San Francisco and Virginia City, the richness of the Comstock's entertainment, and its associated place myths culminate in an investigation of the Red Dog Saloon phenomenon in Chapters Four and Five. Of the fifty people who were active participants in the psychedelic rock scene at the Red Dog Saloon, they were predominantly Californians from white, middle-class backgrounds. But like many of the more acclaimed performers of the nineteenth-century Comstock, these twentieth-century performers would somersault into national and international stardom via the Virginia City stage. In many ways, the music, attitudes, personal styles, and esthetics of these psychedelic rock stars paid direct homage to area myth and folklore. Much of this myth and folklore was originally cultivated on the western stage through sensational performers and groundbreaking performances. So, it can be persuasively argued that the rich, diverse entertainment legacy of the nineteenth century directly fed into the region's artistic rebirth in the 1960s.

One of the most important of these is the reconstruction of the ancient pathway between San Francisco and Virginia City during the twentieth-century renovation and revitalization of the former Comstock House, which was transformed into the opulent, sophisticated, and eccentric Red Dog Saloon. In particular, area folklore will be compared to the twentieth-century expectations of Red Doggers. These expectations were largely configured by place image fictions, Romantic notions of a frontier-forged Ameri-

can destiny, and intense longings to return to the land and/or simpler times. While all based in narrative fictions, these combined influences would have a profound impact on the community that coalesced around the Red Dog and the performative nature of their sojourn in Virginia City, Nevada. As a result, the myth of the nineteenth century became the reality of the twentieth century during two summer-long periods in 1965 and 1966. The question arises: How and why did they perform in Virginia City while living and entertaining there?

Recent work in tourist studies, in particular, is shedding new light on how tourists *tourist* or “perform place” based on “circuits of anticipation, performance, and remembrance” when visiting a place for recreational purposes (Bærenholdt, 2004, p. 9; Light, 2009, pp. 241-242). Studies have shown that individuals act in ways distinctly out of the norm in liminal and liminoid spaces. So, a question, arises: What is the difference between the liminal and liminoid? According to Victor Turner, liminality is strictly bound to notions of the ritual and, more often than not, coming of age or initiation rituals. As a result, liminal experiences serve social functions within a given society. But that is not the only characteristic that liminal phenomena share. Turner observed that “liminal phenomena tend to dominate in tribal and early agrarian societies; they are collective, concerned with calendrical, biological, and social structural cycles; they reflect the experience of a community over time” (V. Turner, 1977, pp. 50-51).

On the other hand, liminoid experiences more often than not are experiences of the leisure sphere, and so this activity is very intricately connected to certain places deemed ‘safe’ for leisure. “[They] tend to develop apart from central political and economic processes, along the margins, in the interstices of central and servicing institutions

— they are plural, fragmentary... and often experimental in character” (V. Turner, 1977, pp. 50-51). Turner also made an important distinction between work and play or work and leisure, which provides further delimitation of the liminoid — strictly speaking, it falls outside of the realm of work.

In this sense, the liminoid is very much a facet of the industrialized world where ritual, in most instances, has been all but lost. “Thus, work and leisure are thought to be mutually exclusive, separate realms, dominated by different goals, values, and attitudes.... One does not integrate the activities, attitudes and energies appropriate to one arena into those of the other” (Rowe, p. 141). As is clearly evident in the above quotations, Turner separated the liminal from the liminoid by examining the social structures within which they were observed. Context was key.

Touristing represents an activity that is the antithesis of work, and touring locations tend to be places that inspire play and rejuvenation rather than meditation upon industry and/or responsibility (words, oftentimes, associated with work). When people are touring, they actually *want* to be involved in something distinctly removed from the routine, and, moreover, their actions are often the direct result of the expectations that they invest (and, in turn, attempt to embody) in specific places. These expectations are situated and embodied through a complex network of public imagery, place myth, mediatization,<sup>25</sup> and the sense of liberation that many tourists tend to feel and express while in a liminoid space — in this case, an enclavic tourist space far removed from the realities and responsibilities of daily life at “home” (Lett, 1983; Light, 2009).

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<sup>25</sup> An important aspect of modernization, mediatization refers to a theory found in communication studies or media studies that the media molds and influences the processes and discourse of political communication as well as the larger community or society within which that communication takes place (Strömbäck, 2008).

Academics have long realized that societies often permit delimited periods of time (e.g. the Dionysia or Carnival) for the expression of subverted social orders and a variety of taboos typically not considered acceptable in mainstream culture. The same is no less true in enclavic tourist spots such as Virginia City where social roles were historically subverted and individuals, since 1859, acted in ways not generally consistent with what might be construed as “decent” behavior in major cities such as San Francisco, California. In this sense, then, Virginia City has long been and continues to be a playground of sorts for unorthodox behaviors, and this is enthusiastically represented in some of the place myths associated with the location.

Over time, as a result of mass communication, these “abnormal” behaviors became more and more prescribed to very specific expectations associated with the “Wild West” and the American frontier experience. Crucial to this transformation were the dime novels, Wild West shows, western music, and, later, western films upon which the Baby Boomers of the 1950s cut their teeth. It is little wonder that when adult members of this generation sought to delve deep into the child-like abandon of liminoid touring, they looked to the most powerful images of their youth from which to draw.

Through a shared liminoid activity, one of the most distinctive and important features of the Red Dog community in the twentieth century would emerge — the universally strong bonds of *communitas*<sup>26</sup> that tied them and continue to do so. *Communitas* refers to a very powerful type of human bonding that occurs as a result of liminal AND liminoid

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<sup>26</sup> Originally defined by Victor Turner, *communitas* refers to an intense sense of community inspired by the shared circumstance of liminality. Turner was particularly fascinated by the relationship of structure to anti-structure, and he argued that both liminality and *communitas* belonged to the realm of anti-structure. In essence, then, *communitas* refers to the particularly tight bonds that many miners formed while toiling together in the same excruciating working conditions.

experiences. Whether through the disorientation of a ritual that deconstructs and then re-assembles one's identity in a new configuration or the anonymity and experimentation associated with liminoid spaces wherein one can be anybody or act in any way that he/she wishes, those who experience these states *together* become very deeply connected. They relate to one another in ways far more profound than those typically experienced in society where questions of status, ethnicity, employment, and class tend to get in the way.

Both liminal and liminoid experiences strip away these confounding factors thereby permitting members of the group to participate in a shared identity based on the most fundamental characteristics of their common humanity. The Red Doggers experimented in the strictly liminal<sup>27</sup> as well as the more conventionally practiced liminoid, and the results would be fascinating.

Although to many, the Bay Area represents the so-called cradle of psychedelic rock in the 1960s, many of its early features (light shows, LSD use during performances, psychedelic music, psychedelic poster art, audience participation in the form of dancing, long hair and costuming, and some of its first bands and concert promoters) actually developed and premiered — not in San Francisco or Berkeley — but rather at the Red Dog Saloon, located amidst the remnants of a dwindling mid-nineteenth century ghost town in rural northern Nevada, and this dissertation provides many compelling historical, sociocultural, and economic reasons for why this was the case. In her interview with me, Mary Works-Covington emphasized the ultimate answer to the psychedelic Red Dog ex-

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<sup>27</sup> They experienced liminality, in its strictly anthropological sense, through the peyote-eating ritual discussed in Chapter Four. Through this ritual conducted under the guidance of noted elders of the Native American church in 1963, members of the community first came together as one body of humanity with similar beliefs and expectations.

perience in Virginia City *is* the fact that it happened in *this* place at *this* time.<sup>28</sup> It was — to borrow a word from many of my interviewees — *serendipity*.

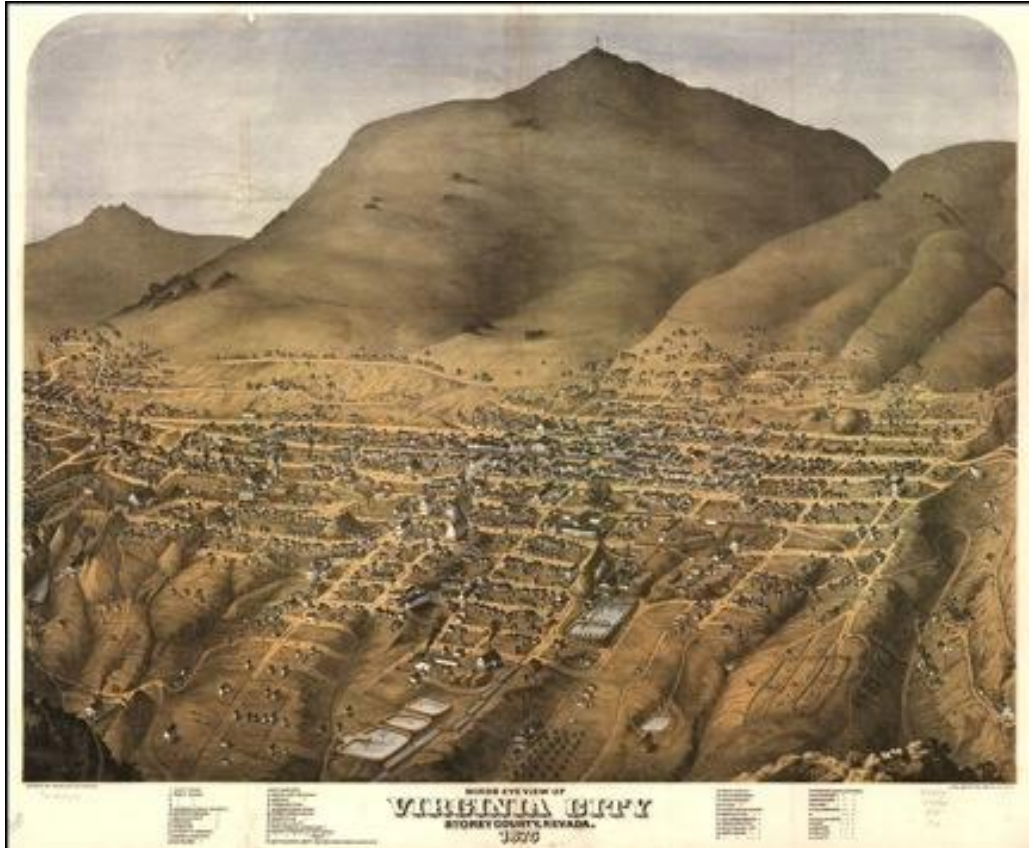


Figure 1.7 Alfred Koch's 1875 Bird's Eye View of Virginia City, Nevada. Image courtesy of: <http://www.worldmapsonline.com/historicalmaps/NV-Virginia-City-1875.htm>.

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<sup>28</sup> While each chapter in this dissertation is intricately bound together by geography, history, methodology, and theory, I attempted to infuse them all with a unique focus based on the order of the themes above. In the course of writing each chapter, certain underlying, recurring theoretical principles were underscored. Moreover, a vocabulary of terminology, some of it rather problematic, was established. Throughout this dissertation, I attempt to synthesize historical events and episodes with broader theoretical points. When necessary, I clearly identify and define the most ambiguous or essentially misinterpreted terms employed in this dissertation in footnote references.

## ***Chapter Two: Setting the Stage: A Brief (Hi)story of California's Mother Lode and Nevada's Comstock Lode***

Westward the course of empire takes its way. (Hunt, 2007)

By the quality of his social organism and civilization [the American] is carnivorous — he swallows up and will continue to swallow up whatever comes in contact with him, man or empire. (Brechin, 2001, p. 6; V. Turner, 1969)

### *The “Northern Mystery”*

The edge of the Great Desert, the traditional homeland of the Numa (or, Northern Piute),<sup>29</sup> was neither a destination for the first white explorers, trappers, and traders of the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s nor the first settlers who began snaking their way overland to California right around the close of those decades. Rather, it was a means to an end. A place to be passed through as quickly and as painlessly as possible in order to reach fabled California, this was a land of beautiful vistas, great bounty, and eventually, gold fever. After 1849, California would rise to such a promontory of prominence in American Folklore that it eventually came to occupy a mythic position summed up in the “California Dream.” Nevada, on the other hand, would languish in the American vision as a destitute realm, a liminal landscape of danger and desperation, even though it possessed a rich silver strike, the Comstock Lode, which arguably saved the Union during the Civil War

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<sup>29</sup> The spellings Piute and Paiute are often used interchangeably to refer to three closely related indigenous groups of the Great Basin although the origin of the term remains unclear. Some scholars argue that the term means “Water Ute” or “True Ute,” but these are not terms used by said people groups to refer to themselves. Perhaps the term derives from Spanish explorers who referred to the Southern Piute, in particular, as “Payuchi.” (They never made contact with the Northern Piute.) The Northern Piute, whose ancestral lands comprise portions of modern day California, Idaho, Nevada, and Oregon, used (and still use) the name Numa or Numu to describe their members who speak Numic, a language of the Uto-Aztecan family. They, along with their language, were sometimes referred to as Paviotso. The Southern Piute found in parts of Arizona, southeastern California and Nevada, and Utah call themselves the Nuwuvi (lit. “the people.”) Finally, the Owens Valley Piute who inhabited parts of modern day California and Nevada referred to their tribe as the Nün’wa Paya Ca’a’ Otuu, which literally means “Coyotes children living in the water ditch” (Pritzker, p. 227).

and financed the construction of San Francisco. By the 1950s, Nevada became a place to film biblical epics, test atomic bombs, and bury the nation's waste. By 2017 or so, some members of Congress hope that it will fulfill a new role as the final destination for the nation's nuclear waste, in Southern Nevada at Yucca Mountain.

Nevada's reputation stretches back to the early to mid-nineteenth century when its geography represented an intimidating, arid swathe of territory, a seeming wasteland where many an explorer and emigrant left their earthly remains. Part of the problem for early explorers and settlers was that Nevada could not be crossed without pain, hardship, toil, and, in many cases, even death. As a result, Nevada came to be seen as a massive geographical obstacle to be conquered and/or circumvented where at all possible. "Nevada has been a huge wedge separating California and the East, an obstruction to challenge the pathfinder, the hardy 'mountainman,' the emigrant, the teamster, the stage driver, the railroad builder, and the autoist" (Lillard, 1969, p. 121). The land of U.S. Highway 50, "the loneliest road in America"; hundreds of boom/bust ghost towns bearing silent witness to the exploits of mining; and postmodern geographies such as the hedonistic Las Vegas strip and the quieter, although no less financially hazardous, Reno casino corridor, remains a massive space to be navigated as quickly as possible on the way to other places. It seldom is a destination unto itself, and when it is, the results are often monetarily ruinous. Godforsaken, it is a place of pleasurable pursuits otherwise taboo in mainstream culture. It is a place of passersby, wayfarers, and wanderers. In this sense, much of Nevada remains an impenetrable mystery, and this is by choice. A similar choice was made by the conquistadors several hundred years prior.

From the earliest colonial times, it is held — although without any great or convincing explanation — that the Spanish–Mexican expeditions made a concerted effort *not* to explore Nevada, and so fabulous legends arose around this unknown territory, this “Northern Mystery.” On maps, it was portrayed, and often whimsically, as a vast blank or else a massive basin drained by three major rivers: the Rio Buenaventura, the Rio Timpanogos, and the Rio Los Mongos.<sup>30</sup> Unconfirmed stories emerged of merciless desert tracts, massive snow-clad mountains, disappearing rivers, and legendary red-headed, cannibalistic giants referred to as the Si-te-cah (lit. “Tule Eaters”) by the Numa (Ean Barnett, 2011). Even before John C. Frémont’s expedition, the first white man to venture within its arid borders was the legendary explorer Jedediah Smith. On July 17, 1827, just four years prior to his death on the Sante Fe Trail at the hands of Comanche warriors, he set quill to paper, penning one of the first accounts of the “Northern Mystery” and thereby solidifying a vision of Nevada oft repeated throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, the “bleakness of Nevada” actually marks a micro-theme of western literature of the nineteenth century.

During his peculiar journey, Jedediah Smith initially followed the Virgin, Colorado, and Mojave rivers before picking up the Southwest Trail through Las Vegas where his party of seventeen men was attacked by natives and later experienced a period of intense desert thirst. They purportedly assuaged this desperate longing for moisture by chewing on a type of cactus referred to as “Cabbage Pear” while traversing the desert ter-

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<sup>30</sup> According to Lillard, the Rio Buenaventura originated in the Rocky Mountains, passed through Lake Salado and ended in the San Francisco Bay. The Rio Timpanago and the Rio Los Mongos were both believed to start in Utah and terminate in the Pacific Ocean (Lillard, 1969, p. 122).

rain.<sup>31</sup> His route eastward took him across central Nevada and through the Salt Lake Desert in Utah. Of the horrific journey, he wrote, “travelling over a country completely barren and destitute of game. We frequently travelled [*sic*] without water sometimes for two days over sandy deserts, where there was no sign of vegetation and when we found water in some of the rocky hills, we most generally found some Indians who appeared the most miserable of the human race having nothing to subsist on (nor any clothing) except grass seed, grasshoppers, etc.” (Lillard, 1969, pp. 122-123).

It is particularly worthwhile to compare early accounts such as Smith’s with those of natives such as Thocmetony. In her account, *Life Among the Piute*,<sup>32</sup> Thocmetony describes her tribe rejoicing over the generosities of nature which provided for large game such as deer and antelope, wild turkeys in the Sierra, waterfowl in area marshes, pine nut harvests, fish from local waterways, range rabbits, and a variety of other plants and game that could be hunted and gathered. Natives were also adept at finding, properly identifying, and utilizing edible roots, which earned them the derisive name “Diggers” among early explorers and emigrants; many of these same individuals, in the last throes of dehydration or starvation, would have done well to have the natives’ extensive foraging knowledge. Over multiple generations, the Numa adapted to the hardships of life in the

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<sup>31</sup> The inhospitality of the desert remains a major theme of literature and movies about Nevada. In fact, instances of “native attacks” (in the guise of various Las Vegas inhabitants from gangsters to strippers) and periods of desert thirst (and/or disorientation and hallucination from excess use of illicit drugs) are still a part of the American myth surrounding Nevada such as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998) and *The Hangover* (2009).

<sup>32</sup> *Life among the Piute*, Thocmetony’s autobiography, was published in 1883 under her anglicized/married name, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins. Sarah Winnemucca is the name that most people associate with her and her work today. Her book marks a major milestone in American literature as one of the first autobiographies written by a Native American woman. Besides this distinction, the book definitely has its merits. Anthropologist Omer Stewart argued that it, “was one of the first and has been one of the most enduring ethnohistorical books written by an American Indian” (O. C. Stewart, 1983, p. 268).

Great Basin and moved seasonally from higher elevations to lower elevations to avoid tough winters and early snows. A hardy people able to adjust to some of the most challenging conditions high desert terrain could offer, they were inevitably ill-equipped to confront the challenges raised by white colonization of the American West.

Even their beloved Nevada — a place sworn off by the Spanish — would not avoid the coming demographic and sociocultural upheaval. In one of the first written accounts to give an authentic voice to native peoples of the American West, Thocmetony describes her early childhood and her people's first dealings with Euro-Americans making the overland journey to California. Born in the early to mid-1840s, she was particularly well poised to witness the first great cultural clashes between the Numa and white explorers, trappers, emigrants, and eventually Comstockers, who would flood northern Nevada beginning in 1859 with the silver strike.

I was born somewhere near 1844, but am not sure of the precise time. I was a very small child when the first white people came into our country. They came like a lion, yes, like a roaring lion, and have continued so ever since, and I have never forgotten their first coming. My people were scattered at that time over nearly all the territory now known as Nevada. My grandfather was chief of the entire Piute nation, and was camped near Humboldt Lake, with a small portion of his tribe, when a party traveling eastward from California was seen coming. (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 5)

With her people, Thocmetony grew up along the edge of what in her youth was called the Great Desert. The daughter of Tuboitone and Wobitsawahkah,<sup>33</sup> a Shoshone warrior who

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<sup>33</sup> Wobitsawahkah (lit. "Bad Face") is oftentimes referred to as Winnemucca in nineteenth century accounts, which is an anglicized version of the title "Wuna Mucca" (Ontko, 1997). When Wobitsawahkah married Tuboitone, the daughter of Tru-ki-zo, he received the honorary title of "Wuna Mucca" (lit. "The Giver of Spiritual Gifts"), a title also used by Tru-ki-zo. As a result, they are often differentiated in literature of the nineteenth century as "Old Winnemucca" and "Young Winnemucca." As Gae Whitney Canfield points out in her book *Sarah Winnemucca of the Northern Paiutes*, although Thocmetony would claim that her grandfather and (later father) were the chiefs of the entire Piute nation, in reality, there was no such centralization of political authority among the loosely organized Piute nation spread across the Great Basin.

married into the Cui-ui Ticutta<sup>34</sup> (lit. “Cui-ui Eaters”) band of the Northern Piute (or Numa) nation, Thocmetony would eventually interact extensively with both whites and various native peoples as a translator for the Federal Government. Educated by whites, at the behest of her grandfather, Tru-ki-zo, Thocmetony would come to inhabit a liminal cultural space between natives and whites and prove to be one of the very few voices willing to speak for her people (Lape, 1998). But such interactions would come much later. First, she witnessed (and/or heard tell of) fairly peaceful interactions largely due to her grandfather, Tru-ki-zo, who was described by nearly all accounts as amiable, generous, peaceful, and wise.

Chief Tru-ki-zo (today more popularly known as Truckee, lit. “good” or “hello”) guided Captain John C. Frémont during his 1843 to 1845 survey and cartographic expeditions through what are now parts of modern day Nevada and California. In 1844, Frémont and his entourage reached the Cui-ui Ticutta’s most prized space, Cui-ui pah (lit. Cui-ui Lake), where they first interacted with Tru-ki-zo’s people. The exchange would be uncharacteristically amiable. “Fremont, upon noting a rock formation in the lake shaped like a pyramid, gave the lake its new name, Pyramid Lake, and shared a meal of the fish with the Cui-ui Ticutta” (Berry, 1997, p. 83).

According to Frémont’s own account, he set off to explore the “Northern Mystery” or *terra incognita* to ascertain what it “really contained.” His ragtag band of men

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Rather, Chief Tru-ki-zo and then Chief Winnemucca would be war chiefs with power over about 150 individuals (Canfield, 1983, p. 94).

<sup>34</sup> In my research, I have encountered a variety of different spellings for Piute names including the Cui-ui Ticutta as Kuyuidika. In this paper, I use the term Cui-ui Ticutta, which reinforces the Numa’s relationship to Pyramid Lake (Cui-ui pah) and the cui-ui (*Chamistes cujus*), one of their principal food sources, a large, omnivorous sucker fish found only in Pyramid Lake and the Truckee River (Berry, 1997, pp. 82-83).

included “twenty-five persons, and they of many nations — American, French, German, Canadian, Indian, and colored” (Frémont, 1945; Glotfelty, 2008, p. 46). Amazed by Pyramid Lake and the generous band of natives that fed his men, Frémont describes a veritable feast and the laying of groundwork for mutual cooperation, a necessity of surviving the Great Basin that some future travelers, like the Donner-Reed Party, would neglect to their own peril.

Such a salmon-trout feast as is seldom seen was going on in our camp; and every variety of manner in which fish could be prepared — boiled, fried, and roasted in the ashes — was put into requisition; and every few minutes an Indian would be seen running off to spear a fresh one. Whether these Indians had seen Whites before we could not be certain; but they were evidently in communication with others who had, as one of them had some brass buttons, and we noticed several other articles of civilized manufacture. (Frémont, 1945; Glotfelty, 2008, pp. 51-52)

During this period, Tru-ki-zo would famously serve during the Mexican-American War earning himself many friends among the first whites to reach the Great Basin; he referred to them as his “white brothers.” This service also earned him a signed letter of commendation from General John Frémont, which Tru-ki-zo referred to as his “rag-friend.” In her autobiography, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins later explained what the “rag-friend” signified for Tru-ki-zo, who remained ever optimistic of peace between the Numa and their “white brothers.” It “can talk to all our white brothers and our white sisters, and their children.... The paper can travel like the wind, and it can go and talk with their fathers and brothers and sisters, and come back to tell what they are doing, and whether they are well or sick” (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 19).<sup>35</sup> By insisting that his

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<sup>35</sup> Thocmetony would never forget her grandfather’s lesson about the “rag-friend.” Later, as Noreen Groover Lape argues in her article about cultural liminality’s impact on the writing of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, Thocmetony would create, through her own autobiography about her people, a new “rag-friend”

granddaughter, Thocmetony, be educated by whites,<sup>36</sup> and, more specifically, that she learn how to read and write English, Tru-ki-zo transformed Thocmetony into a fellow ambassador between whites and natives. But he did something far more important. He guaranteed that his little granddaughter would someday be the composer of new “rag-friends.” During her adult life, in fact, Thocmetony would extend the ambassadorial role established by her grandfather, Tru-ki-zo, traveling back and forth to various locations (including Washington D.C.) as an interpreter, lecturer, and spokeswoman for the Piutes, Bannocks, and the larger Native American community, in general. She would write many “rag friends,” too, including her autobiography, which “intercede[d] between Whites and Native Americans and portray[ed] her life liminally situated between Paiutes, Bannocks, and encroaching Anglo Americans on the frontiers” (Lape, 1998, pp. 259-260). Although he would pass away before seeing his granddaughter’s autobiography, her finest “rag-friend,” Tru-ki-zo remained a lifelong ambassador reaching out time and again to whites travelling through the area. Silver had not yet been discovered, and so explorers and emigrants came and went. Their impact on the Numa and their carefully balanced way of life was not yet fully felt.

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tasked with bringing sympathy and attention to the plight of Native Americans, and, more specifically, her own Numa people (Lape, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> This included his insistence that Thocmetony attend an all-white school after the family relocated to Stockton, California to work on a cattle farm when Thocmetony was six years old. Later, Tru-ki-zo arranged for Thocmetony — then going by Sarah (aged 13 years) — to live in the household of General William Ormsby with her sister, Elma, where they provided companionship for Mr. and Mrs. Ormsby’s daughter, Lizzie. Sarah and Elma performed basic household chores in exchange for education. Over time, Sarah expressed a specifically well-developed ability to interact in both the Piute and white spheres, and she became fully literate, a rarity for most Piutes at this time. Although not literate, her family, however, all spoke English. William Ormsby was a hotel owner and city leader in Carson City, Nevada, and he would later become a casualty of the first Pyramid Lake Indian War, which must have been particularly disorienting for both Sarah and Elma (O. C. Stewart, 1983).

He was a popular figure by the 1840s, and a number of geographical features of the Sierra and northern Nevada became Tru-ki-zo's namesakes. The stunningly beautiful Sierra Nevada lake, which is now forever associated with the desperation of emigrants during an ill-fated Sierra crossing too late in the season,<sup>37</sup> was once named Truckee in Tru-ki-zo's honor. The lovely ski and railroad hub of Truckee, California, still honors his reputation today, as do the Truckee River and Truckee Meadows of northern Nevada. Tru-ki-zo's mission was one of peace, and he urged his people, throughout his lifetime, to embrace their "white brothers." Soon after his death in early 1860 from an infection associated with a tarantula bite, vicious conflicts erupted between his people and the whites who, upon the discovery of silver in Washoe in 1859, began pouring into the area in unceasing streams, then rivers, then tidal waves. "In a few short years, the population of resident Euro-Americans in northwestern Nevada skyrocketed from about 200 to well over 6,000" (Berry, 1997, p. 83; Knack, 1984). Resources were scarce in the arid Great Basin, and almost overnight, the Numa found themselves competing for water, land, big game, and timber. Many of the resources that the Numa had grown to rely upon over millennia were gobbled up hastily (in a matter of less than two decades) by temporary residents bent on exploiting, polluting, and destroying just about every tree, drop of water, and square inch of dirt in the region in the name of gold and silver mining.

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<sup>37</sup> Nineteenth-century travelers on the overland route had approximately 123 days to trek across 2,200 miles (or more) of unsettled country. Most importantly, they had to cross the Sierra Nevada Mountains before harsh blizzard-like winter conditions set in around late October or early November, in the higher elevations. Even today, Interstate 80 must sometimes be closed to through traffic due to the intensity of these Sierra snow storms (Longfellow, 2014).

## *The Numa of the Great Basin*

The father passed on to the Great Milk Way. Then there seemed no consolation for the wife and mother. Even at her chores of seed gathering she wailed and mourned. No one checked her whereabouts when she did not return to her canoe at night. Notice was made only when a large body of salt water appeared. Near this pah nun a du was the form of the mother. She still had her burden basket on her back. She had been turned to a stone. The lake was the tears she had shed. The Stone Mother is one of the [Cui-ui] Lake's tufa formations. It can be seen close to the Who noh (Pyramid) today. The area around the Stone Mother is a sacred place to the [Numa] for their meditation and prayer. (Glotfelty, 2008, pp. 1-12; Harnar, 1978, pp. 16-18)

The Numa people, particularly the Cui-ui Ticutta band of Tru-ki-zo, Thocmetony, and Wobitsawahkah, lived in northern Nevada and covered a large swathe of territory ranging from the Humboldt River Valley to Pyramid Lake to the Truckee Meadows and much further. As the name suggests, the Cui-ui Ticutta looked to the cui-ui fish of Cui-ui pah (Pyramid Lake) and its waters as a primary source for food, water, and vegetation. Cui-ui pah represented an oasis in an otherwise starkly arid landscape, and the Cui-ui Ticutta were so intimately linked to the place that it held sacred significance in terms of the very origin of their ancestors and the creation of the world:

The legend of Stone Mother tells of the origin of the Tribe. It tells of the settlement of the Tribe, Cui-ui Ticutta (Cui-ui eaters), the Lake's origin, Cui-ui pah (Cui-ui Lake) and the origin of its fish, the Cui-ui. It tells us that all of this creation was simultaneous. The son of Stone Mother became its lake. The Lake's shore became the Tribe's home and the Lake's depths became the home of the Tribe's name sake, the Cui-ui. The legend sets the Tribe's identity and forever fixes the components that make up the Tribe's way of life. (Berry, 1997, p. 83; Ely, 1991, p. 2)



Figure 2.1 Photograph of Pyramid Lake, Nevada, December 28, 2013 by Seabam-  
irum (<https://www.flickr.com/people/59323989@N00>.)

Besides the cui-ui (*Chamistes cujus*), a fish measuring about nine to twelve pounds and about twenty-seven inches long, the Cui-ui Ticutta also harvested Lahontan Cutthroat trout (*Salmo Henshawi*) a massive fish lurking in the deepest depths of the lake. Lahontan Cutthroat trout weighing as much as a two to three-year-old toddler (between thirty and thirty-five pounds or more) have been recovered from the lake. During December and then again in April or May, the Lahontan Cutthroat trout gathered at the mouth of the Truckee River to begin upstream spawning runs to the very headwaters of the river, and the Cui-ui Ticutta used this opportunity to capture vast quantities of fish using harpoons, nets, spears, and other implements. The cui-ui fish participated in similar spawning runs in April or May and were gathered as well. Once harvested, the fish were dried, stored, and used to greatly supplement their food supply. The process continued uninterrupted for centuries, and there was no way for the Cui-ui Ticutta, who generously fed Frémont and his men fish along the banks of Cui-ui pah, to anticipate how much their world would change in less than a decade.

Cyclical processes such as the gathering of fish or the harvesting of piñon pine nuts were accompanied by music and/or dancing, depending upon the occasion. The first music of the Great Basin, it was one of power and purpose: “Music [was] a medium of communication and contact with the supernatural, and since all the varied activities of life [found] their respective places in the Indian’s cosmos, there [were] songs for every occasion. The hard and fast distinction between sacred and secular which we are accustomed to make [lost] its definiteness in the Indian’s world” (Rhodes, 1954, p. 6). Thus, in the culture of the Northern Piute, music served a highly functional role and accompanied a variety of daily activities as well as more specialized rituals and celebrations. Music

shaped their interactions with the natural world and even helped the Numa's "doctors and doctresses"<sup>38</sup> gain access to some of the hidden knowledge of the Spirit-Land. The relationship of music to the natural world, which Carney defined as one of the conceptual subdivisions of a geography of music, was essential to the Northern Piute way of life and marks an essential element of their culture and cosmology (Carney, 1994).

During round dances, which were held at least three times during the year — just prior to the spring fish gathering season, fall pine nut harvest, and early winter rabbit drives — music and dance affirmed the tribe's social unity and focused each individual's attention toward collective subsistence tasks necessary for the band's ultimate success and survival. One of the Numa's most common dance forms was the round dance during which members of the tribe formed a circle moving clockwise to music provided by one or more singers in the center of the circle. The singer(s) usually performed a capella although the Numa adopted the practice of accompanying singers to a rhythmic drumbeat as they came into greater contact with other tribes and whites.<sup>39</sup>

Examples of musicking as a complement to hunting and gathering are evidenced in the work of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins: "My father told them to dance at night and that the men should hunt rabbits and fish, and some were to have games of football, or any kind of sport or playthings they wished, and the women could do the same" (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 13). In another passage, Thocmetony describes the practice of "antelope charming," an event that took five days to complete and which involved,

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<sup>38</sup> In her autobiography, this is the term that Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins uses to describe those who practice shamanic and healing rituals in her tribe. She distinguishes them from white people's "medicine men" that heal the sick using medicine.

<sup>39</sup> The round dance of the Northern Piute comprised the basis for Wovoka's controversial "Ghost Dance."

at one point, her father's performance on the only instrument that she attributed to her people:

After they had smoked the pipe, my father took a kind of drum, which is used in this charming, and made music with it. This is the only kind of musical instrument which my people have, and it is only used for this antelope charming. It is made of a hide of some large animal stuffed with grass, so as to make it sound hollow, and then wound around tightly from one end to the other with a cord as large as my finger. One end of this instrument is large, and it tapers down to the other end, which is small, so that it makes a different sound on the different parts. My father took a stick and rubbed this stick from one end of the instrument to the other, making a penetrating, vibrating sound, that could be heard afar off, and he sang, and all his people sang with him. (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994)

Besides blessing seasonal food gathering, music welcomed those who had been away back into the tribe, endowed the participants of hand games (an early form of gambling practiced among tribes of the west) with good fortune, permitted "doctors or doctresses" to communicate and consult with the spirit world in matters of healing and prophecy, assisted tribal youth in furtive steps toward courting, and helped to lull restless babies to sleep. Thocmetony recalled being greeted by a group of singing men on her family's way to a new encampment near the Carson Sink: "Just about noon, while we were on the way, a great many of our men came to meet us, all on their horses. Oh, what a beautiful song they sang for us." Upon arrival, she described the activity of the camp: "One could hear laughter everywhere, and songs were sung by happy women and children" (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 13).

During certain shamanic rituals, the "doctor" gathered elder males of the tribe together in the counsel shelter where the pipe was passed. Eventually, with the help of singing by the elders of the tribe, the doctor would slip into a trance-like state culminating in communications with the spirit realm: "After the pipe has passed round five times to the

right, it stops and then he tells them to sing five songs. He is the leader in the song-singing. He sings heavenly songs, and he says he is singing with the angels. It is hard to describe these songs. They are all different, and he says the angels sing them to him” (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 16). The ultimate goal of this ritual singing and smoking was the creation of a spiritual threshold or doorway through which the doctor could pass thereby entering into a transcendent state, a state where he could potentially gain esoteric knowledge from the realm beyond the material.

In sharp contrast to mystical states accessed through musicking stands another account of Thocmetony’s, that of a Flower Festival. The Flower Festival served clearly social purposes, helping youth of the opposite sex to become acquainted prior to traditional courtship rituals. During the festival, girls who were named after flowers gathered and decorated their dresses and hair with the flower of the same name. Those named after rocks, collected the rock for which they were named proudly displaying it. Then, “[the young girls] all go marching along, each girl in turn singing of herself; but she is not a girl any more, — she is a flower singing. She sings of herself, and her sweetheart, dancing along by her side, helps her sing the song she makes.” Recording the lyrics of what just such a song might say, Thocmetony provided the following example:

I, Sarah Winnemucca, am a shell-flower, such as I wear on my dress.  
 My name is Thocmetony. I am so beautiful!  
 Who will come and dance with me while I am so beautiful?  
 Oh, come and be happy with me!  
 I shall be beautiful while the earth lasts.  
 Somebody will always admire me and who will come and be happy with  
 me in the Spirit-land?  
 I shall be beautiful forever there.  
 Yes, I shall be more beautiful than my shell-flower, my Thocmetony!  
 Then, come, oh, come, and dance and be happy with me! (Winnemucca  
 Hopkins, 1994, p. 47).

While the girls sang and marched along wearing the flowers or carrying the rocks that represented each one's namesake, the young men of the tribe each chose a girl to dance beside while helping her sing her unique song.

Musical expression through song clearly dominated Piute music. In terms of vocal style, Numic music was characterized by moderately-blended monophony, and songs were organized into paired-phrase melodic structures repeated twice (e.g. AABB, ABAB, or AABBC.) As a result of this iterative tradition, melodic phrases usually repeated once although occasionally, multiple repetitions occurred. In either case, the performance style encouraged relaxed, nonpulsating vocalizations. The melodic range of Northern Piute songs rarely exceeded a perfect fifth or major sixth, and melodic lines typically featured between three and five notes. Because fixed-pitch instruments did not constitute an important part of the Numic musical heritage, pitch and intonation were not standardized. Rather, singers enjoyed a certain tonal fluidity determined by numerous factors including the musical, emotional, and textual contexts of a given performance. Unlike the structure of melodic variations in the Western music tradition, which generally rely on the underpinnings of major and minor scales, in the Numic tradition, different melodic material meant the utilization of different notes, and these notes represented melodic medians around which related notes were clustered rather than constant values existing in relation to one another through a predetermined mathematical precision. Clearly, the Numa's musical tradition was one of performers (as opposed to composers), and it circulated orally from generation to generation in carefully modeled forms.

The cyclical pattern of hunting, gathering, and musicking that permitted the Northern Piute to survive the rigors of life in the Great Basin would be increasingly impacted by expanding numbers of Euro-Americans passing through, especially after the California Gold Strike commenced. While Tru-ki-zo maintained that these white brothers were essentially family, as early as 1846, rumors seemed to indicate otherwise. Stories of pioneers who left violence and destruction in their wake filled the Numa with fear and uncertainty. Thocmetony would later write of this time:

The following spring, before my grandfather returned home, there was a great excitement among my people on account of fearful news coming from different tribes, that the people whom they called their white brothers were killing everybody that came in their way, and all the Indian tribes had gone into the mountains to save their lives. So my father told all his people to go into the mountains and hunt and lay up food for the coming winter. Then we all went into the mountains. There was a fearful story they told us children. Our mothers told us that the whites were killing everybody and eating them. (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, pp. 10-11)

When Tru-ki-zo's Numa first encountered white emigrants headed to a frightful destiny high in the Sierra — the Donner Party<sup>40</sup> after whom Truckee Lake would be renamed —

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<sup>40</sup> The Donner Party is often referred to as the Donner–Reed Party because George Donner, Jacob Donner, and James F. Reed comprised the core leaders of the group until Reed's exile near the Humboldt Sink. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term the Donner–Reed Party because it is a more accurate reflection of leadership roles in the wagon train. The group also consisted of a number of families including the Breens, the Eddys, and the Murphys. All-in-all, nearly ninety emigrants disembarked from Missouri, but only forty-one survived the arduous journey, which culminated in utter starvation snowbound in the High Sierra during the winter of 1846 to 1847 (K. J. Dixon, Shannon A. Novak, Gwenn Robbins, Julie M. Schablitsky, G. Richard Scott, Guy L. Tasa, July 2010, p. 630; Hardesty, 1997, pp. 15-18; K. Johnson, 1996, pp. 294-298; McGlashan, 1918, pp. 140-143; G. R. Stewart, 1988, pp. 197-206). Three quarters of those survivors were women and children attesting to the unique epidemiology of survival scenarios (K. J. Dixon, Shannon A. Novak, Gwenn Robbins, Julie M. Schablitsky, G. Richard Scott, Guy L. Tasa, July 2010; Gennep, 1960). The tale of the Donner–Reed Party became a cautionary one for future emigrants and brought well-deserved notoriety to Lansford W. Hastings whose 1845 guide *The Emigrant's Guide to Oregon and California* led the Donner–Reed party on a “short-cut” across Utah's Wasatch Mountains and the Great Salt Lake Desert that promised to cut between three to four hundred miles (about two weeks) off their overland trip. In reality, the “short cut” added more than one hundred additional miles, precious time needed to cross the Sierra before winter set in (Baker, 2010, 20:40-29:00; Hastings, 1845).

accounts on both sides point to tensions, outright hostilities, and clear cultural misunderstandings.

According to Thocmetony's account, her father, Chief Wobitsawahkah, had a dream three nights in a row about what the coming of whites to Nevada would do to his people, and he attempted to prepare the Piute for the onslaught.

I looked North and South and East and West, and saw nothing but dust, and I heard a great weeping. I saw women crying, and I also saw my men shot down by the white people. They were killing my people with something that made a great noise like thunder and lightning, and I saw the blood streaming from the mouths of my men that lay all around me. I saw it as if it was real. Oh, my dear children! You may all think it is only a dream,—nevertheless, I feel that it will come to pass. And to avoid bloodshed, we must all go to the mountains during the summer, or till my father comes back from California. He then will tell us what to do. Let us keep away from the emigrant roads and stay in the mountains all summer. There are to be a great many pine-nuts this summer, and we can lay up great supplies for the coming winter, and if the emigrants don't come too early, we can take a run down and fish for a month, and lay up dried fish. I know we can dry a great many in a month, and young men can go into the valleys on hunting excursions, and kill as many rabbits as they can. In that way we can live in the mountains all summer and all winter too. (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, pp. 14-15)

They were the first and last among a small handful of truly permanent residents of Nevada (including Mormons) — at least for a span of fifty years or so to come. They understood the intricacies of survival in the Great Basin in a way that few other people would, and they celebrated its small bounties, large skies, and stark beauty. Those who were coming would not give Nevada nearly so long a look. In fact, it would take almost a century and several generations more for people to appreciate the rugged splendor of a landscape marked by the infinite interplay between sky and earth, and even many of these individuals would be but passers-by. “Nevada history has been made, to an extraordinary extent, by groups of temporary residents eager to depart” (Lillard, 1969, p. 121).

### *Athwart the Great Desert*

The terrible part of the journey began with the entrance into the great deserts, like that of the Humboldt Sink. There the conditions were almost beyond belief. Thousands were left behind, fighting starvation, disease, and the loss of cattle.... There was no fodder for the cattle, and very little water. The loads had to be lightened almost every mile by the discarding of valuable goods.... The road was bordered with an almost unbroken barrier of abandoned wagons, old mining implements, clothes, provisions, and the like.... And when this desert had sapped their strength, they came at last to the Sink itself, with its long white fields of alkali with drifts of ashes across them, so soft that the cattle sank half-way to their bellies. The dust was fine and light and rose chokingly; the sun was strong and fierce.... And when at last they reached the Humboldt River itself, they found it almost impossible to ford.... In the distance the high and forbidding ramparts of the Sierra Nevadas reared themselves. (White, 1920, pp. 73-75)

From the frontier dweller's point of view, there was nothing beautiful or friendly about Nevada's high desert terrain. Descriptions of the hardships of travel across Nevada soon became an established norm in frontier literature. The theme of desolate, barren Nevada continued to grow. Certainly, these accounts were based in reality with the most sobering being that of the Donner-Reed Party (although their miseries were certainly scattered across the deserts of Utah and the Sierra Nevada of California, too). But there were also numerous instances of exaggeration. An unlikely predecessor of J. Ross Browne and Mark Twain, Joe Meek set out with a trapping party in 1832 under the supervision of Milton Sublette and Nathan Wyett. In northeastern Nevada, their foodstuffs ran low, and they were reduced to incredible feats — or at least abstemious — of survival. Although Meek mentions that beaver were plentiful, they did not attempt to consume them as the meat was deemed inedible. (Apparently, the beaver ate some type of poisonous carrot found in the area, but earlier trappers considered the meat fatty and unpalatable, even when not tainted.) Meek would later pen an altogether unreliable account that was,

nonetheless, a foreshadowing of the Great Basin's future rough handling in the written word.

I have held my hands in an ant-hill until they were covered with ants, and then greedily licked them off. I have taken the soles of my moccasins, crisped them in the fire, and eaten them. In our extremity, the large black crickets... were considered game. We used to take a kettle of hot water, catch the crickets and throw them in, and when they stopped kicking, eat them. That was not what we called *cant tickup ko hanch*, (good meat, my friend), but it kept us alive. (Lillard, 1969, p. 124)

For settlers, the overland routes to California and Oregon came with serious hazards. In fact, it is estimated that over the course of westward movement in the nineteenth-century United States, about 20,000 emigrants perished. That works out to about ten graves per mile of the 2,300 to 2,500 mile trek.<sup>41</sup> Nevada (formerly a portion of Mexico and then a part of the Utah Territory, until Nevada statehood) marked perhaps the most unwelcoming leg of the overland journey vis-à-vis the California Trail. Its infinite desert expanses were terrifying: to be conquered earnestly, wholeheartedly, and quickly. The Forty Mile Desert, in particular, claimed more than a few overburdened wagons, sick oxen, and weakened pioneers. One emigrant to make the crossing was Sarah Royce, along with her husband, Josiah, and their two-year old daughter. They departed from Council Bluffs, Iowa, on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1849, and faced many hardships along the way but none so challenging as the trek across the Forty Mile Desert.

The name the "Forty Mile Desert" is itself an artifact of the California Gold Rush and denotes the area more properly referred to as the Lahontan Valley. Emigrants such as the Royces had a painful decision ahead of them as they followed the California Trail

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<sup>41</sup> Figures provided in the History Channel documentary *America the Story of Us: Westward* (Baker, 2010, 28:00-29:00).

along the Humboldt River. Just as the legends of old, the Humboldt River<sup>42</sup> *did* literally disappear into the parched sands of the “Northern Mystery” in what is today called the Humboldt Sink. At the Humboldt Sink, the California Trail inevitably forked leaving emigrants with two equally daunting choices — a forty mile desert trail which eventually met up with the Truckee River or a forty mile desert trail which eventually led to the Carson River. The Truckee route snaked along a series of small valleys running parallel to the Lahontan Valley but separated from it by the Hot Springs Mountains. Passing through what is modern-day Lovelock, Nevada, it ended around the Wadsworth area.<sup>43</sup> The other route, taken by the Royces in 1849, led south from Lovelock to Ragtown, located just west of modern-day Fallon, a place featuring the last hints of potable water on the Carson River. When they finally reached the Carson River Valley, Sarah Royce simply wrote, “We had conquered the desert” (Glotfelty, 2008, p. 83; Royce, 1932).

The great oceans of dry valleys and mile-high mountains faced by westward bound pioneers were to be endured at worst, dodged as able, and conquered at best, and this perception of adversity came to color how the nation looked at the portion of the Utah Territory that would eventually become Nevada. There is ample reason for this as graphically recalled by unlucky settlers attempting to make a bleak overland crossing to California. Clearly, the Forty Mile Desert loomed in the minds of settlers as the most horrific stage of the California Trail. Smart settlers attempted to make the crossing at night to prevent heat exhaustion. Many were reduced to abandoning treasured belongings and possessions to lighten the weight of their wagons as the interminable journey progressed.

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<sup>42</sup> In accounts from the period, the name “Mary River” is actually used to denote the Humboldt River.

<sup>43</sup> Today, one can get a taste of the desolation and isolation confronted by settlers traversing this path by driving along Interstate 80 between Lovelock and Wadsworth where there is nary a drop of shade nor a hint of water.

Some settlers never left the Forty Mile Desert at all as attested by an 1850 survey that counted nearly one thousand<sup>44</sup> graves along that portion of the trail. Besides lone graves to those who perished in the desert, the 1850 survey noted the scattered belongings of settlers desperate to escape the landscape and the bleached bones of thousands of pack animals that died from exhaustion, thirst, miring in sand, or a combination of all three.

Nevada was poised to be the wasteland of the United States — a place of pain, death, and impossible challenges — the American pioneer's graveyard. A calamity during the winter of 1846–1847, just two years before the Royces crossed the Forty Mile Desert, cemented this image in the identity of the Great Basin, and the mountains of the Sierra Nevada would be forever enmeshed with one of the worst tragedies in the American Pioneer Experience.

### *Cultural Diffusion and Musicking Among the Pioneers*

Washington is not a place to live in. The rents are high, the food is bad, the dust is disgusting and the morals are deplorable. Go West, young man, go West and grow up with the country. (Kasson, 2000)<sup>45</sup>

From the earliest colonial times, European settlers to the New World carried with them a pronounced love of entertainment. Whether in the form of music, books, or art, the need

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<sup>44</sup> The 1850 Survey that I refer to above counted exactly 953 graves along that portion of the California Trail attesting to the hardships of that crossing. One must wonder, too, how many stragglers were simply left behind with no one to bury them like the sixty-year old Belgian man named Hardkoop. He began traveling with the Donner-Reed Party at Fort Bridger in 1846. According to survivor accounts, by October of 1846, Hardkoop's ankles were so swollen that he had trouble walking. After being thrown out of Ludwig and Phillipina Keseberg's wagon near what is present day Winnemucca, Nevada, on the eighth, he attempted to gain access to other wagons by knocking on their backboards. But no one would let him in. He was last seen sitting alone in the desert.

<sup>45</sup> The authorship of this quotation is problematic. Traditionally attributed to Horace Greeley by a variety of historic sources, most scholars now conclude that Greeley was actually a popularizer of this phrase rather than its creator. The editorial to which it is attributed does not include this actual phrase. Rather, it counsels Civil War veterans to take advantage of the Homestead Act by relocating to public lands.

for diversion was fundamental to the colonial experience. Despite the common misconception that music, instruments, theater, and similar performance arts came in a second or even third wave of migration after the first colonial settlements were established, towns birthed, and civilization guaranteed, historical accounts point to the contrary. Plays and concerts were common in even the earliest and most primitive of settlements and the same would hold true in the American West. This point highlights additional subdivisions of musical geographic study: (1) the origin and diffusion of musical phenomenon from Europe to the colonies and eventually the American West and (2) the effects of music on the American cultural landscape from colonial times to the conquest of the American West.

On one hand, the early colonists, like the Northern Piute, made music an integral part of daily life; it served both sacred and secular functions. On the other hand, unlike the Numa's highly integrated music and holistic cosmology, the distinction between sacred and secular was delineated for colonists, a clear byproduct of Europe's classical tradition. As a result of the sacred-secular distinction, the music transported to the New World was carefully selected to adhere to the strict religious principles of many colonists who were, in some cases, religious exiles. The result was a pared down body of musical works: "Balladry in the American colonies tended to be selective. None of the bawdy and few of the happy British ballads survived because the influence of religion extended itself over secular music. Early Americans preferred the sad, lonesome ballads dealing with tragedies in people's lives or disastrous events. As colonists began to set their new experiences to music, an extensive body of American ballads emerged" (Carney, 1994, p. 15).

Besides religious considerations, the origin and diffusion of musical phenomenon from Europe — and the British Isles, in particular — was distinctly influenced by practical concerns. For trans-Atlantic voyagers, the constraints of sea travel heavily limited the types of instruments they transported to the New World. “Cargo space was at a premium on the tiny colonial ships.... The colonists could and did enjoy only music that was quite simple and fully functional: social and worship music” (Hitchcock, 1988, p. 2). Even in more remote areas such as the early frontier (e.g. Pennsylvania), the voice and the fiddle were easily portable companions for lonely travelers, and this precedent would follow American expansion into the Appalachians, the Plains, the Rockies, and further still. It is only inevitable that music in its myriad forms eventually made its way westward with the first military bands, pioneers, miners, and railroaders. In fact, settlers westward relied on similar pastimes and divertissements to entertain and ease the journey. Among the preferred forms of entertainment, music played a crucial role in the creation and expansion of the United States as well as the myth of the West.

However, the variety of instruments transported westward was not nearly as limited for pioneers as it had been for their colonial counterparts. “Almost as common as the ubiquitous fiddle, but much more surprising considering the space limitations on the wagon trains, were keyboard instruments, either reed organs or upright pianos, that the women especially could not bear to leave behind”(Dyer, 1995, p. 145). Of course, the further West pioneers traveled, the more difficult it became to transport these beloved musical items in a timely fashion, and time was crucial in the case of settlers heading along the California Trail. The Sierra Nevadas had to be crossed before the first winter snows or emigrants stood the distinct possibility of being snowbound. For example, it is

said that the Forty Mile Desert is littered with the remnants of settlers' trunks, grandfather clocks, musical instruments, furniture, and other items that pioneers threw from their wagons in desperate attempts to lighten their wagon loads and speed the journey.

Casting off former lives and past belongings, many pioneers clung yet more fiercely to what they could carry anywhere, vocal music. Among the most popular forms of vocal music transported westward was the folk ballad derived from medieval French *chanson balladée*, which were originally conceived as songs for dancing. By the late the Middle Ages, cross-cultural diffusion from the cultural hearth of France to the British Isles through warfare, weddings, and other means, succeeded in establishing the ballad as an essential genre in the English, Scottish, and Irish musical traditions. The ballad continued to evolve into the standard template for the composition of narrative verse to be set to music. Eventually, those settling and working land in the American West relied on ballads to describe their experiences in song form. “Before long, borrowed melodies came to be considered original homespun pioneer products and — truth to tell — they had become original in the hands of their performers” (Ewen, 1977, p. 31). Embellishing the wistful tunes of medieval Anglo-Saxon and Celtic ballads, song lyrics and subjects were revised to suit the needs and interests of those singing them. Working songs quickly dominated the music of the American West and discussed everything from cow punching among cowboys to the travels and travails of railroad workers and miners. Sentimentality reigned supreme and translated songs about past wars into songs about the tragedies and sorrows of crossing the continent in covered wagons. Regionalization in Western music occurred in the southwestern United States where Mexican influences seeped into the Western ballad style as *corridos*. Much like Country music developed in the Appalachi-

ans for the people of that distinct region, Western music expressed the hardships, adventures, and dreams of Westerners. Some of those dreams took on a distinctly golden hue.

By the mid-nineteenth century, the nation's imagination and movement westward was dominated by avarice on an unparalleled level. In California, Nevada, Colorado, and the Dakota Territory, gold and silver rushes broke out after the fateful discovery at Sutter's Mill. The nation had hit the lottery, and the thought of quick wealth filled the popular imagination. Besides this, the opening of the Oregon Territory ensured that ever longer lines of settlers would dot the western horizon. A long and arduous journey, music played a crucial role in building up and maintaining the morale and determination of pioneers. Driven by thoughts of wealth, new land, increased freedom, and fresh starts, these early pioneers interwove song traditions with their hopes and dreams, creating a new Western music based upon their visions of a promised land burgeoning with abundance, honor, courage, and zeal for life. "Prospective settlers dreaming of rich, verdant lands and a new life, translated these dreams into songs" (Ewen, 1977, p. 31). The crowds, buildings, and trappings of civilization were often critiqued in these revitalized songs as being crowded and unhealthy; several songs later to be associated with cowboys were born during this time including "Betsy from Pike," "Clementine," and "Dreary Black Hills."

During the spring of 1846, it is estimated that about 2,700 emigrants accompanied by 500 wagons (each yoked with about three pairs of oxen) headed west from Independence, Missouri (K. J. Dixon, Shannon A. Novak, Gwenn Robbins, Julie M. Schablitsky, G. Richard Scott, Guy L. Tasa, July 2010, p. 629). Cultural clashes with natives were inevitable. In the Great Basin, the Northern, Southern, and Owens Valley Piute attempted to untangle scattered rumors from other nations of white-skinned people heading their

way with frightening rapidity — killing, raping, and cannibalizing in their wake. Wobitsawahkah reasoned that “these white people must be a great nation, as they have houses that move” (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 14).

One group, the now infamous Donner–Reed Party, was a particularly spectacular emigrant train to see moving. In Missouri, James and Margaret Reed (along with four children, Margaret’s ailing mother, and five servants) disembarked with a true marvel of the nineteenth century, a two-story wagon pulled by four yoke of oxen. Inside, the wagon featured a comfortable interior with a stove; spring-seated shocks; a bed for Margaret’s seventy-year-old mother, Sarah Keyes;<sup>46</sup> and, a second story with sleeping bunks for the rest of the family. Traveling in style, the Reed family and what would become the Donner-Reed Party, like their pioneer counterparts, relied on music as a daily accompaniment to their journey. Survivor Virginia Reed (Murphy), Margaret’s eldest daughter from a previous marriage who was thirteen at the time, recalled that as they crossed the plains traveling up the valley of the Platte, “often a song would be heard or some clever dancer would lower the hind gate of a wagon and do a jig on it” (Reed Murphy, 1996, p. 20).

As emigrants moved from the cultural hearths of Europe and the East Coast into the unknown lands of the frontier, music accompanied their every step, meandering and diffusing westward in a stream of hope that, just a few years later, would symbolize the rapids of a massive river of conquest. In her account of the Donner-Reed Party’s fateful journey entitled *The Expedition of the Donner Party and its Tragic Fate*, Eliza Poor Donner Houghton, the youngest daughter of George and Tamsen Donner, attempted to accurately describe what pioneer life was like for those traveling with the party. Since she

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<sup>46</sup> On May 29<sup>th</sup>, Sarah Keyes died of consumption while the Donner-Reed party was camped, and she was buried under a tree at Alcove Spring near present-day Marysville, Kansas.

was only three years old during the 1846-1847 crossing, she spent her life interviewing and collecting accounts from fellow survivors, including Virginia Reed Murphy, in order to better understand what occurred. In the resulting work, Donner Houghton described how high the spirits of the party were when they started out from Independence, Missouri. Along the journey, music bolstered the resolve of these voyagers and provided common ground when members of various wagon trains periodically intermingled at encampments: “The evening was devoted to friendly intercourse, and the camp was merry with song and melodies dear to loved ones around the old hearthstones” (Donner Houghton, 1997, p. 18). During the day, when travel might otherwise become dreadfully monotonous, singing represented a comfort and an encouragement. Moreover, as the wooded hills of the East gave way to the wide open prairies and skies of the frontier, music complemented the settlers’ first explorations and interactions with the landscape and mirrored the expansive sense of freedom and adventure that they experienced during their push westward:

The staid and elderly matrons spent most of their time in their wagons, knitting or patching designs for quilts. The younger ones and the girls passed theirs in the saddle. They would scatter in groups over the plains to investigate distant objects, then race back, and with song and banter join husband and brother, driving the loose cattle in the rear. The wild, free spirit of the plain often prompted them to invite us little ones to seats behind them, and away we would canter with the breeze playing through our hair and giving a ruddy glow to our cheeks. (Donner Houghton, 1997, pp. 15-16)

### *1846-1847: The Fearful Crossing*

By the time the Reeds reached the Truckee Meadows, however, their songs were marked by exhaustion and foreboding. They found themselves and the rest of their wagon train in a race against time to reach California before winter snows. The family wagon, nicknamed the “Pioneer Palace Car,” was abandoned in the forlorn Forty Mile Desert; their father, the Northern Irish immigrant and businessman, James F. Reed, was banished from the group for murder near the Humboldt Sink; and, the remaining individuals of the party presented a disillusioned, ragtag gathering.

According to Donner–Reed Party accounts including the journals of Hiram Miller and James F. Reed,<sup>47</sup> the party was harassed across the Great Basin by Piute warriors who wounded their oxen with arrows, thereby rendering many of their livestock stragglers (Rarick, 2008, pp. 94-95). They were forced to leave these wounded oxen behind (and, in some cases, the wagons that they pulled.) Presumably, the disabled livestock became feasts for members of the warriors’ families. The emigrants experienced their worst encounter near the Humboldt Sink where they lost about twenty oxen, although Native Americans never shot directly at any individual members of the party. By the time they reached the Truckee Meadows, the pioneers were “well-nigh exhausted and their slender

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<sup>47</sup> The caveat with these journals is that they were not known to exist until 1954 when Martha (Patty) Reed donated them to Sutter’s Fort Historical Museum, and it does not appear that these journals were consulted during the writing of Virginia Reed Murphy’s article “Across the Plains in the Donner Party (1846)” for *Century* magazine (1891.) They were never shown to C. F. McGlashan while he was working on the first definitive history of what occurred, which he published as the *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra Nevada* in 1879. Moreover, some of the journal entries appear to have been written after the events, which led scholars such as George R. Stewart (author of *Ordeal by Hunger: The Story of the Donner Party*, 1936) and Joseph King (author of *Winter of Entrapment: A New Look at the Donner Party*, 1992) to question the authenticity of those passages. Nonetheless, they provide us with some possible glimpses of what life was like for those traveling with the ill-fated Donners and Reeds, and so they are still heavily quoted. For more detailed information, please see McGlashan, 1918; King, 1992; Stewart.

stock of provisions nearly consumed” (McGlashan, 1918, p. 33). Nonetheless, their greatest challenges still awaited them in the High Sierra.

Further westward, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkin’s grandfather, Tru-ki-zo, continued to attempt peaceful contact with new white settlers, and he even ventured over to California to participate in the Mexican-American War. He was loathe to believe negative news coming from other nations, let alone the more wild rumors about his long lost “white brothers,” and so he continued to welcome explorers and emigrants that he and his men met just as he had done with Frémont. According to Thocmetony, Tru-ki-zo forced his followers to swear that they would not harm any hairs on their “white brothers” heads (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994). But his son-in-law, Wobitsawahkah, was not so sure of Euro-American intentions, and by the fall of 1846, Wobitsawahkah’s skepticism (and his dream) was confirmed.

A chance encounter with the Donner–Reed Party — members of which burned the Numa’s winter foodstuffs while passing near the Humboldt River — substantiated what the Numa were being told and what Wobitsawahkah quietly feared. The loss of their winter foodstuffs signaled a near calamity for Wobitsawahkah’s tribe, who had conscientiously gathered and preserved these supplies during the previous spring so that they could stay in the mountains throughout the summer and winter thereby avoiding the emigrant routes and settlers. “They set everything we had left on fire. It was a fearful sight. It was all we had for the winter, and it was all burnt during that night. My father took some of his men during the night to try and save some of it, but they could not; it had burnt down before they got there” (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 96).

Attempting to come to terms with this tragic encounter while still maintaining the optimism of Tru-ki-zo's vision about their white brothers, Thocmetony remembers her father, Wobitsawahkah, addressing the people. "They come for no good to us, although my father said they were our brothers, but they do not seem to think we are like them. What do you all think about it? My dear children, there is something telling me that I am not wrong, because I am sure they have minds like us, and think as we do; and I know that they were doing wrong when they set fire to our winter supplies. They surely knew it was our food" (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 14). Whether or not these individuals were actually from the Donner-Reed party, both sides saw individuals as representative of the whole in these first encounters; the results would be tragic.

On one hand, by destroying their winter foodstuffs, the Donner-Reed Party nearly sealed the fate of the Cui-ui Ticutta that winter. But the Numa survived by relying on intimate, multigenerational knowledge about the land that they inhabited. Greater challenges loomed on the horizon, however, for the Numa faced a terribly bleak future at the hands of Euro-American settlers, prospectors, and miners over the next few decades. On the other hand, the Piute warriors who picked off the Donner-Reed Party's livestock in the great deserts of Utah and Nevada slowed their pace considerably and ensured their late arrival in the Sierra foothills. The fear of continued Indian attacks exponentially increased the pioneers' anxiety about remaining in the Truckee Meadows, too, which would have been a far better place to winter over than the Sierra Nevadas. The emigrants made nearly every wrong decision possible before climbing the vertical slopes of the eastern Sierra, which would seal a grim fate where half their rank died of starvation, and some resorted to cannibalism. While those members of the Donner-Reed Party who

made it to California eventually enjoyed some of the prosperity allotted the early pioneers of the soon-to-be “Golden State,” the experience of the perilous crossing during the winter of 1846–1847 lingered with each survivor long after the makeshift cabins around Truckee Lake were abandoned. Moreover, their struggles to survive would not only illustrate the dangers of being “stuck” in a geography of liminality but also provide a cautionary tale about the necessity of interconnectivity between rural areas and urban centers.

It is strangely ironic that members of this same group of settlers — whose attack on Numa foodstuffs placed the natives in peril of starvation that winter — would perish by that very fate high up in the Sierra near Donner Summit a few months later. For although the Donner–Reed party survived the catastrophe of Hastings Cutoff before going on to conquer the Great Desert, they set out far too late on the last leg of the California Trail,<sup>48</sup> becoming inescapably snowbound between 100 and 150 miles from the end of their 2,500 mile journey along a tricky portion of the trail (Hastings, 1845). Within this radius lay the Sierra Nevada, a range comprised of 500 distant peaks over 12,000 feet high. With the height of these peaks and their proximity to east-bound moisture flows from the Pacific Ocean, they received extraordinarily high snowfall in many a year. In fact, they still receive on average more snow than most other North American ranges, rendering the conditions for fall-winter crossing potentially a problem in the extreme. Moreover, the eastern slopes of the Sierra are notoriously steep (Rarick, 2008, pp. 47, 105-106). Between the sheer inclines and an early mid-October storm that resulted in five feet of snow in one night and drifts in leeward areas accumulating up to sixty feet of

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<sup>48</sup> Like so many of their poor decisions, the Donner-Reed Party made camp for a week in the Truckee Meadows before beginning the climb into the higher elevations. They mistakenly believed the first snows would not come until November but were quickly proven wrong.

snow in depth, the emigrants lost all control over their fate. According to survivor Virginia Reed Murphy:

That night came the dreaded snow. Around the camp-fires under the trees great feathery flakes came whirling down. The air was so full of them that one could see objects only a few feet away. The Indians knew we were doomed, and one of them wrapped his blanket about him and stood all night under a tree. We children slept soundly on our cold bed of snow with a soft white mantle falling over us so thickly that every few moments my mother would have to shake the shawl — our only covering — to keep us from being buried alive. In the morning the snow lay deep on mountain and valley. We turned with heavy hearts back to the cabin that had been built by the Murphy-Schallenger party two years before. We built more cabins and prepared as best we could for the winter. That camp, which proved the camp of death to many in our company, was made on the shore of the lake. (as cited in Glotfelty, 2008, pp. 67-71)<sup>49</sup>

The families of the Donner–Reed party stood no chance of reaching the summit. Moreover, they were haphazardly scattered over a seven mile or more radius from one another where they hastily hunkered down in makeshift shelters at Alder Creek (about a mile off the Emigrant Trail) and three abandoned cabins near Truckee [Donner] Lake built by previous emigrants to the area: Joseph Foster, Allen Stevens, and Moses Schallenger in 1844 (Hardesty, 1997, pp. 49-50). The cabins had no windows, leaky roofs, dirt floors, and one large hole per structure to access their interiors. As wave after wave of snowstorms swept down from the Gulf of Alaska entombing the desperate pioneers in feet upon feet of snow, they used canvas and ox hide to patch roof holes to try to keep out

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<sup>49</sup> The Indians that Virginia Reed Murphy refers to in her account were Miwok converts to Catholicism named Luis, 19, and Salvador, 28 or 29. Their Miwok names were Eema and QuéYuen, respectively. Members more specifically of the Consumne, Eema and QuéYuen belonged to the band of Miwoks known to occupy the California plains region between modern-day Stockton and Sacramento, and they became employees of John Sutter after their conversion (J. A. King, 1994). Luis and Salvador would fatefully agree to lead a small band of the Donner-Reed party (led by William Eddy and referred to as the Forlorn Hope) on makeshift snowshoes over the summit. But they were most likely murdered and cannibalized by members of the Forlorn Hope around January 9<sup>th</sup> after refusing to eat human flesh themselves and fleeing on foot at the warning of Eddy (K. Johnson, 1996, p. 62). Also see (Mullen, 1997).

leaks. One to two families occupied each cabin comprising about sixty individuals in total. These individuals included the Eddys and Murphys in one, the Reeds and Graves in another, and the Breens in a third. The German emigrant, Ludwig Keseberg, whose name would soon become synonymous with the worst instances of cannibalism,<sup>50</sup> built a lean-to along one wall of the Breen cabin that he occupied with his wife, Phillipina, and their infant son, Ludwig, born on the trail a few months earlier.

At Alder Creek, the Donners never attempted to construct a cabin, and they had no residential artifacts from other travelers upon which to rely. By November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1846, a series of unrelenting snowstorms commenced from which the emigrants would receive little respite (Hardesty, 1997, p. 60; G. R. Stewart, 1988, pp. 84-87, 105-106). Because of their broken wagon axle and a subsequent injury to George Donner's hand (which quickly turned gangrenous), they never made it the eight miles to Truckee Lake. Instead, they

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<sup>50</sup> Ludwig (or Lewis) Keseberg was the last individual rescued from the Donner Party. He is implicated in the self-confessed cannibalism of William Eddy's son and Tamsen Donner, the wife of George Donner. Tamsen Donner stayed behind after the Third Relief, to tend her deathly ill husband, George. Tamsen, however, was in fair enough health to walk out, and so salvagers sent by the *alcalde* at Sutter's Mill in April to recover the Donner-Reed Party's belongings quickly suspected that Keseberg murdered her. This was further substantiated by their find of George Donner's pistols as well as Donner jewelry and \$250 in gold in Keseberg's living quarters, formerly the cabin of the Eddys and Murphys. Under threat of lynching, Keseberg reportedly confessed that he hid \$273 of the Donners' money. He claimed he did so at the behest of Tamsen so that the funds could someday benefit her children. Besides Donner money and belongings, salvagers found a pot full of human flesh in the cabin noting, to their horror, that he preferred human meat to the carcasses of horses and cattle that had been exposed by the spring thaw. William Eddy, upon hearing Keseberg confess he had eaten Eddy's three-year old son, James Eddy, who died in March 1847, swore to kill him if he ever saw him in California. Although William Eddy attempted to track Ludwig Keseberg down to murder him, he was eventually persuaded to desist by James Reed and Edwin Bryant. About a year later, Eddy sat down with J. Quinn Thornton describing the horrors of his ordeal with the snowshoe party self-titled the Forlorn Hope, and this became the basis for the first account of the Donner-Reed Party tragedy (Hardesty, 1997, p. 3). Keseberg lived the end of his life as a pariah hardly daring to step foot in public. He would confess to Charles McGlashan in his later years, "I often think that the Almighty singled me out, among all the men on the face of the earth, in order to see how much hardship, suffering, and misery a human being can bear!" (McGlashan, 1918, pp. 221-222). Keseberg, more than any other member of the Donner-Reed Party, became a symbol of villainy and depravity (G. R. Stewart, 1988, pp. 258-265). Nonetheless, he brought much negative attention upon himself by describing instances of cannibalism in lurid detail to members of the public and even choosing to open an inn and restaurant in Sacramento, California, following the ordeal. His choice of owning a restaurant, in particular, excited the public's imagination.

managed to pile together a crude brush shelter covered with their wagon's canvas — “a hut like the Indians Wigwam [*sic*] with an opening at the top for the smoke to escape... short posts were driven into the ground on the inside across which sticks were laid, and on them pine boughs were thickly spread. This arrangement served as comfortable beds when they could be kept dry” (K. J. Dixon, Shannon A. Novak, Gwenn Robbins, Julie M. Schablitsky, G. Richard Scott, Guy L. Tasa, July 2010, p. 654 footnote #653; J. A. a. J. S. King, 1995, pp. 168-169).

They waited for a break in the weather. None came. Instead, they became stranded for over four months (K. J. Dixon, Shannon A. Novak, Gwenn Robbins, Julie M. Schablitsky, G. Richard Scott, Guy L. Tasa, July 2010, p. 629). Within three weeks, their food had dwindled to almost nothing. They ate boiled ox hide. They ate pet dogs. They

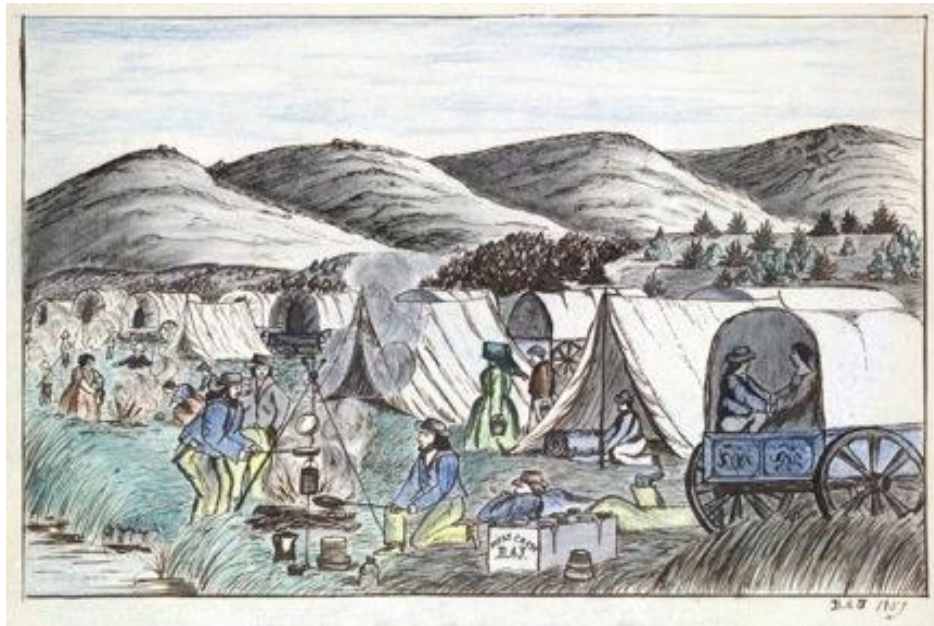


Figure 2.2 Sketch of pioneers camping on the banks of the Humboldt River in western Nevada, 1859, by Daniel A. Jenks. Graphite, ink, crayon, watercolor, 18.2 x 25.4 cm (sheet). Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Figure 2.3 Map showing the route taken by the ill-fated Donner-Reed Party during their 1846-1847 transcontinental emigration. Created by K. Musser March 19, 2010 using elevation SRTM, trails data from the NPS, and features from the National Atlas of the United States.



Figure 2.4 Drawing of Truckee (Donner) Lake camp based on descriptions by William Graves, a survivor. First appeared in Myron Angel's *History of Nevada County, California* by Thompson & West in 1880.



Figure 2.5 Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California photographed by T. H. O'Sullivan of the U.S. Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel (King Survey), 1870s.

ate wild mice (Hardesty, 1997, p. 1). By Christmas, according to the more grisly accounts, some party members committed their first acts of survivalist cannibalism.

The infamous legend of this desperate emigrant party spread rapidly after the first survivors made it safely to Sutter's Mill: "This whole band of white people perished in the mountains, for it was too late to cross them. We could have saved them, only my people were afraid of them. We never knew who they were, or where they came from. So, poor things, they must have suffered fearfully, for they all starved there. The snow was too deep" (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 13). Already perplexed by their unfortunate brush with the Donner-Reed party in 1846, the Northern Piutes' worst fears seemed to be confirmed as the last near-skeletal remnants of the Donner Party were pulled from snow-bound cabins hiding their winter gore during the Third Relief and the final salvage party.<sup>51</sup> Snow bound near the summit of the Sierra, it quickly became clear that they had begun to carve away the fleshy remnants of their own desperate community.<sup>52</sup> As Thocmetony would later write in *Life Among the Piute*, the Numa were horrified by what they heard and what they anticipated to await them with the arrival of more whites. "Yes,

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<sup>51</sup> Numerous attempts were made to rescue members of the Donner-Reed party during the winter of 1846-1847, especially after the starved remnants of the Forlorn Hope stumbled out of the Sierra near Sacramento on January 17<sup>th</sup> (K. Johnson, 1996, p. 62). The salvage party was called by the *alcalde* of Sacramento to seize any and all property of the Donner-Reed Party left behind. More than likely, they did not expect to find any of the members of the party still alive when they happened upon Ludwig Keseberg. As a result, their account of Keseberg's murder of Tamsen Donner has sometimes been called into question since they would have been vying with Keseberg for George and Tamsen Donner's wealth and belongings.

<sup>52</sup> It is important to note here that the archaeological evidence for cannibalism at the Alder Creek Campsite remains minimal. During excavations of the site in 2004 by Dr. Kelly Dixon and Dr. Julie Schlabitsky, however, they were able to locate what appear to be the ashy remnants of a fire hearth along with artifacts consistent with an 1846-1847 occupation. Among the artifacts recovered were many very small shards of faunal remains that, due to size, could only be identified as mammal. Future DNA testing may prove whether or not these remains were actually human. But again, the bone fragment sizes are too small to elicit evidence of cannibalism (e.g. cut marks, pot polish, etc.) (Scott, 2006). Based on Dixon's and Schlabitsky's findings, however, it is highly likely that those stranded at Alder Creek were eventually forced to resort to cannibalism but only after late February or early March, assertions generally supported by eyewitness accounts. That said, cannibalism makes up but a very small portion of the actual story of the Donner-Reed Party, it appears to have been a last resort measure to save their young children.

they do eat people, because they ate each other up in the mountains last winter” (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 15).

The tragedy of the Donner–Reed Party, however, only gave the nation a moment’s pause for far beneath the graves of that fateful party lay never before accessed veins of gold the likes of which Americans had never seen. Soon, gold fever and the California Dream seized the imagination of an entire nation and eventually the world. Despite the challenges of the overland route, thousands of pioneers set off on a frantic dash westward. No Great Desert, no vast Sierra Nevada Mountains, no fears of cannibalism or death would stop them. Some called themselves “Argonauts” alluding to the Greek warriors of old. Members of the Donner–Reed Party — apart from Ludwig Keseberg<sup>53</sup> — were heralded as the first wave of heroes fulfilling the call of God and country to tame the west and propel Manifest Destiny. The sacrifices of the Donner–Reed Party, though unimaginable, were deemed necessary and justifiable, so great were the alluring rewards of California, the land of milk, honey, and gold.

In his 1879 account of the Donner–Reed Party’s journey, *History of the Donner Party: A Tragedy of the Sierra*, C.F. McGlashan would not only refashion the pioneers as faithful martyrs of Manifest Destiny, but he would forever link the Donner–Reed Party to the California Dream. “California, with her golden harvests, her beautiful homes, her dazzling wealth, and her marvelous commercial facilities, may well enshrine the memory of these noble-hearted pioneers, pathfinders, martyrs” (McGlashan, 1918, p. 17).

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<sup>53</sup> For more information about the folklore and place myth surrounding the Donner-Reed Party, and more specifically, a discussion of how Ludwig Keseberg figures into the mythology of the American West, please see Chapter 5.

*California Dreaming: The 1849 Rush and Fabled "Argonauts"*

The old American Dream... was the dream of the Puritans, of Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard*... of men and women content to accumulate their modest fortunes a little at a time, year by year. The new dream was the dream of instant wealth, won in a twinkling by audacity and good luck. [This] golden dream... became a prominent part of the American psyche only after Sutter's Mill. (Brands, 2003, p. 442)

Nevada's Forty Mile Desert was crossed time and again by desperate, depleted wagon loads of settlers bound for what they imagined, and were told, was the promise of California. Wagon wheel tracks crisscrossed the Forty Mile Desert, and oaths and curses about the desolate aridity of the place traveled eastward via letters to long-lost family members. California's Gold Rush captured the national imagination in a profound though rather brief way starting on January 24, 1848, when James W. Marshall so famously found gold at Sutter's Mill in Coloma, California. Initially, Marshall wanted to keep news of the gold strike secret as it threatened to destroy his goal of amassing an agricultural empire. But rumor could not be controlled, and by March of 1848, a San Francisco newspaper publisher by the name of Samuel Brannan was strolling the streets of San Francisco with a gold vial in hand proclaiming, "Gold! Gold! Gold from the American River!" Incidentally, Brannan used this word-of-mouth advertising to draw patrons to his newest venture, a gold prospecting supplies store (Bancroft, 1889, pp. 55-56; Holliday, 1999, p. 60). Mining the miners, as they say, began nearly from the gold strike's inception.

Samuel Brannan<sup>54</sup> was not the only historical figure to let the cat out of the bag, as it were. The Federal Government stepped in to entice Americans from the East or

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<sup>54</sup> According to American novelist Stewart Edward White, Samuel Brannan boasted a rather checkered background. Originally emigrating to California with a group of about 250 Mormons from New York, Brannan was tasked by Brigham Young with establishing a Mormon community on the Pacific Coast. Up-

South to far off lands in California. The first order of business for President James Polk was a nationwide announcement confirming the discovery of gold in California. He followed this on December 5, 1848 — one year following the tragic Donner–Reed Party disaster — with a message to Congress extolling the virtues of heading west. During his presidential address to Congress, Polk publicly displayed fourteen pounds of California gold and argued that it was in the nation’s best interest to develop the American West in all rapidity. His speech sparked a national hysteria motivating thousands of Americans to race westward despite the steep challenges of the overland journey. Ignorance, naïveté, and avarice overrode all practical concerns. By early 1849, the fabled Argonauts of the Gold Rush were making preparations to journey to California, and James Marshall was being cemented into the fabulous myths of mid-era republican history.<sup>55</sup>

Once an alerting cry to the presence of gold went up, the lands that would come to make up modern-day Nevada started to see substantial foot traffic. The first to receive news of the strike were settlers to Oregon, the Sandwich Islands (Hawai’i), and Latin

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on seeing the American flag already flying over the Presidio at Yerba Buena, Brannan reportedly cursed the red, white, and blue. Later, however, Brannan would reinvent himself as a proper American citizen after embezzling tithes from his band of 250 Mormons in California, which landed him in hot water with Brigham Young in Salt Lake City, Utah. It is some time thereafter that he took up “mining the miners” of the California Gold Rush (White, 1920, pp. 56-57).

<sup>55</sup> There are certain disparities with regard to the chronology surrounding the discovery at Sutter’s Mill. Finding gold in California came with suspicious convenience after the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on February 2, 1848 — less than two weeks later — which ceded nearly half of Mexico to the United States, including gold-bearing California. Within this historical context, Gray Brechin argues that the story of James Marshall’s mythical discovery at Sutter Mill was, at worst, a blatant fabrication and, at best, no kind of news at all to the United States Federal government. This claim is bolstered by an 1843 shipment of some two thousand ounces of gold from the San Fernando Mission in Southern California to the United States. Moreover, by 1846, Thomas O. Larkin, U.S. Consul to Mexico, was writing letters to Washington informing them of wealthy quicksilver mines just south of San Jose, California, along with untapped stores of copper, iron, silver, and gold in the north, which would render Yerba Buena (San Francisco) an urban mining center of no little importance. “The Mexican-American War may well be a textbook example of the mining engineer’s adage that commerce follows the flag, but the flag follows the pick, for Marshall merely *rediscovered* gold, and much else besides, before declaring war on their neighbor” (Brechin, 2001, p. 29).

America. Easterners quickly followed, too, despite the sobering example set by the Donner–Reed Party, and soon tens of thousands of “Argonauts” flocked to California, about half of them taking the overland route via the California Trail or the Gila Trail. During the spring of 1849, the California Gold Rush became a verifiable reality when an estimated 50,000 emigrants began the overland trip westward (White, 1920, p. 72). Only the weak, dead, and dying chose to tarry in what would later become the Silver State. On one hand, while the Great Basin saw an increase in passers-by, it remained a liminal place to be overcome. On the other hand, in short order, California officially entered the union as part of the Compromise of 1850, dramatically evidencing the delirious effects of the 1849 Gold Rush on the nation as a whole.

The Argonauts of 1849 were very different from their settler predecessors in dress and motivation, and the tunes that they carried across the wide plains of the frontier to California tended to come from popular minstrel shows as often as from English balladry or hymnals. Describing the disparity between these new arrivals and her own pioneer stock, Eliza Poor Donner Houghton observed:

Those light-hearted newcomers, who danced and gayly sang,

O Susannah, don't you cry for me!

I'm bound to Californy with a tin pan on my knee

were the first of that vast throng of gold-seekers, who flocked to our shores within a twelvemonth, and who have since become idealized in song and story as the “Argonauts,” “Boys of '49.”

They were unlike either our pioneer or our soldier friends in style of dress or manner. Nor had they come to build homes or develop the country. They wanted gold to carry back to other lands. Some had expected to find it near the Bay of San Francisco; some, to scoop it up out of the river beds that crossed the valleys; and, others, to shovel it from ravines and mountainsides. When told of the difficulties before them, their impatience grew to be off, that they might prove to Western plodders what could be done by Eastern pluck and muscle. (Donner Houghton, 1997, p. 217)

More than “pluck and muscle,” the Argonauts had sheer numbers on their side. Rapidly, their increased presence and motivation to access gold stamped the landscape of California in myriad ways, namely the Bay Area. Within little more than a year’s time, from 1848 to December of 1849, San Francisco went from a sleepy Spanish mission of about 1,000 permanent residents to a boomtown of nearly 25,000 predominantly male prospectors (Richards, 1992). By 1852, San Francisco boasted nearly 36,000 inhabitants. During the 1850s, so many crew members and passengers of Pacific-based ships raced ashore to the California gold fields that it is estimated about 600 ships were abandoned, junked, or burned. “The waters of the San Francisco Bay and the nearby coastline are a graveyard for shipwrecks from centuries past” (Harris, 2005). This vision of gold-crazed passengers and crew members haphazardly fleeing ships for the placer fields of California brings new meaning to the Western literary theme of the “ship of fools” (*stultifera navis*). Dating back to the fifteenth century, it describes ship loads of crazed, deranged, frivolous passengers sailing the high seas without a pilot or any intelligible direction. For the auriferous-warped denizens of California-bound sailing vessels, however, the direction always followed gold nuggets as an acceptable form of insanity came to grip nineteenth-century America and then the world.<sup>56</sup>

In a disorderly demographic dispersal to be mirrored a decade later on the Comstock during the Silver Rush, miners flocked to California from the world over, establishing ethnically diverse mining camps, and these camps had a major impact on the cultural

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<sup>56</sup> According to Michel Foucault in *Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique* (1961, 1964), the “ship of fools” theme can be traced back to concrete circumstances whereby fifteenth-century Europeans “dealt” with individuals deemed insane. Incidentally, Foucault argues that the “insane” replaced “lepers” in Western culture. They were literally confined to ships that were cast out to sea or that sailed along canals. Travel, then, became associated with insanity (Foucault, 1965).

landscape of the city that emerged. By 1852, about 25,000 Chinese had flocked to California to participate in the Gold Rush. They, along with Mexicans and other groups deemed “foreigners,” were banned from many diggings although both groups still managed to salvage riches by sifting through tailings left behind by Euro-American miners, or by providing other services to miners. In an attempt to stem the flow of foreigners to the California gold fields, the California Legislature passed the first of a series of taxes aimed specifically at controlling and excluding foreign miners in 1850. This tax required foreign mine owners to pay \$20 a month (a preposterously large sum in 2014 US currency) to maintain a license to work a claim. Despite such laws, however, foreign-born residents in California numbered approximately 39% of the population by the 1860 U.S. Census.

Fast on the heels of California’s first miners followed performers who, taking a page from Samuel Brannan’s book, realized that the real wealth of California lay in appealing to the miners themselves. Performers from Billy Birch and Wells’ Minstrels to Mart Taylor and Lotta Crabtree took the California gold camps by storm. Mart Taylor (accompanied by the Taylor family) had a particular rapport with miners, delivering variety-style shows verging on sheep dips. When he came to a new town, he adjusted his song lyrics to address the specific sentiments of the community for which he performed, recognizing and giving voice to the loneliness and nostalgia of the prospecting life, the fabulous dreams that buoyed miners, and injecting comic appeal into even the most humdrum aspects of the semi-nomadic camp lifestyle. His improvisations poked fun at local characters, too. Relying on numbers such as “Way the Money Goes,” “Poor Old Mining Gentleman,” “Peep at the Mines,” and “Pike’s Visit to Placerville,” Taylor connected with his audience providing an evening’s respite from their daily toil. According to a

Monoville miner who witnessed one of Mart's performances in 1859, he was "the man with a tremendous nose who... travelled [*sic*] from town to town with a variety troupe, and whose strong hold it was to get up a local song in every camp he visited, bringing in a hit at all prominent characters in the place" (Watson, 1964, p. 36).

Besides making a mark on the cultural landscape of the California gold fields, Taylor had a sure eye for talent and a keen ability to assemble popular troupes. For example, in the early 1860s, Taylor brought together a team of crowd-pleasing minstrels who toured the Bay Area and the Comstock to praise and acclaim. The troupe included Walter Bray, Della Sager, Jake Wallace, and Lotta Crabtree. Taylor first recognized the captivating talent of the petite, red-headed performer, Lotta, while she was living with her family near Grass Valley, California. Little Lotta was then under the tutelage of her neighbor, the internationally renowned dancer Lola Montez, mistress to many notable individuals including Franz Liszt and King Ludwig I of Bavaria. Montez encouraged Lotta's dramatic flair and helped her develop and refine her dancing, singing, and seductive skills. Soon, little Miss Lotta was dancing to the thunderous applause of miners and the glittering appreciation of their gold coins, but she would not stop there. After meeting Mart Taylor, she continued to refine her skills. From Jake Wallace, she learned how to play the banjo and provide strumming accompaniment to her own numbers. From Taylor, she developed a relaxed style of engagement with her audience, focusing on improvisation and songs carefully tailored to appeal to her audience and their love of minstrel shows. Among those songs she sang would have been lyric such as:

I can play the banjo, yes, indeed, I can,  
I can play a tune upon the frying pan.  
I hollo like a steamboat 'fore she's gwine to stop;

I can sweep a chimney and sing out at the top —  
 Strike de toe and heel, cut de pigeon wing,  
 Scratch gravel, slap de foot, dat's jus' de ting. (Watson, 1964, p. 200)

Several years later, while touring with Taylor and his troupe in Virginia City, Lotta was showered with silver coins and an improvised Comstock bouquet, a silver bar, was plopped on the stage at her feet. Even women flocked to her performances (especially surprising since the bawdy content of many minstrel shows tended to discourage their presence.) Taylor's performers, however, took care to avoid any offensive material, and this paid great dividends in terms of audience attendance. Lotta was lauded as, the "talented young lady, the embodiment of fun and frolic, always whimsical but never vulgar" (Watson, 1964)



Figure 2.6: Photograph of Lotta Crabtree taken in 1868 by J. Gurney & Son. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

One of the chief ways that performers such as Mart Taylor and Lotta Crabtree appealed to their audiences was through the careful cultivation of certain popular myths about the American West as a land of endless plenty, egalitarian opportunity, and ready-made wealth. In a nutshell, they promoted themes that would coalesce into the California Dream — the fantasy of quick made money and its "equalizing" effects — and, Lotta Crabtree would become America's darling, the Golden Girl of the West. The California Dream remains a particularly contagious and powerful myth among Americans even today as attested by the popularity of the California lottery, Hollywood and reality television shows such as "Gold Rush" and "Yukon Gold." Beneath the gilded façade of this

lovely myth, however, lurks a history of conquest, exploitation, and environmental destruction, a history that unfolded not only in California but also in Silverland following the 1859 Silver Rush. As a result, holding onto the California Dream would become both increasingly difficult and increasingly vital to Forty-Niners turned Comstockers; the performers of the Bay Area and the Silverland's stages were crucial to filling this need.

### *From Forty-Niners to Comstockers*

The district is said to be exceedingly rich in gold, and I fancy it may well be so, for it is certainly rich in nothing else. A more barren-looking and forbidding spot could scarcely be found elsewhere on the face of the earth. The whole aspect of the country indicates that it must have been burned up in hot fires many years ago and reduced to a mass of cinders, or scraped up from all the desolate spots in the known world, and thrown over the Sierra Nevada mountains in a confused mass to be out of the way. I do not wish to be understood as speaking disrespectfully of any of the works of creation, but it is inconceivable that this region should ever have been designed as an abode for man. (J. R. Browne, 1860-1861; Glotfelty, 2008, p. 105)

By 1851, Forty-Niners with dwindling interests in the California gold fields wandered east across the Sierra in pursuit of precious metal. For the first time in American history, the sizable portion of the Utah Territory that would become Nevada represented an actual destination. While these early prospectors had no interest in staying for the long term and, therefore, lived in very impermanent mining camps, nonetheless, they made northern Nevada, and more specifically, the foothills of Gold Canyon a destination rather than a bridge eastward. Thus began the true terror of the Piute, Washoe, Shoshone, and other native peoples and the birth of the (hi)story of Nevada.

The quest for gold drew many to the sandy lowlands of Sun Mountain where Mormon settlers had long been aware of its presence (some say by as early as 1850,) but

the sizable hierarchy of the Church actively discouraged them from pursuing and/or publishing news of any strike (DeQuille, 1974, p. 9). Nevertheless, no matter how much fathers of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints wished to jealously guard their fabled utopian State of Deseret, they could not bar outsiders from accessing the area, and early expeditions seeking the best railroad routes across the North American continent were essaying various potential paths, which would have served to warn the Church fathers of likely later arrivals. As a result, many of the more attainable foothill surface deposits were rapidly collected by placer miners during the mid- to late-1850s. But a pesky, thick sediment referred to as “blue mud” impeded their progress while “fouling” their pans, long johns, cradles, and sluices.

This “blue mud” that all complained about was a nuisance of the loftiest order. It was pesky to the point of pestilence; and no one thought to have it assayed. According to William Wright (a.k.a. Dan DeQuille):

The fact that silver was so little in the minds of the early miners, and they knew so little about any ore of silver, that when they at last found it, they did not know what it was and cursed it as some kind of heavy worthless sand of iron, or some other base metal, that covered up the quicksilver in the bottom of their rockers and interfered with the amalgamation and saving of the gold they were washing out. They damned this stuff from the rising of the sun till the going down thereof, and worked in it for a considerable length of time before anybody knew what it was. Until after an assay of the “blasted blue stuff” had been made, the miners were all working in blissful ignorance of silver existing anywhere in the country. (DeQuille, 1974, p. 19)

Obsessed by their quest for the fabled auriferous “Mother Lode,” placer miners would heed the presence of no other substance, no matter its relative worth. Within a couple of years, they exhausted gold deposits at the lowest sandy elevations while throwing out and cursing untold amounts of what was, of course, a nearly-pure silver. With any gold in

these sandy surface soils played out, they turned their sights upwards, scaling ever more remote elevations. Silver never appeared to cross any prospector's mind.

Everything should have changed by 1856 or by 1857 at the very latest.<sup>57</sup> It was around this time, according to written correspondence by the famed and tragic prospecting brother duo, Ethan Allen and Hosea Ballou Grosh, that a ledge of rock containing silver was first identified near what is present-day Gold Hill. The Grosh brothers were sons of a Pennsylvania minister. Both were trained mineralogists and veterans of the California gold fields. Unfortunately, fate was not on their side, and they both died tragically just after making the monumental discovery. First, Hosea Ballou Grosh mortally wounded himself with a pick axe to the foot. He would die two weeks later from blood poisoning. Then, Ethan Allen, attempting to cross the Sierra in November, walked into a mountain blizzard. Winters in the Sierra can be particularly unforgiving as the Donner–Reed Party discovered; they were by no means the last victims of self-inflicted disaster. Ethan Allen followed in their ill-fated tracks a decade later. The untimely deaths of the Grosh brothers ultimately prevented the news of a silver strike from spreading to the West coast.

The demise of the Grosh brothers on the eve of their momentous discovery coupled with the narrow-minded approach many placer miners applied to locating mineral deposits, especially deep beneath the earth, meant that the Comstock Lode lay undiscovered for over two more years. During this time, most prospectors approached the search for minerals in Nevada the way that they had discovered and collected such deposits in California. As a result, their progress was slow, inefficient, and, in some cases, nearly

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<sup>57</sup> For additional information about the Grosh brothers, see Ronald James's *The Roar and Silence: A History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode*, 1998, p. 3 and *The Gold Rush Letters of E. Allen Grosh and Hosea B. Grosh*, 2012, edited by Ronald James and Robert E. Stewart.

untenable. The harsh limitations on water and other natural resources that they encountered in the Great Basin only exacerbated this time-consuming process.

As placer miners, they relied on traditional techniques to locate gold accumulated in placer deposits, and these deposits were generally located in areas of very loose material rendering tunneling both unnecessary and impractical. Instead, gold deposits were extracted through dredging and washing, either of which requires generous amounts of water. A painfully arid locale, the Eastern Sierra's constant lack of a steady water supply represented a chief challenge for Comstock prospectors.

As they had on the other side of the Sierra, these miners used simple methods to extract the gold, relying on the weight of the mineral to sink faster than worthless sand. Most often, they used rockers or long toms, wooden troughs with small ridges at the bottom, in which they shook and washed sand until the gold settled out and the worthless dirt flowed away. When water was scarce, miners used mercury, which attracted the gold, but that method was more costly. Groups of men thus worked just as they had in California, up and down the ravines, wherever likely-looking sands had gathered. Wealth would be cumulative, not concentrated, and strikes would emphasize the promise of the entire region, not of specific locations. (James, 1998, p. 3)

Besides water, other necessities to a mining camp lacked. In the First Directory of the Nevada Territory, Henry DeGroot wrote: "Storey County is almost entirely destitute of agricultural lands, as well as grass and water" (as cited in James, 1998, p. 45). It was not a prime location for a mining camp let alone any type of more permanent dwellings.

### *Gold Fever and the Ascent up Sun Mountain*

The Forty-Niners' mining experiences in California — unimproved by Spanish–Mexican experience with the ores of Mexico and the Southwest — led to preconceived notions about where gold deposits should exist and how to extract them. This meant that miners

looked in valleys and streambeds, where the bulk of California's mineral wealth was located, rather than considering the actual geology and geomorphology of the intermountain west. Clearly, "the California experience colored their perceptions, and gold remained their only goal" (James, 1998, pp. 3, 12). The environment that prospectors and old-timers encountered on the eastern side of the Sierra was anything but welcoming and remained very poorly accessible; supplies of available water and quicksilver (mercury) for amalgamation were pitifully slim. Faced with numerous geographic challenges, limitations on basic necessities, and painfully narrow mindsets, Sun Mountain did not yield much in the immediate way of wealth. What results there were, were uninspiring. The prospectors of the region languished in liminality, poised on the precipice between destitution and the mineral wealth they so vainly sought.

Through minimal effort of his own or, perhaps, a preposterously lucky coincidence, Henry T. "Pancake" Comstock made a claim to the ore that had originally been discovered by the Grosh brothers in 1858, after moving into their abandoned cabin.<sup>58</sup> Despite stumbling on the single most important discovery in the area up to this point, Comstock was known for a seriously lazy streak, and so another year would go by before the call of "Silver!" reached the ears of the nation. Prospectors in the area were still too busy attempting to locate gold in the higher elevations of Sun Mountain. They reasoned that placer deposits at the base of mountains generally indicate mineral wealth at higher elevations, but the arduous undertaking of scaling the canyons and mountains of the area still understandably gave them pause.

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<sup>58</sup> It is very difficult to entertain the notion that this was entirely coincidental. After all, Comstock only made this discovery after taking over the Grosh brothers' abandoned cabin and rummaging through their papers.

The higher they went, the less forgiving the terrain. While the lower elevations offered welcome, albeit rare, springs and creeks, thereby teasing their discoverers' with a glimpse of land suitable for agricultural settlement, these were not the places that beckoned placer miners. Rather, the highest and most foreboding levels, where neither water nor vegetation tarried, pulled prospectors upwards. While eyes cultivated to enjoy the natural environment and romanticize the vanishing "Old West" might look upon the Great Basin today as an expansive, liberating, and, perhaps, even sacred location, nineteenth-century prospectors (like pioneers) were generally horrified by its infinite, empty landscapes; its monochromatic swathes of brown and gray varying only in saturation; its searing and sandy summers punctuated by vocal and voracious insects; its preternatural afternoon winds and dust storms; and, its preponderance to melodramatic weather changes on monthly, daily, and even midday bases.

To the nineteenth century eye, this part of western Nevada offered little to recommend it to any but the most devout explorer or prospector. Contemporary landscape appreciation of the day placed a very high premium on utility, resource, and the ease with which nature could be subdued. The high desert and arid hills of northern Nevada seriously undershot any of these qualifications. "Nineteenth-century aesthetic standards did not accustom Americans to finding beauty in a high desert like the western Great Basin. To most eyes, it appeared unrelentingly bleak, forbidding, and exposed" (Barber, 2008, p. 19). "Godforsaken" became a favorite term of early arrivals. But perhaps most unforgivable to early miners was the rugged terrain verging on inaccessible.

By exploiting the sands at the base of mountains, placer miners basically allowed nature and time to do most of the milling and processing for them. All they had to do was

scoop decomposing sands into their rockers and start sorting. Although miners were well aware that this gold-bearing sand originated at the top of the mountain, they feared that the brilliant mineral was locked deep within the earth. Ultimately, a vast gulf existed between the capacity of individual placer miners versus large, corporate deep-rock mines to work such a strike: “To work a solid ore body, a miner had to remove large amounts of rock, crush it, and transport it to a stream at the base of the canyon — all of this necessary before the material could be treated like placer sands. It was hard work, and it was costly” (James, 1998, p. 6). Under these circumstances, the first prospectors of the Comstock simply lacked the resources or capital to fully exploit what lay atop Sun Mountain. Yet, they continued to push upwards driven by avarice and gold fever.

Despite the intimidating nature of the landscape, as the lower elevations played out, small handfuls of intrepid miners continued the punishing ascent up Sun Mountain driven on by a lust for gold. Some worked higher and higher into Gold Canyon to the south while others headed up Six Mile Canyon to the east. Prospecting brought with it no guarantees, and this was particularly true in Nevada. One can only imagine the level of foreboding and hopelessness packed up the mountain along with those intrepid souls. In 1858, unfavorable findings by the Pioneer Quartz Company further shook their confidence. After working a ledge near Devil’s Gate in Gold Canyon, the company only pulled about three and a half ounces of gold out of five tons of processed rock. “A return of \$42 in gold was made, and the Pioneer Quartz Company, after a rapid comparison of their debit and credit accounts, went back to work at the place diggings” (Lord, 1959, p. 34).

But this poor news gave way to tempered excitement when James “Old Virginny” Finney, John Bishop, Alexander Henderson, and John Yount uncovered a promising site

at the base of Gold Hill where they set up camp and started processing sediment yielding gold deposits worth about \$12 per day for each miner. But it was not until July 1859 that the *Nevada Journal* proclaimed the discovery of silver by Patrick McLaughlin, Peter O'Riley, Henry T. "Pancake" Comstock, and Immanuel "Manny" Penrod and inaugurated the "rush to Washoe." As miners and financiers came to comprehend the potential wealth entombed within Sun Mountain and its environs, hysteria rapidly broke out.

### *The Rise of the Silver Queen*

A much more desolate scene one does not often contemplate. Only some half dozen years ago the poor weary half-starved emigrant with his worn out cattle, as he passed through this desolate, unfruitful country, slowly dragging his weary way towards California, unable to find decent feed for his stock, wondered what in the name of Heaven, this unpromising, sterile, barren waste was made for. No one thought at that time that it was good for anything. But lo! what a change. The wandering adventurer, Comstock — came here among a few explorers and prospectors for gold, and in the course of his examinations he happened to discover the richest and most extensive silver mine known in the world; a ledge, the extent of which is far from being comprehended, and in fact it is but merely prospected, as yet, the deepest shelf on it being but 520 feet in depth. (Doten, 1864-1867; Glotfelty, 2008, p. 126)

Perhaps the greatest irony of the 1859 silver strike was the speed with which disposable, accursed "blue mud" transformed into a rarified commodity drawing miners from all parts of California, the greater United States, and even the world. All it took was a simple assay. "Unlike California's free placer gold, however, Nevada's came mired in a heavy blue matrix, which the miners tossed aside in heaps until a Grass Valley assayer pronounced it silver sulfide worth more than three thousand dollars per ton. Thousands of California prospectors suddenly rushed east to take advantage of new opportunities in the Great Basin.... The Comstock was the first and greatest of the western silver strikes

(Brechtin, 2001, p. 39). To prospectors happy to pull \$100 of gold from a ton of ore, the thought of \$3,000 or more in silver per ton was breathtaking. Hysteria quickly took over. So great was the strike, in fact, that it would quickly capture the national attention and then that of the world, and with good reason. “Over the next twenty years, the 2 ½-mile deposit of high-grade ore would produce nearly \$400 million in silver and gold, create several fortunes, and lead to Nevada’s early admission to the Union during the Civil War, even though it lacked the population required by the Constitution to become a state” (Straka, 2007, p. 4). Like the preceding California Gold Rush, people would flock from both hemispheres to the city built upon a great hill made of pure silver, or so they boasted. Twenty years of boom would follow — truly a feat for any mining town, especially in so isolated a region as the Comstock.

Of course, it is essential to remember that the “rush to Washoe” was initially more like the “backwash” from the California Gold Rush. Men who had braved a transcontinental crossing to try their hand at California gold, only to be disappointed a few years later by how quickly the “Mother Lode” played out, now set their sights on a new and potentially greater prize, the “Comstock Lode.” “Like a large colony of bees in search of pollen, the California mining community sent scouts all along the Sierra. Each time word returned of mineral wealth, the resulting feverish excitement rivaled any dance honeybees could muster, and off swarmed the miners to investigate the possibilities of new riches” (James, 1998, p. 2). The investigations by these prospectors, however, never really hit upon the true wealth of the area because they simply lacked the resources and infrastructure to begin exploring the subterranean, silver fissures of the Comstock. A whole industrial complex would need to be assembled before this grand undertaking could be

underway, and it would require all of the resources, capital, machinery, and manpower that the great city of San Francisco could muster. Thus, interconnectivity between San Francisco and Virginia City grew early and exponentially as both cities resolved to tackle the same challenges in their quest for fabulous, unprecedented wealth.

While the territory that would become Nevada now drew crowds from across the world, the vast majority only intended to stay so long as gold and silver bound them to the spot. It was during this time that temporary, haphazardly constructed buildings rose across the mining district. While the Comstock Mining District inevitably abandoned forlorn placer mining operations as it rapidly gained its industrial footing, transitioning from a liminal, marginalized landscape to a stable community would pose its own challenges. With time and relative economic stability, however, Virginia City boasted more carefully constructed buildings, the markers of an intentional, semi-permanent community by the mid-1870s.

After a two month visit to the Comstock in 1860, J. Ross Browne wrote “A Peep at Washoe,” which first appeared in serial form in *Harper’s Monthly* magazine in December 1860 and January/February 1861. Browne colorfully captures the spirit that overtook California gold miners (and the world) as news of the Washoe silver strike emerged.

But softly, good friends! What rumour is this? Whence come these silvery strains that are wafted to our ears from the passes of the Sierra Nevada? What dulcet Eolian harmonies — what divine, enchanting ravishment is it

“That with these raptures moves the vocal air”?

As I live, it is a cry of Silver! Silver in WASHOE! Not gold, now, you silly men of Gold Bluff, you Kern Riverites, you daring explorers of British Columbia! But SILVER — solid, pure SILVER! Beds of ten thousand feet deep! Acres of it! miles of its! hundreds of millions of dollars poking their backs up out of the earth ready to be pocketed!

Do you speak of the mines of Potosí or Golconda? Do you dare to quote the learned Baron von Tschudi on South America and Mexico? Do you refer me

to the ransom of Atahualpa, the unfortunate Inca, in the days of Pizarro? Nothing at all, I assure you, to the silver mines of Washoe! “Sir,” said my informant to me, in strict confidence, no later than this morning, “you may rely upon it, for I am personally acquainted with a brother of the gentleman whose most intimate friend saw the man whose partner has just come over the mountains, and he says there never was the like on the face of the earth! The ledges are ten thousand feet deep — solid masses of silver. Let us be off! Now is the time! A pack-mule, pick and shovel, hammer, and frying-pan will do. You need nothing more. HURRAH FOR WASHOE!” (as cited in Glotfelty, 2008, pp. 130-114)

In this passage, Browne preserves the frenetic energy and blind hysteria that would spin fabulous fantasies about the 1859 discovery soon determined to be the fabled Ophir, alluding to mine wealth of biblical proportions. Such comparisons and claims advertised the American West, and more specifically the Comstock, to people from all over the world. San Francisco investors and speculators were abuzz. Moreover, Browne foreshadowed the type of dry wit and grandiose humor that would soon inspire many written depictions of the Comstock, especially by journalists such as Dan DeQuille and Mark Twain. These writings cemented place myths surrounding Virginia City firmly into the very foundation of the city while bringing emigrants and immigrants by the droves for a shot at overnight wealth.

With the silver strike in Washoe, communities quickly sprang up along the Comstock to fill the various basic needs of miners; provide raw materials, supplies, and equipment to mining operations; and, entertain those flocking to the locale in droves. Promises of wealth sparked intense allure, and “Virginia City quickly became one of the most important cities between Chicago and San Francisco” (Straka, 2007, p. 4). From April 1860 to January 1861 alone, the city's population grew by nearly a thousand residents and set the boom trend for the next decade and a half. According to Myron Angel's *History of the State of Nevada* published by Thompson and West, by January 1861, the

population of Gold Hill numbered 1,294 residents, and Virginia City boasted 3,284 inhabitants (Angel, 1881). Over the next twenty years, the resultant waves of human migration drew upwards of 25,000 to 30,000 people from extremely diverse ethnic backgrounds into what would quickly be coined the “Comstock” after Henry T. “Pancake” Comstock, one of its original residents (Brechin, 2001, p. 39; Doten, 1864-1867; Glotfelty, 2008, p. 126).

Population figures for the Comstock are notoriously difficult to pinpoint due to the extreme mobility and fickle nature of the settlers who came, went, came back, left for good, and sometimes, swelled the census to preposterous numbers — and then departed yet again before the formal U.S. census officials reappeared after each decade clicked forward. Historical figures only very roughly estimate the true number of dwellers at any given point in time due to constant fluctuations in population that characterize boom/bust mining settlements. “The population rotated as it grew losing nearly as many as it gained” (James, 1998, p. 37). Regardless, the rapid jump in population between 1859 and 1861 brought with it a heightened demand for entertainment of various kinds. While the first prospectors and settlers to Washoe brought with them a variety of entertainment, it was fairly primitive and not typically formalized in this early stage of settlement. This would change rapidly as the Comstock garnered an international reputation and people from the world over flocked there to make their fortune (and enjoy themselves while doing so.)

Following the pattern emerging across the west, cultural diffusion to the Comstock and greater Washoe occurred through the hand transport of traditional music, songsters, and instruments from urban centers in California, the East, and elsewhere.

Moreover, new arrivals actively sought out professional performers. "With the growth in population came a thirst for musical and theatrical entertainment, and variety theatres featuring minstrelsy, burlesque, and vaudeville, appealing to both more genteel audiences as well as to rough miners, proliferated" (Taranto, 2007, p. 121). The rudimentary entertainment enjoyed by the first placer miners (eating, sleeping, drinking, gambling, and the occasional dance) quickly gave way to a variety of more "sophisticated" cultural expressions. As Virginia City expanded to dominate an increasingly industrial landscape, so intensified the thirst of its workforce for liminoid pursuits. The community quickly developed a distinct bipolarity between work and play typified in its cultural landscapes. Theaters, music halls, and niche saloons catering to particular identities or desires arose in sharp contrast to the mines and mills of employment, and the city's prominent role as San Francisco's playground rendered Virginia City a kind of proto-Las Vegas.

Describing the exponential growth he personally witnessed in Virginia City, resident Alf Doten remarked upon the general rapidity with which infrastructure, fine buildings, and public works were undertaken.

The miner's cabin formed the first nucleus for the present city, which in a short time extended itself far away down and along the mountain slope. It is laid out in squares, as nearly as the conformation of the country will admit of, and contains a vast number of fine water works, gas works, etc., and in fact is really a fine city, considering the age of it. Many of the buildings are four and five stories in height, and finished off inside and out in splendid style. (as cited in Glotfelty, 2008, p. 126)

This passage is not only marked by a certain level of civic pride for so many accomplishments achieved in so little time, but it is founded upon certain basic — and rather

optimistic — assumptions that the great veins of mineral wealth hotly pursued by Comstock miners would continue *ad infinitum*.

As its fame grew, the Comstock attracted ever greater numbers of visitors and inhabitants. By 1875, the city represented a significant population and cultural center of the west. “At the peak of the excitement in 1875, Virginia City reached an estimated population of twenty-five thousand” (Brechin, 2001, p. 39). Others, like Doten, log the city’s numbers at something more akin to 30,000 residents. Either way, the Comstock was well-stocked with doctors, innkeepers, miners, musicians, politicians, prostitutes, restaurant owners, shop keepers, teamsters, and others necessary for the development of a robust, vibrant community. Rising nearly 7,000 feet above sea level in an incredibly arid, difficult area to access, it proved a marvel of ingenuity and technology. Virginia City’s close proximity to San Francisco certainly assisted the introduction of fine entertainment to the area. Moreover, Virginia City represented a home-away-from-home for many San Franciscans who wished to participate in the “rush to Washoe” without losing the convenient amenities of their beloved city by the bay. Their neighbors, the Northern Paiute, who traditionally utilized the Comstock to collect piñon pine nuts had very different concerns; they stood to lose a way of life.

### *Industrialization, Effects of Time, and the “Past as a Foreign Country”*

Within a relatively short period of time, a mere twenty years, waves of California-bound (and, later, Nevada-bound) emigrants flooded the homeland of the Northern Piute, transforming the Piutes’ Great Basin home into a major mining destination just after the California Gold Rush started to calm. The crowning glory of the silver strike and subsequent

rush to Washoe in 1859 would be cosmopolitan Virginia City, constructed high atop a mountain of pure silver. As Forty-Niners moved in, inescapable clashes with the Northern Piute occurred much as they had with the desperately overtaxed Donner–Reed Party.

As greater numbers of Euro-Americans, Chinese, and other individuals moved into the area, they competed with natives for basic resources ranging from firewood to waterfowl to fish to big game. Besides decimating the forests of Tahoe, Forty-Niners turned Comstockers ravaged the mountains of northern Nevada, indiscriminately cutting down piñon pine-nut groves — an essential component of the Piute way of life as food, fuel, and shelter — with no regard for any type of long-term sustainability:

For a distance of fifty or sixty miles all the hills of the eastern slope of the Sierras [*sic*] have been to a great extent denuded of trees of every kind — those suitable only for wood as well as those fit for the manufacture of lumber for use in the mines. Already the lumbermen are not only extending their operations to a greater distance north and south along the great mountain range, but are also beginning to reach over to the western slope — over to the California side of the range.  
(DeQuille, 1974, p. 174)

Uncontrolled exploitation by temporary residents bent on getting rich quickly and then retiring to California or back East would leave the Piutes' homeland utterly destitute and nearly uninhabitable. Miners poisoned Numa waterways and destroyed areas where they traditionally gathered fish and hunted waterfowl. The Cui-ui Ticutta's unique way of life centering around Cui-ui pah (Pyramid Lake) was particularly hard hit by the latter part of the nineteenth century when extensive logging and lumber mills associated with the forests of Tahoe and an upper basin pulp and paper mill seriously impacted Cui-ui pah. These industries had a devastating impact on spawning fish and the Northern Piute way of life (Berry, 1997, p. 84; Division of Water Planning, 1995; Pisani, 1977).

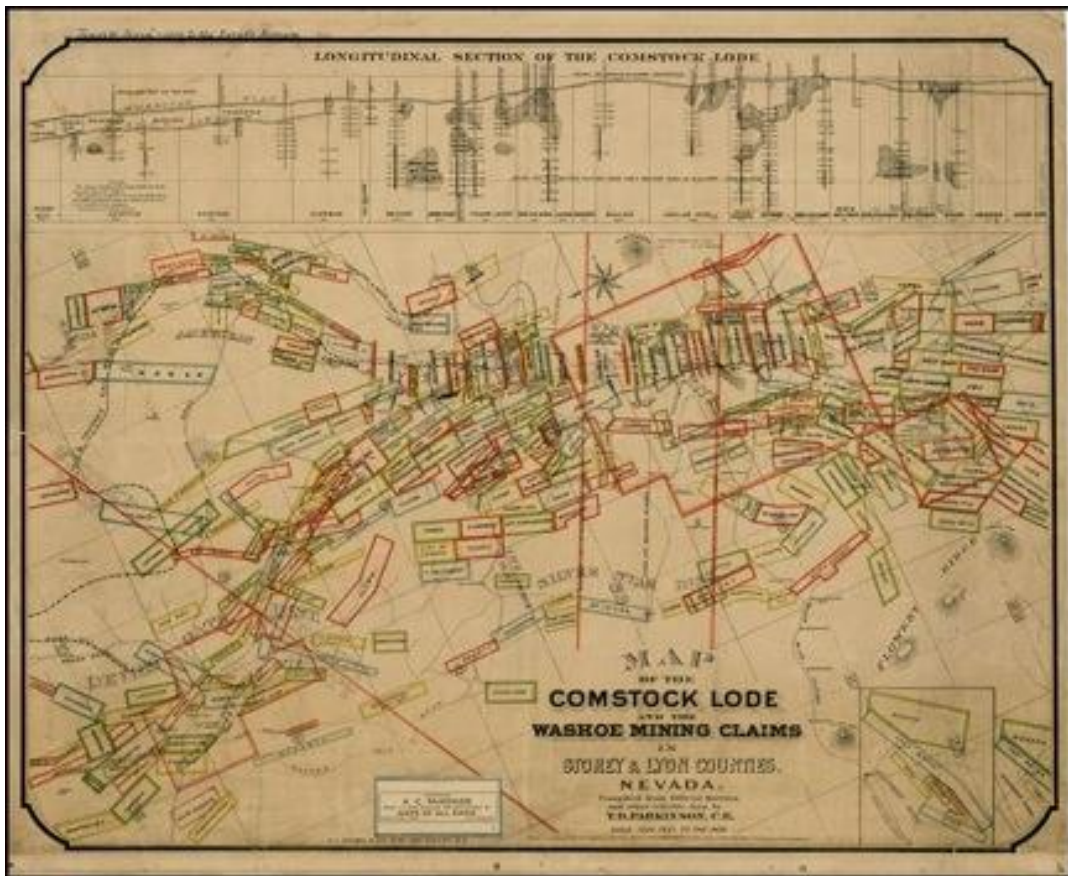


Figure 2.7 Grafton Tyler Brown & Company map of the Comstock Lode and the Washoe Mining Claims of Storey and Lyon Counties, Nevada, published in 1873. Image courtesy of the University of Nevada, Reno's DeLaMare Science and Engineering Library.

Intervention became inevitable, and it fell to Numaga,<sup>59</sup> a war chief of Wobitsawahkah's people during the Pyramid Lake Indian War. Numaga would argue that the pine-nut groves were the "Indian's orchards." While he willingly agreed to allow Comstockers to gather fallen timber for firewood, he adamantly demanded that live trees not be cut down. Numaga's pleas were largely ignored, and the mountains around Virginia City, Nevada, laid bare (Knack, 1984, p. 76). The Numa of Tru-ki-zo, Wobitsawahkah, Thocmetony, and Numaga were further horrified by white seizure of their traditional homeland without any type of compensation, basically theft, followed by unreasonable claims of exclusive Euro-American ownership. Coupled with "the shooting of Paiutes without reason, the ravaging of women, and the general hostility of whites towards Indians," Numaga — a huge proponent of peace — could not steer his people away from the approach of war (Knack, 1984, p. 72).

From the Piute point of view, this destructive consumption of natural resources without any attention to future generations must have been as much an act of cannibalism as what occurred that fateful winter in the high camps of the Sierra. The Forty-Niners turned Comstockers devoured the resources of the area at an alarming rate, and without regard for future generations, the environment, or the flora and fauna of the region. In less than twenty years, Comstockers consumed what might have sustained the Piute for innumerable generations, the very epitome of the cannibalistic nature of imperialism. Besides the environment, they subsumed individuals, groups, or voices that might raise op-

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<sup>59</sup> Some accounts list Numaga as a son of Winnemucca and brother to Thocmetony. But in her own account, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (Thocmetony) describes him as her cousin (Winnemucca Hopkins, 1994, p. 60).

position to their means and methods, and this included Piute children who were assimilated into Euro-American families.

Northern Piute children, such as Thocmetony, faced cultural liminality as many were adopted into white families so that they could be “civilized.” Like Thocmetony, many learned to speak English, to dress in Western clothes, and to desire to conform to Euro-American ways. But true assimilation was not possible because most Americans viewed Native Americans as genetically and intellectually inferior. Manifest Destiny taught Euro-Americans that the extermination of Native Americans was inevitable. As a result, Piute children such as Sarah were generally not permitted to attend schools with



white children. Nonetheless, these children were filled with a distinct desire to assimilate, and this is evident, to a degree, in Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins’s own autobiography and life choices. After all, she married several times; all three husbands were Caucasian. But as W.E.B. DuBois points out in his own

Figure 2.8 Historic photograph of Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins in her regalia, black and white, 1860s. Image courtesy of: <http://nativeamericanencyclopedia.com/sarah-winnemucca-2/>

Figure 2.9 Historic photograph of Chief Winnemucca. Image courtesy of: <http://nativeamericanencyclopedia.com/chief-winnemucca/>



Figure 2.10 Historic photograph of Numaga. Image courtesy of: <http://nativeamericanencyclopedia.com/paiute-war-background/>

analysis of the predicament facing black children can children in a predominantly Anglo-European America, double consciousness can be a type of gift allowing for “access to the dominant White consciousness” (DuBois, 1968, p. 3; Lape, 1998, pp. 262-263). Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins used this “double consciousness” well. “As an ambiguous subject, she incorporates White and Native voices and sets them in dialogue with each other.... [Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins] finds rhetorically powerful her position between cultures, from which she functions as a politically savvy mediator” (Lape, 1998, pp. 262-263).

Nonetheless, as Professor Maggie Kilgour (McGill University English Department) argues in *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*, the desire to eliminate “Otherness” results in “metaphors of incorporation” through which the external is assimilated. Cannibalism, thus, becomes a fitting metaphor for westward expansion, and, perhaps, this explains the American preoccupation with the Donner–Reed Party’s plight. It is a story to which Americans of the nineteenth century could relate for a whole host of reasons.

As it is obvious at the most basic level that the circumference contains the center, in order to maintain a situation of centripetal control, what is outside must be subsumed and drawn into the center until there is no category of alien outsiders left to threaten the inner stability. This process often appears in the form of an attempt to invert actual relations by projecting a desire for assimilation from a center to a periphery, a tactic that has been shown to work in psychic defences, misogyny, racism, and imperialism. (Kilgour, 1990, p. 5)

“Metaphors of incorporation” originate from a foundational inside-outside binary relationship, and the history of modernity and capitalism have increasingly narrowed the perspective of this inside-outside viewpoint. This is exemplified by movements such as that of the Nativists along both American coasts who wished to narrow and codify American

identity and that of Manifest Destiny-minded individuals, namely politicians, who irrationally argued that it was not only God's will for United States sovereignty to sweep from one sea to the other but that Native Americans must be mowed down and exterminated in the process. Similarly, acts of enclosure and land seizure among Euro-American settlers along the Comstock represented assertions of individual isolation rather than early communion.<sup>60</sup> Groups such as the Numa were seen as threats to the internal because of their external "Otherness," and so they had to be consumed and/or destroyed. The "white brothers" of the Numa again proved themselves cannibals, frantically consuming every resource within their reach, in exaggerated assertions of rugged individualism.

By 1860, the Pyramid Lake Indian War erupted in violence between natives and Comstockers; the resulting violence impeded day to day activities and even managed to temporarily halt mining operations and the construction boom initiated by the rush to Washoe. By January and February of 1860, a handful of local conflicts in the environs of Honey Lake between Euro-American settlers and the Piute led Comstockers to agitate for military intervention. According to newspaper accounts, some wanted to teach the North-

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<sup>60</sup> This would be the case not only for pioneer-native interactions but also pioneer interactions along family, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. For example, in Dixon et al., the authors note that "even before ascending the Sierra Nevada, the stressed contingent [the Donner-Reed Party], had fragmented along family, class, and ethnic lines" (K. J. Dixon, Shannon A. Novak, Gwenn Robbins, Julie M. Schablitsky, G. Richard Scott, Guy L. Tasa, July 2010, p. 629). In *The Forty-Niners: A Chronicle of the California Gold Rush and El Dorado*, White argues that "a man who is a perfectly normal and agreeable citizen in his own environment becomes a suspicious half-lunatic when placed in circumstances uncomfortable and unaccustomed." White goes on to relate numerous accounts of pioneers who — forced to leave behind belongings weighing down their wagons — often preferred to destroy perfectly edible bags of flour and sugar, collections of clothing, and pieces of furniture than see other pioneers find and use them. Moreover, he describes one man who attempted to set fire to all of the grass that he passed so that future emigrants following his trail would be retarded and/or delayed in their progress to California. As a result, some emigrants began to experience great hardships including starvation as grass was already quite rare in that vicinity. His monopolization came to a quick end, however, when he was shot to death in the saddle by a posse of vigilantes (White, 1920, pp. 70-72). Ultimately, cooperation among pioneers was essential for long-term survival, which such "rugged individuals" found out the hard way.

ern Piute a lesson for perceived wrongs. Others had a much more calculated agenda, genocide. “Confident that extermination of the American Indians was possible, newspapers such as the *Territorial Enterprise* complained that Paiute transgressions were adding to the bellicose specter hanging over the young year,” and so the Honey Lake Rangers “intended to take an Indian hunt, as soon as the weather will warrant” (James, 1998, p. 39). The destruction of whole people groups were bandied about in the same offhand way that some nineteenth-century Euro-Americans might prepare for a coyote or wolf hunt. The tone was cold-blooded; the outcome appeared predictable. Again, Forty-Niners turned Comstockers looked to their experiences in California to influence their dealings with the Northern Piute, and, in this respect, they would be proven deathly wrong.

After two brothers living at Williams’ Station (a pony express station along the Carson River) kidnapped and molested two preteen Piute sisters, warriors from their tribe — a band of Northern Piutes and/or Bannocks<sup>61</sup> — including the girls’ father, rescued the girls from the station and retaliated by killing the brothers and three other Euro-Americans before burning the station. When Numaga heard news of the raid on Williams’ Station, he famously responded, “There is no longer any use for counsel; we must prepare for war, for the soldiers will now come here to fight us” (Angel, 1881, p. 151). Despite the fact that Numaga claimed the Bannocks carried out the raid, he realized that his people would be blamed, that war was inevitable, and that the Piute must quickly pre-

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<sup>61</sup> The Bannocks and Northern Piute tended to be closely allied at this time although Dan DeQuille clearly states that the Northern Piute were not involved in the trouble at Williams’ Station. In fact, he blames the entire incident on the Bannocks who had married Piute women from the Walker Lake tribe, including the two kidnapped women. Thus, DeQuille paints the preteen girls as more mature, married women. DeQuille attempts to cast the Northern Piute, and especially Numaga, in a very favorable light as peacemakers forced by destiny and misunderstanding to go to war (DeQuille, 1974, pp. 80-81). Later authors such as Ronald James, however, implicate the Northern Piute and not the Bannock in the attack on Williams’ Station (p. 39.)

pare for combat (DeQuille, 1974, pp. 81-82). Under his leadership, the Cui-ui Ticutta joined by Bannock and Shoshone allies won an unforeseen victory, which shook the confidence of inhabitants of the Comstock. On May 12<sup>th</sup>, 1860, Numaga's army lured the undisciplined ragtag band of 105 miners into a trap southeast of Pyramid Lake along the banks of the Truckee River. Seventy-six Comstockers were killed during the fight and many of the twenty-nine survivors badly wounded. The whole company might have been slaughtered were it not for nightfall. General Ormsby, who led the motley miner militia, fell that day, and settlers on the Comstock were shocked by how well the Native American forces organized and fought (Canfield, 1983, pp. 24-25).

News of the attack horrified locals as it represented the biggest confrontation between natives and whites in the vicinity of Washoe to date. In fact, more Euro-Americans were killed that day than in the previous sixty-nine years of confrontation with Native American groups. Enraged, many locals again called for the utter extermination of the Piute nation; some, such as Alf Doten, also blamed the conflict on the Mormons, constructing a bizarre conspiracy theory with Brigham Young at its core. In a letter voicing the general sentiment of many Comstockers following the assault, Doten wrote that, "the Paiutes should be utterly exterminated and the old arch traitor Brigham Young hanged" (Edwards, 2011).

A telegraph was sent to California relaying news of the loss and soon about 544 volunteer troops arrived from California. A subsequent battle on June 2, 1860, proved far more decisive. While Piute and Shoshone forces were able to delay the approach of white troops long enough to secure their women, children, and elderly precious time to slip away into the desert, they were soon forced to retreat under heavy fire. "Thus the Com-

stock area was put solidly under Euro-American control, and never again would Native American forces be able to muster any effective resistance to white population incursions” (Edwards, 2011). The Piute, however, were exiled to the desert during the approach of summer, and they faced almost certain starvation, having been completely cut off from access to their seasonal food sources. After suing for peace, though, they were allowed to return to Cui-ui pah.

This did not, however, mark an end to the bloodshed. A general sense of misgiving and tension pervaded Native American and Euro-American relations after the Pyramid Lake War. In various parts of the Great Basin, “hostility ran high” as other native groups increased their attacks on local Euro-American settlers. U.S. troops stationed at Nevada forts were a necessity in order to protect east-west trade routes, and the Great Basin quickly earned a reputation as one of the most dangerous expanses along the Pony Express Trail, which began delivering overland mail for the United States in April 1860. The dangerous nature of Nevada’s multi-layered liminality may have shifted, but the psychological impact remained very similar. The limen between the savage and civilized, Nevada continued to elicit fear and fascination across the nation. “American Indian hostility during 1860 threatened the long lines of contact between the Comstock and the outside world. The expansiveness of the place, besides creating an obstacle to teamsters and packers, made communication and the administration of government difficult under the best of circumstances” (James, 1998, p. 41). Between Native American agitation and the inhospitable geography of the region, the “Northern Mystery” remained a major challenge to transcontinental communication and interconnectivity at the start of the Civil War. Lack of communication and interconnectivity between major urban centers of the

East and West could carry with them death and desperation as the Donner-Reed Party found out all too well. Comstockers and other inhabitants of the Intermountain West feared being cut off, separated from civilization, and they responded violently.

In 1865, tensions in the Great Basin culminated in an outright massacre of the Northern Piute by a troop of Nevada Volunteer cavalry led by Captain Almond B. Wells. The unit raided and killed random Piute encampments in the vicinity based on the slightest specter of theft or mistreatment of Euro-American settlers, no matter how disreputable the source. As in 1860, the overall consensus among many Comstockers was to “remind [the Piute] of who was in charge,” and this culminated on March 17, 1865, in an attack on Chief Wobitsawahkah’s camp of about thirty old men, women, and children near the shores of Lake Winnemucca while Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and her father were away in Dayton, Nevada (O. C. Stewart, 1983). Twenty-nine individuals were murdered including two of Wobitsawahkah’s wives, one being Tuboitone, Sarah’s mother. The song and laughter of the Numa people that Thocmetony recalled from her childhood fell silent. Chief Winnemucca (as Wobitsawahkah was then famously known among whites) and Sarah would learn of the attack on their relatives while perusing the *Virginia Union* (Canfield, 1983; O. C. Stewart, 1983). Just as with the death of her benefactor, General William Ormsby, at the hands of the Numa in 1860, Thocmetony must have experienced great confusion and anguish, torn by the deaths of so many members of her immediate family, including her mother and an infant half-brother, by the very Euro-Americans who claimed to have “civilized” her and given her Christianity.

The gold strike in California and the silver strike in Washoe brought with each the full brunt of America’s fledgling industrial revolution. By the late-nineteenth century, the

traditional homeland of the Piute rang out with the incessant hammering of stamp mills, the wild gurgling of hydraulicking in the Sierra, the felling of huge groves of timber around Lake Tahoe, and the frantic whistles of Iron Horses frenetically traversing the continent. The rapidity of these changes was no less than wildly disorienting to Chief Winnemucca, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, and the Numa people. While writing her autobiography, which was published in 1883, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins must have struggled to accurately account for the extraordinary changes she witnessed during her lifetime. From her very birth, she was poised to witness a terrible clash of cultures that would forever change her beloved Great Basin home. One must wonder how she was able to maintain any memories at all of her native land before the first floods of pioneers left their indelible, long-lasting marks. As David Lowenthal so famously argued, “the Past is a foreign country” (Lowenthal, 1985). Memory, history, material culture, music, and certain places — like passports — allow humans to enter the world of the past ever so briefly, and her autobiography permits a glimpse into that forgotten past.

In 1896, six years after the official closing of the American Frontier, William Murphy, a renowned attorney from Virginia City, Nevada, who in 1880, went on to serve as City Attorney of Marysville, California, gave a talk in Truckee, commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Donner–Reed Party disaster. Murphy gave the talk as a tribute to his mother, Lavinia Jackson Murphy, and his three young siblings who did not make it out of the Sierra that snowbound Winter of 1846–1847. An eyewitness to the horror at the tender age of eleven, he was rescued by the First Relief. One can only imagine the strange mixture of feelings engendered within him to stand so near the spot where his family perished from starvation just fifty years earlier, an area since crisscrossed by rail-

road tracks; settled by miners, ranchers, farmers, loggers, and shepherds; and, clear cut by logging companies to fill the hungry mines of Virginia City, Nevada. Just like the Northern Piute, Murphy witnessed vast changes during his lifetime, and he, too, must have felt transported to that other country of the past as he revisited a spot that held so much hope, anguish, and desperation for his family.

The majority of the changes witnessed by Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins and William Murphy can be attributed to the complex system of interconnectivity that developed between San Francisco, California, and Virginia City, Nevada, during the mid- to late-nineteenth century. This interconnectivity literally meant life or death for inhabitants of the satellite communities that it fed (as well as pioneers traveling between such areas). The Donner–Reed Party, members of which the journalist C.F. McGlashan would baptize “pioneer martyrs” in his 1879 account of their ordeal, came before San Francisco (then Yerba Buena) had grown in strength and authority to wield control over the communities of the Sierra. In fact, there were not yet communities in the Sierra Nevada Mountains because gold still lay undiscovered for a year. Silver on the eastern slopes of the Sierra and in the Great Basin would lay undiscovered for nearly a decade more. The Donner–Reed Party perished as a result of this utter lack of interconnectivity. So would a haphazard mining community high in the Virginia Range, were it not for the rapid development of a vast industrial complex between the city by the bay and the Comstock during the early 1860s. At the same time, this sophisticated network of industrial infrastructure that would soon crisscross the continent marked death, destruction, and the end of traditional ways of life for Native Americans such as the Numa. As Denis Cosgrove points out, America was busy during the nineteenth century — busy waging a war of conquest in the west,

transforming the nation through an industrial revolution, and attempting to establish a sense of national identity among an increasingly ragtag group of peoples from various parts of the world only loosely united by the pursuit of capital and self-interest:

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the United States not only completed the conquest of a continental empire and the subjugation if not erasure of its indigenous dwellers, but also emerged as an industrial competitor to Great Britain, France or the fast-growing Germany and the destination of a rapidly growing volume of immigrants from Western Europe's peripheries.... America's truly aboriginal peoples were not only seen as non-dwellers, generally believed to be non-cultivators, but were regarded as inferior racial types destined to decline and disappear, and thus physically removed into an apartheid system of reservations. In the resolution of American national origins and identity, as in Europe, natural environment and wilderness were to play a uniquely significant role. (Cosgrove, 2008, pp. 111-112)

No matter what the actual (hi)story of cities like Virginia City and regions like Nevada might be, reality gave way to Frederick Jackson Turner's tantalizing Frontier Thesis. Twentieth-century politicians would use it to argue for Anglo-European racial supremacy (Theodore Roosevelt), American expansionism and militarism in the name of Cold War containment (John F. Kennedy), and American exceptionalism and imperialism (Ronald Reagan).

**Chapter Three: Navigating Questions of Identity,<sup>62</sup> *Communitas*, and Liminality through the “Sensuous Production of Place” in Music**

Lo, the poor Indian! whose untutor'd mind  
Sees God in clouds, or hears him in the wind;  
His soul proud science never taught to stray  
Far as the solar walk, or milky way;  
Yet simple nature to his hope has given,  
Behind the cloud-topt hill, an humbler heaven;  
Some safer world in depth of woods embrac'd,  
Some happier island in the watery waste,  
Where slaves once more their native land behold,  
No fiends torment, no Christians thirst for gold;  
To *be*, contents his natural desire...  
(Thompson, 1881, pp. 8-9)

In the real world We are human being  
In the Shadow world We are being human —  
(Trudell, 1994, n.p.)

*Ambivalent<sup>63</sup> Desire & the Winnemucca Troupe*

The rhythmic polarity of the Piute drum circle drew denizens of Virginia City, Nevada, to behold an incredible scene unfolding onstage. Mournful aboriginal overtures, with ululating wild screeches, filled the room. Attendees — entirely, utterly captivated — watched

<sup>62</sup> “Identity” is a vital theme of this chapter, and yet the term is actually rather ambiguous. On a fundamental level, we all embody our identity on a day-to-day basis through our actions, words, and beliefs. In *Jazz Cultures*, musicologist and jazz pianist, Dr. David Ake, takes up the question of identity among jazz musicians arguing that identity is the way that musicians and audience members perceive and comprehend who they are, what their music is, what comprises their communities, especially within a world context. He observes that, “Identity always goes beyond conscious personal choice. Rather, it both reflects and shapes all understandings of one’s self and one’s relationship to the world” (Ake, 2002, p. 3).

<sup>63</sup> My use of *ambivalent* in this context stems from Post-colonial criticism and Homi K. Bhabha’s contention that, “it is the force of ambivalence that gives the colonial stereotype its currency; ensures its repeatability in changing historical and discursive conjunctures; informs its strategies of individuation and marginalization; produces that effect of probabilistic truth and predictability which, for the stereotype, must always be in *excess* of what can be empirically proved or logically construed. Yet the function of ambivalence as one of the most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power — whether racist or sexist, peripheral or metropolitan — remains to be charted.” Bhabha identifies the stereotype as an “ambivalent mode of knowledge and power” and calls for a movement past merely identifying positive and negative images to an exploration of the actual “processes of subjectification” (Bhabha, 1992, pp. 312-313).

the intricate dances and fiendish deeds, thirsting for more yet terrified at the prospect of what could follow.

Magnetically drawn to the scene, bodies pressed forward and eyes wide, many in the audience gasped unbelieving as the conclusion of the performance unfurled. Fantastically and frenetically, the action culminated in the unspeakable, the unthinkable — a staged scalping!<sup>64</sup> And, that’s exactly what Virginia City’s theater-goers got the evening of October 5<sup>th</sup>, 1864, packed breathlessly into Sutliff’s sumptuous new venue to catch a glimpse of their exotic neighbors and local nobility to the north: The Winnemucca Troupe.

Indeed, few sights of co-mingled barbarity and grace rivaled what the city’s distinguished and varied citizens beheld that night. The nobility and pageantry of Chief Winnemucca and his offspring were undeniable. Sarah’s pleasantly sturdy frame, highlighted beneath seductively draped buckskin and beads, sent more than a few Comstock male hearts in a lusty spiral. Likely not far behind in their vivid reactions were faint females overwhelmed by the intense and unaccustomed virility of the war and scalping dances.

Then, to the delight and horror of those assembled, “the chief and other loyal native-born citizens captured a Copperhead just arriving over the Sierras [*sic*] and pulled off his scalp in a *highly scientific manner*” [emphasis added] (Watson, 1964, p. 324). The grisly scene met with thunderous applause, and the performance concluded with a con-

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<sup>64</sup> No newspaper reports describing the event indicate whether or not the scalping was staged or real. Based on the popularity of the show across the west and the fact that they toured the West Coast, one can assume that they had an actor planted in the audience who repeated the same episode nightly. The popularity of the show, more likely than not, would have fast deteriorated were members of the audience fearful of losing the tops of their heads. But assumptions can be dangerous, so the question of what the newspaper men really meant by “scalping” is left to the reader’s discretion.

trastingly solemn and dignified soliloquy delivered by Chief Winnemucca, a man impressive in both form and bearing. “About six feet high, straight as an arrow, with a depth and breadth of chest which denotes great physical strength and quiet dignity and self-possession of manner,” Winnemucca elegantly embodied the role of royalty for Comstockers who readily embraced this “troupe” as a minstrel-type variety show like none other (Watson, 1964, p. 323).

The Winnemucca Troupe only played the best theaters in Nevada and California as evidenced by their performances at Maguire’s Opera House and Sutliff’s Music Hall, but the performances would live long in the community’s memory. Sutliff’s Hall was sumptuous and elegant, and it boasted a magnificent cornice and oriental-style architecture. The stage dimensions measured 29-by-50 feet, a space covered well during the staging of Piute dances and other Numic scenes, and the hall boasted five large, extremely discreet boxes for those who did not wish to be seen. “Maybe Sutliff was considering Julia Bulette and other such females” when he constructed these highly private boxes (Watson, 1964, p. 247). There were fourteen lower boxes whose occupants were visible to the rest of the audience, and these were extravagantly decorated with landscapes: mountains, Alpine glaciers, lakes, tropical gardens, fountains, statues, urban scenes, castle interiors, kitchens, apartments, rooms, and parlors.

The music hall’s owner, Henry Sutliff, spared no expense on his establishment’s comfortable, even lavish, interior, yet he booked entertainment that appealed to a far broader audience base than Classical music and opera aficionados, attempting thereby to fill the niche between crude melodeons (where women and children were not generally permitted) and opera house performances, which were inaccessible below a certain eco-

onomic bracket. The *Virginia Evening Bulletin* remarked that the entertainment found at Sutliff's was "of a higher grade than usual (free from the vulgar lewdness usual to melodeons)" (Watson, 1964, p. 248). Sutliff's business model worked, and his hall achieved great successes like that the Winnemucca Troupe enjoyed that nippy evening in early October.

Following their sold-out and immensely popular performances at Sutliff's, the *Virginia Daily Union* reported that, "the big chief of all the Pi-Ute nation along with his two daughters, fifteen-year-old son, and seven braves came on stage dressed in full Indian costumes with tomahawks, scalping knives, and all the other requisites" (Watson, 1964, p. 323). The Winnemucca Troupe helped cement frontier myth into the popular "reality" of the American West, much like its successor some twenty years later — Buffalo Bill's Wild West,<sup>65</sup> which would take the nation and Europe by storm much later during the 1880s.

Starting in the early 1860s, Chief Winnemucca, Sarah, and various relatives reenacted Native American depictions or "tableaux" to the beat of hypnotic Native American drums and singing. Some "tableaux" presented rather innocuous aspects of Piute life such as camp scenes and other episodes of daily life "on the deserts, in the mountains, [and] along the rivers and lakes of Washoe" (Watson, 1964, p. 324). Interspersed with quotidian moments were more sensational episodes such as those of a war council, a war dance, a scalping dance, and, finally, when tensions reached the emotional crescendo, with the act of scalping, itself.

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<sup>65</sup> Although today many references are made to Buffalo Bill's "Wild West Shows," they were actually known simply as his "Wild West" (sans the "show") during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Buffalo Bill Cody had nothing on the Winnemucca Troupe. Not only did the Troupe navigate the rough waters of the Wild West show genre more than a decade before William Cody's first brushes with the theatrical spectacles of the East, they played on dominant themes of white culture (including Civil War politics of the 1860s) and their own exoticism, quite to the delight of audiences on the stages of Washoe (Virginia City, Gold Hill, Carson City) and the theaters of California (Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose). From 1860 to 1865, in fact, Chief Winnemucca, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins,<sup>66</sup> and her siblings spent considerable time on the stages of the West and far less time with the Numa people.

They were particularly successful for a number of reasons. First and foremost, they demonstrated astuteness in their sophisticated ability to master and manipulate cultural liminality,<sup>67</sup> and they did this by embodying the spaces "between" the savage and the refined through their performances. On the one hand, they played to their growing family celebrity, billed as the legendary "Piute Royal Family" with requisite pageantry and pomp. On the other hand, their depictions of Native American daily life flirted with the terrifying and scandalous in their depictions of war dances, scalping parties, and the like. Washoe was pleased as punch by their native nobility. Ultimately, the Winnemuccas gave audiences exactly what they wanted and more.

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<sup>66</sup> In this chapter, I will refer to Wobitsawahkah and Thocmetony by their stage names with which they became most closely associated during this period.

<sup>67</sup> It is clear from her autobiography that Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins saw herself as inhabiting a space "between" her people, other Native American tribes, and Euro-Americans, and so, in this sense, she describes herself in a state of cultural liminality. For more on liminality, please see footnote #3 located on page 25 of Chapter One.

In their performances as the Winnemucca Troupe, they demonstrated a surprising and seductive level of nobility and elegance, exoticism, and accessibility, thereby fully embodying the concept of the ‘Noble Savage’ with which Euro-Americans had been intrigued since the Age of Discovery — a fascination clearly evident in the writings of Aphra Behn, Michel Montaigne, Alexander Pope, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and François-René de Chateaubriand among many others. The Winnemucca Troupe radiated a fascinating ambiguity by presenting contradictory qualities at the same time tantalizing, irresistible, and horrifying: power, wisdom, vulnerability, naïveté, and brutality. Their tactic was simple: dazzle the Euro-American crowds of the Comstock and California with spectacle, color, music, drama, and violence. In so doing, they provided Euro-Americans with what they believed were glimpses into a secret world; they awakened within them a desire for the primitive, the untamed, and the uncivilized, simultaneously perplexing and uncontrollable. The Winnemucca Troupe, thus, cleared some brush from the path of Primitivism that would become so attractive in the twentieth century, and they did this on the stages of Virginia City’s Maguire’s Opera House and Sutliff’s Theater, Sacramento’s Metropolitan Theater, and as far afield as San Francisco’s Metropolitan Theater during the mid-nineteenth century (Canfield, 1983, pp. 38-39).

Perhaps most unsettling to the audience, unlike William Cody’s Wild West extravaganzas of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries where cowboys, cavalry, or generals rode in at the end to restore order and “civilization,” the Piute had the first *and* last words. They remained entirely in control of the plot and its dénouement. Their ability to both satisfy and surprise through a careful admixture of stereotypes and the unexpected was essential. In this way, they inspired ambivalent desire, seducing Euro-

American crowds with both glimpses of mystery and evidences of mastery.<sup>68</sup> “The only way to lead the seduced along and keep the upper hand is to create suspense, a calculated surprise. People love a mystery” (Greene, 2004, p. 241). Embodying the crowd’s greatest expectations of savagery during the scalping scene, they softened its impact with a humorous political appeal, and then juxtaposed it with Winnemucca’s aristocratic final speech. Crowds that gathered to see something new, do some heckling, and be mildly amused by the child-like naïveté of “Digger Indians” were flabbergasted and astonished by the carefully constructed stage presence of the Winnemucca Troupe, and they walked away more confused, dazzled, and intrigued by the Piute Royal Family than ever.

Following their highly successful performance, an invitation from Max Walter, Sutliff’s manager was accepted to return the following evening for what would prove to be another sold-out performance. During a five-year period from 1860–1865, in their entertainment for Comstockers at Sutliff’s and Maguire’s, the Winnemucca family proved astutely capable of exploiting “Otherness”<sup>69</sup> to captivate their audiences (Canfield, 1983; O. C. Stewart, 1983). They employed carefully prescribed clichés of the dominant white discourse with brief, tantalizing glimpses of complexity, sophistication, and nobility for

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<sup>68</sup> An entire article, if not a book, could be written about the implications of the scalping scene in the Winnemucca Troupe’s performances. After all, what greater evocation of Native American mastery over whites could they have employed than the scalping of a white man? Placed near the very end of their performance, without any reconciliation of the “savage” act back to the “civilized” dominant white discourse, this scene was entirely daring. Like Carnival, it reversed the hierarchy of roles placing the Piute performers in complete control of their audience, not unlike Molière’s *Tartuffe*, where the servant of the household, Tartuffe, manages to insinuate his way into a noble family to the point where he nearly assumes the role of head of the household. Typically, as is the case in the last scenes of *Tartuffe*, it would be left to the king, one of his representatives, or some symbol of the dominant political and cultural discourse to reestablish order (Molière, 2008). But in the case of the Winnemucca Troupe’s performances, the figure who reestablishes order is Chief Winnemucca himself. One could, thus, build a tantalizing argument here for a re-reading of the Winnemucca Troupe’s performances as highly subversive and dangerously radical.

<sup>69</sup> Please see pages 32-33 of Chapter One and, in particular, footnote #18 for greater exploration of the theoretical underpinnings of the “Other” and “Otherness.”

which audiences were entirely unprepared. They proved themselves equally skilled at navigating dominant themes of contemporary political discourse in order to engender praise and popularity. In fact, the episode with the “Copperhead” marked a moment of keen political savvy.

Copperheads were a group of vocal Democrats in the northern United States who opposed the Civil War and attempted to inspire a grass roots movement to end it. Labeled “Copperheads” by Republicans who accused them of treacherous, poisoning rhetoric not unlike a bite by the snake of the same name, these Democrats managed to turn the name around by reinterpreting it to mean copper head pennies, which just happened to accommodate the symbol of Liberty. In fact, they went so far as to cut Liberty from the copper pennies, donning these cuttings as honorary badges to make their point. A controversial group sometimes accused of undermining and actually harming the Union cause through anti-draft efforts, various conspiracies, and the encouragement of desertion, the Copperheads gained a strong foothold in Ohio. But they fell very quickly from favor after the fall of Atlanta in September 1864, an event that Northerners interpreted as a sure sign that the war was nearly concluded, and to be finished in Union’s favor (Thomas, 1952, p. 377).

Virginia City, Nevada, was particularly strong in its support of the Union<sup>70</sup> and took pride in its silver contribution as *the* single most important factor in the North’s fa-

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<sup>70</sup> There were a couple of notable episodes of tension between the Northern majority in Virginia City and Southern sympathizers (who appear to be more or less synonymous with Copperheads according to the area’s journalists.) Some Confederate flag raising incidents in 1861 led to the marching in of a company of United States Dragoons from Fort Churchill and the temporary enactment of martial law (Watson, 1964, p. 62). In 1862, an incident between Copperheads and Union recruiters turned violent before townsfolk intervened. Later, a local paper printed the following:

An Epitaph

vor. So, the “Royal Piute Family’s” use of such political staging was brilliantly geopolitical and temporally nuanced for maximum effect. They scalped about the only white archetype that Comstockers could wholeheartedly get behind, thereby narrowly avoiding crowd alienation. That constituted a stroke of genius. Hitting the mark of all truly great performances, the Winnemucca Troupe succeeded in leaving their audiences at once delightfully entertained and relatively uncomfortable. The peculiar combination was sure to keep their performances at the forefront of each Comstocker’s mind and the front of their conversations for a long time. They were an immediate hit.<sup>71</sup>

The Winnemucca Troupe had a powerful “ace in the hole” — a deeply embedded understanding (courtesy of Tru-ki-zo) that their “white brothers” were, in the end, more or less just like them. Of course, there was the façade that many whites projected. Moreover, the Numa had trouble comprehending their often startlingly backward understanding of the world and Euro-American roles within it. Nevertheless, it appears that the Winnemucca Troupe recognized that beneath the propriety and peculiar beliefs with

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Stranger behold! Here lies the dead;  
 ’tis John G. Downey, the Copperhead.  
 Some say that he died from shame and grief;  
 Others, that he choked on Carpenter’s beef.  
 Anyhow, he lies here, dead as d—nation,  
 A fearful warning to all who wickedly oppose  
 Uncle Abe’s Administration!”

<sup>71</sup> The irony of the Winnemucca family performing across the Pacific Coast and northern Nevada and scalping someone onstage during the same time period as the Pyramid Lake Indian War is similar to that of Sitting Bull and Rains in His Face performing with Buffalo Bill following the relatively recent massacre of Federal forces at the Little Big Horn. At first glance, this might appear to be a carefully calculated political move akin to the parading and humiliating of imprisoned Vercingétorix through the streets of Rome after the fall of Gaul. But Native Americans were neither humiliated nor denounced in either of these shows (although they did have to adhere, to varying degrees, to predetermined stereotypes.) Apparently, nineteenth-century Americans (and Europeans) were just as fascinated by “fugitive” Native Americans as they were gunslingers and bandits such as the outlaws Jesse James, Butch Cassidy, the Sundance Kid, and Billy “the Kid.” Clearly, a fascination with exoticism and “Otherness” was also at work here.

which Euro-Americans shrouded themselves, they had the same fundamental desires, wants, and needs. They were stimulated by the same visual images, auditory experiences, sensual memories, and subconscious motivations. They were actually little removed from the Druidical ancestors of Europe's yesteryear. Only they didn't know it. Living for so long within the repressive rigors of a puritanical society, they had come to believe themselves impervious and superior to such feelings, and it was this sense of superiority that belied their ultimate weakness.

Naïveté of self, bordering on ignorance, made many Euro-Americans quite vulnerable to seduction by those that they deemed, ironically, to be naïve, unsophisticated, and inferior. The power of the "Other" to entertain, captivate, and confuse them represented an untapped source of power — something that savvy black pioneers of post-Civil War minstrel shows fully exploited, too. In fact, a number of white performers employed the same trick by inventing exotic personae, which distinguished them as the "Other" and then using their intimate understanding of basic human psychology to blindside fans with ambivalent desire.<sup>72</sup> In essence, they "defamiliarized"<sup>73</sup> themselves. The mere fact that exotic "foreigners" participating in onstage taboos could excite desire within white audiences was incredibly troubling to many Euro-Americans raised in a Judeo-Christian culture of guilt where "sin" was not to be mentally entertained, let alone physically indulged. Equal parts curious, stimulated, and guilty, many Euro-Americans paradoxically came

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<sup>72</sup> Female performers such as Adah Isaacs Menken, Lola Montez, and Lotta Crabtree were particularly adept at this. For more about the strategies that Adah Isaacs Menken used in order to launch her celebrity, see the beginning of Chapter Four.

<sup>73</sup> This brings to mind an argument that would be made by Modernist authors and artists of the twentieth century that "literary language and all other artistic forms work in the opposite direction [of the automatisation of perception]: they draw attention to perceptions by making them *unfamiliar*" (Selden, 1989b, p. 42). They applied this strategy to their oeuvre through the technique of defamiliarisation.

back for more, unable to understand why the “Other” held such powerful sway over the very corporeality that they tried to repress and marginalize.

### *The Wild West & the Native American Question*

Indians of the West have been celebrated as the Noble Savage, revered as the mystical medicine man, mourned as the vanishing Red Man, upheld as the harmonious environmentalist, admired as the proud and able warrior, and vilified as the conniving and treacherous barbarian, to name [a] few of the broad-brush themes that have proliferated in dime store novels, Hollywood Westerns, and New Age babble. The truth is, of course, much more interesting: Indians are, at the end of the day, people. And this means that the stories and lives of the aboriginal peoples of the American West are at once more universally human and more singularly unique than any myth about them. (Reinhardt, 2003, p. 184)

Following upon their successes in Washoe, the “Royal Piute Family” went on to perform in Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose, and other select California localities. The departure of the Winnemucca troupe was heralded in local newspapers: “Our great Chief Winnemucca and his two daughters with a train of attendants left Carson for Sacramento and San Francisco, where Jim Miller proposes to show them up to the greatest possible advantage before the delighted citizens of that portion of the Pacific world” (Watson, 1964, p. 324). Following in the tracks of their journey, the *Sacramento Daily Union* stated on November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1864, that “the famous Indian chief WINNEMUCCA arrived in town,” and on November 15<sup>th</sup>, “the Winnemucca Indian Troupe performed at the Metropolitan Theater” (Sacramento Daily Union, 1865).

During a later Sunday performance at San Francisco’s Metropolitan Theater, the Winnemucca Troupe was “abundantly greeted by the *elite*, the dark of the city... clothed in their stolidity” (Watson, 1964, p. 324). Among those attending was San Francisco’s

own royalty of a sort, the self-proclaimed “Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico” his Imperial Majesty Emperor Norton I,<sup>74</sup> who chose to sit rather conspicuously and nobly away from the main crowd, surely a mark of his self-perceived stature in the community. The crowd contained various notables besides Emperor Norton including California legislators; members of the Board of Education; police officers; and, police detectives. Even the honorable “Officer Blitz,” who figured so consistently in Mark Twain’s column of eventful happenings and mishaps for the *San Francisco Daily Morning Call*, (after Twain’s relocation from Virginia City to the city) stopped by to watch.

While the popularity of the Winnemucca Troupe seems a bit surreal in its temporal proximity to the Williams’ Station Massacre, the Pyramid Lake Indian War, and countless other skirmishes between Great Basin Native Americans and whites, the categorization of the Troupe as a minstrel show is very telling. In fact, it may betray an important psychological function embedded in the event. Minstrel shows came into vogue

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<sup>74</sup> Joshua Abraham Norton (c. 1819-1880) was born in England and spent his early life in South Africa before voyaging to San Francisco in 1849 via the *Hurlothrumbo* with \$40,000 from his father’s estate. He was a self-employed business owner who fell into financial difficulties after speculating in Peruvian rice before falling off the radar for about ten years. Upon his reappearance in San Francisco in 1859, he made up for lost time by declaring himself the “Emperor of the United States and Protector of Mexico” and issuing a number of bold declarations and statements. His audacious self-coronation, radical albeit somewhat “common sense” proclamations, and his regal bearing won over many a San Franciscan, and so citizens tended to treat him with deference and respect. In fact, some local establishments went so far as to accept currency issued in his name. Among his more popular proclamations was a call to construct a bridge crossing the bay, build an underground tunnel to access the city, and dissolve the United States Congress by force. His funeral was attended by an estimated 30,000 people, and he was immortalized in literature by authors such as Mark Twain, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Neil Gaiman. Petitions continue to circle whereby the Bay Bridge would be renamed to honor his memory and foresight. *Emperor Norton I, The Musical* premiered in San Francisco at the Shelton Theater off Union Square on April 1, 2007. One theater critic aptly observed, “The spirit of rugged individualism is the very lifeblood of San Francisco. It’s the kind of place where Starchild can run for County Supervisor, where we not only put a measure to impeach President Bush on the ballot, but dozens of people will go out to Ocean Beach in mid-winter and lie upon the sand to spell the words “IMPEACH” with their bodies. *I like to think of it as a city of the grand flourish.* And ever has the City by the Bay been this way, it appears. The city’s slogan, “Find Yourself Here,” was never more applicable than to the epic figure of San Franciscan, Joshua Norton, Emperor of the United States who ruled the nation from his seat of power, a little place on Commercial Street between Kearny and Montgomery... one of San Francisco’s most beloved figures [emphasis added]” (Hunt).

beginning in the 1840s and were among the most popular form of entertainment across nineteenth-century America, both prior to and following the Civil War. The melodeons of Virginia City often did their best business when touring minstrel shows stopped over on their way back East or to California. Stephen Foster held the honor of being the genre's foremost composer, and his influence on the music of America cannot be overemphasized.

Foster's sentimental and often emotionally-charged music, coupled with the crude racial content of the minstrel show, provided a means, albeit quite unenlightened and Eurocentric, for whites to examine issues of race, identity, and slavery.

He was a voice of the times. When he wrote his songs, the Negro question was disturbing the conscience of the North. This is why the minstrel show grew so popular there so quickly. By finding amusement in blackface performers, by listening to sentimental songs about the South, by watching Negro dancers, Northern audiences found a safety valve for the release of passions aroused by the issue of slavery. Foster's song classics — like the stage medium in which they were heard — reflect Northern sentimental responses to the 'Negro question.' (Twain, 2008, p. 42)

In the performances of the Winnemucca Troupe, perhaps, Comstockers and Californians searched for a similar “safety valve” or means of confronting the emotional and psychological tensions raised by the Native American question.

The Wild West show, as Buffalo Bill Cody envisioned it a decade later, would certainly attempt to confront the Native American question while giving voice and heritage to what Cody feared was a dying way of life. An audacious showman, Cody was adept, like the Winnemucca Troupe, at sensing what his audience expected and then giving them that and much more. His first appearance on stage occurred in the early 1870s when he played himself in a theatrical rendition of Ned Buntline's dime novel entitled

*Buffalo Bill, the King of Border Men* (1869). Deeply impressed by his reception back east, soon, Buffalo Bill organized his own shows in which he included any possible western archetype and/or event that might appeal to his audience. He emphasized rough-and-tumble aspects of life on the frontier along with its exoticism, taboos, and egalitarianism by featuring acts such as “Calamity” Jane, Annie Oakley<sup>75</sup> and Frank Butler, and various Native Americans of notoriety including Chief Sitting Bull, Geronimo, and Rains in His Face, the Lakota warrior purported to have killed General Custer during the Battle of the Little Bighorn. During some of his late nineteenth-century shows, bands of Sioux warriors performed the Ghost Dance of the northern Nevadan Numic medicine man Wovoka,<sup>76</sup> to the delight of audiences, ignorant of its significance or of the controversy that it would soon ignite at the Wounded Knee Reservation. His shows presented Native Americans, even those who had earned ignominious reputations during the Indian Wars, as flesh and blood human beings who were “simultaneously exotic and accessible” (Kasson, 2000, p. 162). He humanized and demystified them, and audiences were captivated. In this way

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<sup>75</sup> Women such as “Calamity” Jane and Annie Oakley must have left an indelible mark on Buffalo Bill because he was very forward thinking in terms of gender equality. In fact, he argued, “What we want to do is give women even more liberty than they have. Let them do any kind of work they see fit, and if they do it as well as men, give them the same pay” (Staff, 1984; Wilson, 1998, p. 316).

<sup>76</sup> Wovoka (lit. “wood cutter”) was a Northern Piute religious leader born somewhere around 1856 in the Smith Valley area southeast of Carson City, Nevada. It is believed that his father was a religious leader known as the “Numu-Taibo” and that he instilled many of his beliefs in Wovoka. Early in adulthood, Wovoka earned a reputation as a powerful medicine man by performing what we would now call “magic acts” or illusions. For example, he was famous for the bullet catch trick, which he employed to persuade the Lakota that special “ghost shirts” would protect them from bullets. Accounts claim that he demonstrated a certain level of mastery over the weather and could even levitate. On January 1, 1889, during a solar eclipse, he claimed to have a prophetic vision wherein he saw the ancestors of the Numa being resurrected and the whites being removed from North America. In order to bring about these prophecies, Wovoka encouraged Native Americans across North America to lead righteous lives, and perform the Ghost Dance during a series of tribal gatherings lasting five days apiece. The Lakota were particularly receptive to his message, and participated in the wearing of “Ghost Shirts” and Ghost Dances, which some whites confused with war dances. The Ghost Dance became notorious after its association with the Miniconjou Lakota and Hunkpapa Lakota who may have practiced it along with the wearing of Ghost Shirts under the direction of the medicine man, Yellow Bird, just prior to their massacre by the U.S. 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment near Wounded Knee Creek on December 29, 1890.

and others far more evident, Buffalo Bill answered the Native American question. In fact, in his advertisements and publications he said it best by describing Native Americans as, “the former foe, present friend, the American.”<sup>77</sup>

### *African Americans on the Comstock*

The sound of a gunshot pierced the smoky air in the small saloon. It came from the poker table, where all but one of the players had alertly jumped to their feet. One of the players writhed on the floor as blood spilled from his leg. The shot was an accident, caused by a pistol falling from someone’s lap and discharging when it hit the floor. Other than having a sore leg, the victim’s good health would later be pronounced by a local doctor. (K. J. Dixon, 2002, p. 1; *Territorial Enterprise*, 1866)

Gunplay, even accidental, marked a boon for Comstock newspaper men, especially on slow days when journalists such as Mark Twain rejoiced at the news of a shootout or murder. In the absence of a good old-fashioned act of violence, Twain admitted that he “let fancy get the upper hand of fact too often when there was a dearth of news” (Twain, 2008, p. 220). Doctoring the news was not necessary on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1866, though, as the accidental shooting at the Boston Saloon provided just enough spice to keep the *Territorial Enterprise* and other local newspapers tasty.

What makes this story particularly intriguing is that the Boston Saloon where the shooting occurred was owned by African American William A.G. Brown and served as the “popular resort for many of the colored population” from 1866 to 1875 (*Territorial Enterprise*, 1866) (K. J. Dixon, 2005, p. 9). The man shot in the leg during the “friendly” poker game was a white man named Frenchy, and his fellow poker players were all Afri-

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<sup>77</sup> As a former scout, Buffalo Bill demonstrated a certain level of respect for Native American peoples and supported their rights. He argued, “every Indian outbreak that I have ever known has resulted from broken promises and broken treaties by the government”(Staff, 2013; Wilson, 1998, p. 316).

can American. In other regions of the emotionally inflamed post-Civil War United States, one can only imagine what an accidental shooting along similar racial lines might have provoked. But in Virginia City, Frenchy's leg was simply patched up, and the poker game went on. All's well that ends well. What's more, the story brought the Wild West just ever so slightly to life for the residents of Washoe, which was always a welcome distraction. Today, it points to the fact that African Americans were very much participants in the Wild West, despite the white-washed treatment that Hollywood has often given the Western genre.

While stigma and racism certainly existed on the Comstock — typified most specifically in the attraction of the minstrel show — the city's overwhelmingly pro-Union sympathies and anti-slavery stance created an ambiguous racial landscape for African Americans to navigate; some did so with remarkable success. Amy Payne, the daughter of former slaves, rose to such prominence that she eventually owned a local saloon, a popular restaurant, a boardinghouse on C Street, and was listed in her obituary as being a well-known facet of the community and having acquired “considerable property” (James, 1998, p. 154). At each of these establishments, she served a wide variety of clientele, and her boarding house was most heavily frequented by African Americans and German-Americans. Payne's endeavors were impressive, not only with regard to her lineage and ethnicity,<sup>78</sup> but most assuredly, with regard to her gender.

The aforementioned William A. G. Brown relocated from Boston, Massachusetts, to the Comstock in 1863 and worked as a “bootblack.” By 1864, he ran his own saloon

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<sup>78</sup> While this chapter does not purport to be an exhaustive examination of racial and ethnic identity construction on the Comstock, a few of the more interesting examples of how identity was manifested through music and entertainment are discussed.

on B Street. Despite involvement in the murder of a fellow African American, he was never charged with any crime (James, 1998, pp. 153-154). Two years later, he relocated to D Street across from Maguire's Opera House, where he opened the Boston Saloon,<sup>79</sup> a beautiful establishment that thrived from 1866 to 1875 under his capable leadership.

Brown's story is a vibrant admixture of three recurring themes of the American West: 1) its egalitarian opportunities, 2) its "wildness" and violence, and 3) the ambiguous morality of its protagonists. He represents the epitome of the rugged individual (with a past) rising from "rags to riches" in the American West of pregnant promise.

The diverse "reality" of Thocmetony's or Amy Payne's or William A. G. Brown's American West, with its varied ethnicities, races, and languages, was largely lost in reified mid-twentieth-century Hollywood depictions of the frontier. During an address to West Point graduates in 1969, Ralph Ellison spoke of the incongruences in American society that drove him to write the *Invisible Man*: "I wanted to tell a story. I felt that there was a great deal about the nature of American experience that was not understood by most Americans. I felt that the diversity of the total experience rendered much of it mysterious. And I felt that because so much of it which appeared unrelated was actually most intimately intertwined, it needed exploring." The story of African Americans — many of whom were freshly emancipated — attempting to remake their social, economic, and political circumstances in the Pacific West of possibility is as "American" as it gets. More-

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<sup>79</sup> The name of the Boston may have been more than a simple demonstration of Brown's pride in his city of origin. Boston, Massachusetts, has long been celebrated as a symbol of freedom to the United States because of its pivotal role in the events leading up to the American Revolution. From the African American viewpoint, this was further underscored by the city's steps to ban slavery altogether as early as the late eighteenth century. In 1860, Frederick Douglass summed it up this way, "nowhere more than here have the principles of human freedom been expounded" (as cited in K. J. Dixon, 2002). In this context, the Boston Saloon represented a place of freedom and refuge.

over, it is not only fascinating but, to our day and age, potentially therapeutic. As archaeologist Dr. Kelly J. Dixon (University of Montana) observes, “it is necessary to continue to promote and expand upon this story of a shared heritage in the West to highlight a sense of mutual respect for the diverse cultures comprising the history and current character of this country” (K. J. Dixon, 2002, p. 220).

This is not to imply that the Comstock was entirely devoid of racism and prejudice, but it (along with the American West, in general) did tend to be more forward thinking than other regions of the country. The instances of racism that we do know about on the Comstock come largely from the documentary record and tend to cut across the deep political channels left by the Civil War. Oftentimes, acts against blacks represented “last stands” by Confederate sympathizers, and they were quickly extinguished by members of the community. An example from the life of Dr. W. H. C. Stephenson perhaps best illustrates this point. In 1870, records show that Dr. Stephenson registered to vote, and one white resident refused to sign under his name because he felt it was beneath him. When journalists of the *Territorial Enterprise* got hold of this news, they used the event to print a damaging ridicule of the racist holdout. Moreover, they affirmed their willingness to sign their own names under that of so well respected an individual as Dr. Stephenson.

A treasured staple of the community, Dr. Stephenson arrived in 1863 and was initially listed as a laundry worker. But by the mid-1860s, he worked as a physician conducting a successful medical practice in Virginia City where he treated both African American and Euro-American patients and reported a net worth of \$2,000. An occasional minister and an outspoken member of the city’s black community, Stephenson was appointed a member of the Nevada Executive Committee in June 1865 whose mission it

was “to take steps to petition the next Legislature for the Right of Suffrage and equal rights before the Law to all the Colored Citizens of the State of Nevada.” On the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1866, he passionately declared his enthusiasm and determination to “contend for ‘Equality before the Law’” for all African Americans in the state (James, 1998, p. 154; Rusco, 1975; Taylor, 1998).

The relatively small number of African Americans on the Comstock and their general orientation toward service work rather than mining labor meant that they were not perceived as an employment threat, and this may best explain the ambiguous place that they occupied in the racial landscape of northern Nevada: “African Americans never numbered much more than one hundred in Virginia City, but they played important roles building the community. African Americans served as laborers, barbers as well as businesses owners and community leaders” (Kitrell, 2011).

In the case of William A. G. Brown, the story of his flourishing Boston Saloon — which he sold just prior to the 1875 fire that wiped out much of Virginia City including Piper’s (formerly Maguire’s) Opera House — is both intriguing and complicated. In her study of four Comstock saloons, Dixon gained new insight into the role the Boston Saloon played in the area through the analysis of butcher marks on faunal remains. The remains were uncovered during the 2001 excavation of the original saloon site, and they clearly demonstrate that the Boston was anything but a second rate establishment. In fact, after comparing her findings from the Boston Saloon with four other saloon excavation sites, Dixon came to a fascinating conclusion. “We discovered that the Boston Saloon offered some of the finest cuts of meat and best prepared food of all the saloons we investigated. After comparing the artifacts from four separate excavations, it became clear that

this saloon was well-appointed and well-lit and that Brown wanted his place to seem safe and inviting” (Kitrell, 2011).

A variety of other artifacts including stemware and the pipes and accoutrements for gas lighting further establish the high end nature of this comfortable, warmly-lit saloon. “The story of William Brown and his Boston Saloon highlights the existence of a nearly forgotten remnant of African American heritage in the West, and its place on the comparative scale of Virginia City drinking houses leads to an understanding of the dimensions of diversity” (K. J. Dixon, 2005, pp. 61, 102, 159). Besides evidence of fine dining, the Boston Saloon excavation uncovered some intriguing examples of blended African and European material culture. For example, red clay pipes were uncovered that are unique to this particular site. While cream colored pipes from Northern Europe are the norm at most Comstock excavations, thick, red clay pipes suggest influences from the Deep South where digs at Southern plantation sites have recovered nearly identical smoking implements.

Moreover, a modified half dollar coin and perforated dime were uncovered beneath floorboards of the saloon, again evocative of similar finds at Southern plantations. While the practice of using perforated coins to ward off unwanted spirits is a European folk cultural tradition with roots in the sixteenth century, it marked an equally important feature of certain West African traditions, especially for contemporaneous members of the forced African diaspora to the Southern states. In the latter case, modified and/or perforated coins were thought to protect against witchcraft and the supernatural (K. J. Dixon, 2005, p. 69). Previously, the furthestmost Western examples of this were thought to be located in Texas. “The Virginia City coins enrich our understanding of a heritage that

preserved traditions from Africa and made them part of the American experience, even as former slaves settled throughout the continent” (Kitrell, 2011).

Located just across the street from Maguire’s Opera House on D Street, the Boston Saloon occupied a prime location on the Comstock and offered its own musical entertainment as attested by material culture from the same 2001 excavation. A trombone mouthpiece was recovered at the Boston suggesting instrumentation typical of minstrel entertainment. Like the Winnemucca Troupe, skillful entertainers excited the ambivalent desire of their Euro-American majority audience thereby securing public acclaim and popularity. As with the Winnemucca Troupe, examining how African Americans interacted with the community through entertainment and music provides an important insight into their role within the community. An April 1866 article from the *Daily Territorial Enterprise* suggests just what such a performance may have looked and sounded like although the ethnicity of the performers is never clearly related: “MUSIC HALL. – Collin’s bone solo was excellent as was the banjo solo of Billy Sheppard. Miss Maggie Moore’s songs always please.” The description of the performance is typical of minstrelsy.

In another excerpt from the *Daily Territorial Enterprise* dated May 12, 1866, the famous American minstrel composer Stephen Foster is mentioned, further suggesting the style of music performed. The ethnicity of these same performers is delineated in the distinctly racist language employed by the journalist:

MUSIC HALL. – A man sees and hears more good things there of an evening all for the insignificant sum of four bits, than he can anywhere else in a whole month. Foster is there with his glorious songs and Josephine with her unrivaled dancing. That huge little nigger, Master Jimmy



Figure 3.1 Trombone mouthpiece recovered from the Boston Saloon.  
Photo courtesy of Ron James, State Historic Preservation Office.

Moore, who defies any small shaver of his size in the world to beat him in his clog dance, and his piquant dashing little sister Maggie with her comic songs and delineations, too, are there. Billy Sheppard and Johnny Collins appear nightly in dance, song, niggerisms, general comic delineations and side-splitting farces.

These newspaper clippings provide interesting insight into the types of minstrel music taking place on the Comstock and, perhaps, at the Boston Saloon. Moreover, within the context of the trombone mouthpiece found at the Boston, this article raises some tantalizing questions, especially with regard to the location of the purported “Music Hall.”

“Virginia City newspaper accounts describe an African American band that performed during the nineteenth century. The brass mouthpiece from the Boston Saloon site

may be a remnant of one of the instruments in the band” (Kitrell, 2011). Due to the generic nature of the term “Music Hall,” however, it is difficult to pin down its listing in the Virginia & Truckee Railroad Directories and, therefore, its address. It was, however, often mentioned alongside Maguire’s Opera House, which may suggest it was in the vicinity of the Boston Saloon. Might this be an allusion to a stage located near or, perhaps, within the African American saloon? While it is extremely tempting to let the imagination run wild, it is worth heeding Ronald James’s warning that “it is impossible to link this artifact with any particular musical organization. The relic is nevertheless evocative of a time when the African American community added to the rich diversity of the Comstock Mining District” (Kitrell, 2011). Clearly, the ambiguous treatment of African Americans on the Comstock did not detract from their active roles as business owners, saloon-keepers, physicians, entertainers, and musicians.

Music halls and melodeons, in general, both drew heavy crowds, especially when they featured travelling minstrel shows. Time and time again, articles from the Comstock’s newspapers show a heavy preference for this form of entertainment. The format for the minstrel show was pioneered by Edwin P. Christy’s Minstrels who played Broadway for nearly ten years and commissioned Stephen Foster to write many of their songs. The Christy Minstrel format was generally adhered to by all performers of minstrelsy and placed the performers in a semi-circle before their audience where they would provide an admixture of entertainment ranging from choruses to solos to instrumental pieces to jokes and even some drama. The program was driven by the interlocutor who wore white face and a fine suit. All of the other performers were generally black-faced and wore gaudy, ridiculous costumes with huge coat tails and striped pants. After opening with a big cho-

rus number, the interlocutor would order the rest of the troupe to take a seat, and then they would launch into a variety act replete with ballads, comic songs, and instrumental interludes generally played on the banjo or violin. Horn instruments such as trombones were sometimes featured, too. The second half, known as the olio, usually comprised a series of individual acts concluding with a hoedown or walk-around in which every member of the troupe was featured at some point while his fellow performers clapped, sang and played instruments in accompaniment.

By far the most influential composer of this genre was Stephen Foster. Despite a lack of formal musical training, he learned by listening to spirituals at the black church that he attended with the family's servant, Olivia Pise. From his sister, he heard a steady stream of popular, sentimental songs and was exposed to the songs of black laborers while working at a Pittsburgh Warehouse. The result was a popular musical career troubled by alcoholism, depression, and marriage problems. Despite troubles in his personal life, however, Foster managed to write about two hundred songs, which largely make up the American popular song album of the nineteenth century including: "Oh Susanna!," "The Camptown Races," "Beautiful Dreamer," and "Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair."

Minstrel shows marked the first truly "American" form of entertainment, and yet, these shows underscored a complicated and troubling legacy of racism, conquest, and inhumanity. In their own time, though, they brought racial issues to the forefront of American popular culture. They introduced the vast richness of African American musical influences to a much wider audience. Perplexing and disquieting, however, were the portrayals of African Americans, especially when represented by whites whose faces were

slathered with burnt-cork or grease paint.<sup>80</sup> “It seems bizarre at best and repugnant at least to modern sensibilities to have northern white men, who knew little to nothing of true African-based music, portray plantation slaves with grotesque accents, degrading humor, and simple, catchy songs. However, to the sensibilities of the age, minstrelsy was a sensation, lauded as the most spontaneous, creative, purely American music ever heard — much as jazz would be lauded eighty years later.” Even more confusing, out West, minstrel show performers did not always wear blackface: “The minstrels were, interestingly, sometimes in blackface and sometimes not; the frontier tended to be more democratic” (Green, 2002, p. 4).

In reality, the race of performers in minstrel shows can sometimes be difficult to identify from the documentary record because white and black performers alike were referred to using racial slurs, and both white and black performers blackfaced at different times, for different reasons. These decisions were based on complex socioeconomic factors that were often regionally based.<sup>81</sup> Ironically, minstrel shows, which were initially established around the vicious propagation of stereotypes and slander against African Americans, eventually allowed the first successful African American performers to

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<sup>80</sup> In his book *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, Michael Rogin argues that blackface served a wide variety of purposes depending on the artist and the scenario. For example, “blackface is a form of cross-dressing in which one puts on the insignias of a sex, class, or race that stands in binary opposition to one’s own” (Rogin, 1998, p. 30). In this context, Rogin asserts that blackfacing, like cross-dressing, represented a means for some white nineteenth- and early twentieth-century performers to protest the white dominant discourse, not unlike Norman Mailer’s concept of the “White Negro” (Mailer, 1957). For others, it most assuredly represented a performance strategy and well-defined niche that could be quite lucrative. For still others, it represented that which it outwardly appeared to be, denigrating manifestations of racism and American imperialism.

<sup>81</sup> Sometimes, it was simply a facet of maintaining the minstrel esthetic, and, in such cases, the end men, whether white or black, usually darkened their faces with burnt cork. In more segregated American communities, it was sometimes considered unacceptable for white and black performers to occupy the same stage, and so ambiguous racial identification, exacerbated by black facing, permitted otherwise segregated performers to work the same stage.

emerge, as was apparent on the Comstock by the 1870s. Since African American minstrel companies often featured female entertainers, too, they opened some important doors for women as entertainers and musicians.

As early as the 1840s and 1850s, Thomas Dilward and William Henry Lane were among the first African American entertainers to perform in minstrel shows. By 1855, a number of all-black minstrel groups (e.g. Hicks and Sawyer Minstrels, Callendar's Consolidated Spectacular Colored Minstrels, etc.) toured the nation (and, in the case of Callendar's, Great Britain) claiming to be the only truly "authentic" minstrel shows, thereby marketing their racial identities and embracing the role of the "Other." Besides performing the standards of Stephen Foster, these performers introduced the music of African American composers to their audiences including the songs of James Bland. A prolific songwriter, Bland wrote over seven hundred songs including *Carry Me Back to Old Virginny* and was a popular singer and banjoist.

By 1877, Virginia City's citizens were still recovering from a devastating fire in 1875, which destroyed the core of the city including Piper's Opera House and the Boston Saloon. The city showed considerable tenacity and initiative, especially for a boom/bust mining community, in its determined resolve to reconstruct, persistent desire to expand, enthusiastic need to create beneficial societies and fraternal orders (for just about every ethnic group represented on the Comstock), and readiness to celebrate with grand festivities, parades, and fine music. According to a *Territorial Enterprise* article dated September 19, 1877, the city held a dedication ceremony and fundraiser for the Ashlar Lodge at the Miner's Union Hall.

Described as in keeping with the festivities of previous Ashlar Lodge events, party-goers enjoyed “a substantial meal and dancing to the music of a Black band with a White leader” (Territorial Enterprise, 1877). Virginia City’s Ashlar Lodge was, in fact, comprised of Prince Hall Masons, the oldest and largest secret fraternal organization for African Americans in the nation (K. J. Dixon, 2002, p. 117; Rusco, 1975, pp. 179-180). African American fraternal orders such as the Prince Hall Masons, churches, benevolent societies, and the contributions of notable business owners and active members of the community such as Amy Payne, William A. G. Brown, and Dr. Stephenson assisted in the establishment of far more than simply an African American presence on the Comstock. These individuals and groups had a hand in writing their own narratives of identity on Mount Davidson.

### *Liminality, Communitas, Entertainment, and Music*

More than colors and forms, it is sounds and their arrangements that fashion societies. With noise is born disorder and its opposite: the world. With music is born power and its opposite: subversion. In noise can be read the codes of life, the relations among men. Clamour, Melody, Dissonance, Harmony; when it is fashioned by man with specific tools, when it invades man’s time, when it becomes sound, noise is the source of purpose and power, of the dream — Music....

All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality. It is what links a power center to its subjects, and thus, more generally, it is an attribute of power in all of its forms. Therefore, any theory of power today must include a theory of the localization of noise and its endowment with form. (Attali, 1985, p. 6)

Just as gold fever attracted individuals from every part of the globe to California, so, too, the silver strike brought remarkably diverse groupings of residents to the Comstock. During his visit to Virginia City in the spring of 1860, J. Ross Browne noted Jewish mer-

chants, “setting out their goods and chattels in front of wretched-looking tenements.... Now and then a half-starved Pah-Ute or Washoe Indian came tottering along under a heavy press of fagots and whisky. On the main street, a jaunty fellow... dashed through the crowds on horseback, accoutered in genuine Mexican style, swinging his ‘riata’ over his head” (J. R. Browne, 1860-1861, p. 68). Obviously, Browne was in full exaggeration mode, and he had a particular theme to maintain, the complete and utter desolation of the “godforsaken” country of Nevada and its forlorn residents.

Nonetheless, his account tells us about the diversity of Virginia City, even from its earliest days. The U.S. Census of 1860 tells us even more. According to the census, the majority of the Comstock’s North American-born and Native American populations were supplemented by prospectors from Ireland, England, Scotland, Scandinavia, the Germanies, Poland (then, occupied by the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Russia), the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Russia, the Italian States, the South Sea Islands, Portugal, Mexico, South America, Spain, Panama, and Asia.

When calculated out, this means that about 30%<sup>82</sup> of the settlers in the portion of the Utah Territory later to become Nevada originated from foreign countries, and they tended to concentrate around the great Washoe silver strike. The Comstock, then, was comprised of an estimated 69% emigrants, 30% immigrants, and less than 1% American-

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<sup>82</sup> When contrasted with other emerging western states, a seemingly important distinction emerges. For example, foreign-born residents comprised 39% of Californians, 27% of Washingtonians, 7% of New Mexicans, and 8% of Coloradans. Back East, foreign born individuals made up about 25% of New York residents, 21% of Massachusetts residents, 19% of Illinois residents, 2% of Georgia residents, and 1% of South Carolina residents (James, 1998, pp. 34-35). While these figures are interesting in comparison to the Comstock number, however, it is essential to note that they include neither American-born Hispanics nor African American figures, both significant communities (based on regional considerations) which tended to have ancient roots in the New World. Native Americans are also exempt. So, these percentages actually say very little about what is commonly referred to as “diversity” today. They do, however, indicate that the Comstock was a place of many languages, cultures, costumes, and types of music.

born Hispanics.<sup>83</sup> According to Eliot Lord, the earliest miners tended to fragment along ethnic lines for recreational pursuits. “Men of different nationalities, working side by side under-ground, here first exhibited a clannish disposition: the Italians had their favorite meeting place; the French their ‘Café de Paris;’ the Germans their beer-cellar” (Lord, 1959, p. 93). From its first steps, the diverse community naturally fragmented, which could have spelled long-term trouble for not only the community but the Comstock Lode. The multicultural underpinnings of the city translated into a community of a thousand masks where identity was surprisingly fluid and communicated both overtly and subtly. While the 1860 U.S. Census records provide some fascinating demographic statistics, entertainment trends demonstrate an unmistakable thirst for the exotic, the unique, and the new. Savvy musicians and entertainers, such as the Winnemucca Troupe and African American minstrels, exploited this thirst for the exotic, the unique, and the new to great advantage while providing the community with shared experiences of theater-going and musicking essential to the development of civic bonds and pride (Levine, 2002).

Bringing together such a diverse population that happened to be largely male and more or less gold-fevered represented a significant challenge. All of the odds were in favor of complete and utter mayhem.<sup>84</sup> “Some of the violence of the early Comstock grew out of the region’s diversity and the contempt with which different ethnic groups

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<sup>83</sup>Native American population figures are very difficult to pin down for this time frame as the Piute, Shoshone, and Bannocks were embroiled in the Indian Wars making enumeration of their populations impossible.

<sup>84</sup> The one group standing apart from the all-male stereotype was Hispanics. In the 1860 U.S. Census, ninety-nine Hispanics were enumerated, and they ranged in place of birth from Mexico to Spain to South America to parts of Mexico incorporated into the United States after the Mexican-American War. Of those ninety-nine, 17% were female, representing, by far, the greatest female presence on the Comstock at the time (James, 1998, p. 35).

### Nativity of People Living on the Comstock, 1860

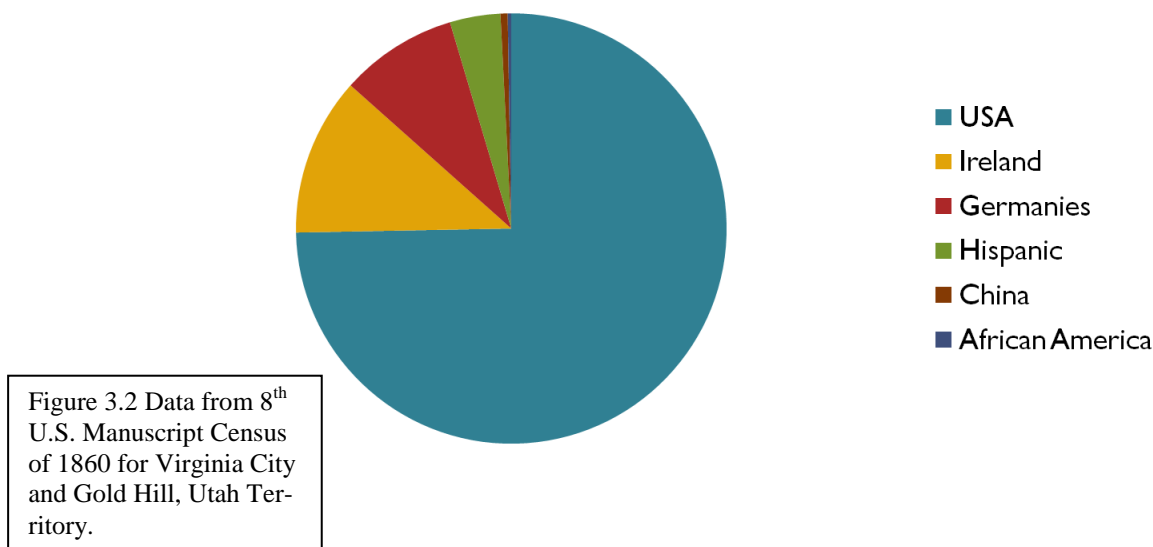


Figure 3.2 Place of Origin for Comstock Residents, 1860

occasionally regard one another” (James, 1998, p. 34). But while the reporters of the area’s future papers would time and again return to and mythologize these early instances of conflict, the greater truth was that the Comstock developed rapidly into a fairly stable, rather domestic, industrial giant — for a boomtown, that is.

What makes this even more striking is the nature of the community itself, which embodied liminality and, in turn, the liminoid. As the area’s wealthy reputation grew so did the number of tourists attracted by reports of enthusiastic stock speculators and journalists as well as the latest industrial technologies. Virginia City epitomized a twenty-four hour, seven-day a week “Gallery of Machines” that one would only typically be able to see during one of the great world’s fairs. Communities that come to embrace tourism are often considered to be both liminal and liminoid because they rely on unstable popu-

lation fluctuations and temporary residents to feed their economies while attracting tourists with leisure pursuits represented distinctly apart from work-related activities. Virginia City's population fluctuations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are fine examples of this "instability" while its "attractions" permitted tourists, ironically, to escape their own quotidian existences by watching the legendary miners of the Comstock Lode battle the subterranean depths of the earth for its wealth-laden yields.

In terms of the liminoid, due to its intimate communal ties with San Francisco, Virginia City represented a "home away from home" for many San Franciscans. It was the outermost frontier of the San Francisco mining pyramid, existing on the limen between civilization and savagery, work and play, decorum and the depraved. As a result, moral disorientation beset the city early and chose to linger, one of the chief characteristics of liminal and liminoid places. This characteristic often represents much of the appeal for tourists. Despite the churches that sprang up, the Temperance League, and the respectable citizens who longed for a stable and dignified community, societal strictures were often rejected and/or ignored outright. While San Franciscans were held to strict Sunday Laws, for example, Comstockers remained stalwartly exempt because of the need to keep the mines open and water free; the pumps chugged away twenty-four hours a day. But there was more than mining and milling at work on Sundays.

Following the persistent presence of a Temperance League in the area in 1864, local bartenders started complaining that Sunday, formerly their busiest day, was turning into their slowest. The *Gold Hill Daily News* went on to claim that, "this is a good indication, and shows that we are advancing in morality" (*Gold Hill Daily News*, 1864). That was, however, an optimistic statement for a community that in 1870 boasted over one

hundred drinking establishments (not counting private gambling halls, restaurants, theaters, or liquor stores),<sup>85</sup> one hundred and eleven professional gamblers, one hundred and sixty-one *reported* prostitutes (in Storey County), innumerable opium dens (not counting medicinal opiate dispensaries), six breweries, and a healthy trade in liquor, both bonded and bootleg.<sup>86</sup>

Liminal and liminoid communities are, furthermore, places of transformation and change, two qualities that Virginia City highlighted as a place where luck and hard work might place one in the upper echelons of astronomical wealth... or get one killed. Red-blooded examples of the success that Comstockers sought were readily in evidence, and they crossed some very diverse lines, thereby further instilling Comstockers with a sense of the egalitarian nature of the American West. “Those who were able to succeed represented a fairly broad cross section of society, a consequence of a new, less-rigid hierarchy where there was considerable opportunity” (James, 1998, p. 227). There were Irish success stories such as the “Big Four”: John Mackay, James Fair, William S. O’Brien, and James C. Flood. There were Jewish-German success stories such as those of Herman

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<sup>85</sup> Virginia City had one drinking establishment for every 145 citizens in 1876, which contrasts rather sharply with Boston, Massachusetts’s one drinking establishment for every 500 people (James, 1998, p. 181).

<sup>86</sup> According to Eliot Lord’s *Comstock Mining*, in 1880, the communities of Virginia City and Gold Hill (with a Storey County population of 16,004 according to the 1880 U.S. Census) consumed around 75,000 gallons of hard liquor (defined mainly as whiskey with beer and wine excluded.) Comstock breweries produced an estimated 147,996 gallons of beer and imported 67,800 gallons from California breweries and 10,000 from breweries located in the east. That puts beer consumption at 225,000 gallons in one year. According to Lord, “this is an average of 15 gallons per head for every resident of the county, in addition to the average consumption of 5 gallons of liquor. At ‘a bit a drink’ . . . , the usual price, the cost of liquor per head was at least \$40, and its total cost \$600,000 . . . . The price of beer and wine at retail was probably half this sum, so that \$900,000 was expended in quenching the thirst of 20,000 people” (James, 1998, p. 377). James points out, further, that Lord’s figures coincide quite nicely with a *Territorial Enterprise* estimate from 1872 that placed Comstock monthly liquor consumption at 1,000 barrels per month or \$20,000 (James, 1998, p. 307). Since Virginia City (by 1880) supported many respectable families, an ever shrinking gender gap (about 58% male to 42% female), and a Temperance League, non-residents from California and elsewhere assisted in those consumption rates.

Schussler, Philipp Deidesheimer,<sup>87</sup> Adolph Sutro, Joe Goodman,<sup>88</sup> and Mark Strouse.<sup>89</sup>

The two great opera house moguls of the Comstock, Thomas Maguire and John Piper, were both immigrants *and* emigrants, respectively from Ireland and Germany via California. Among non-Euro-American Comstockers, there were similar successes: Chinese-Americans such as the Yee family, Dr. Song Wing, and Dr. Son Haong; and, African Americans such as Amy Payne, William A. G. Brown; and, Dr. Stephenson.

The success stories above can be attributed, in many cases, to individuals who were not directly involved in the activity of mining, which adds an important layer of complexity to the mix. This points, yet again, to the fact that “mining the miners” proved more lucrative for many than descending into the shafts. This was something that the musicians, entertainers, prostitutes, saloon keepers, and boardinghouse owners of the area knew well. Healthy measures of heartache, sacrifice, and various intensities of risk for miners, mine owners, stock speculators, and financiers alike were generally guaranteed. Particularly well-suited to communicate the disparity between fabled potential and stark reality, music and the arts provided a balm of consolation for the less successful members of the community while refocusing their energies to aspire for more. “Like the other arts, musical experiences foreground the crucial interplay between the Possible and the Actual... The Possible includes all those things that we might be able to do, hope, think,

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<sup>87</sup> Philipp Deidesheimer’s success, unfortunately, would go largely unrewarded as he failed to patent his square-set timbering invention. It brought, however, name recognition, and many mine owners scrambled to employ him, at one point or another, just to have his name associated with their company (James, 1998, p. 56).

<sup>88</sup> Joe Goodman was editor of the *Territorial Enterprise* from 1861 to 1872 and is often referred to as the man who discovered Mark Twain, having given Samuel L. Clemens his first employment as a journalist in 1862.

know, and experience, and the Actual comprises those things that we have already thought and experienced” (Turino, 2008, pp. 16-17).

The Actual, which encompasses a system of habits necessary for daily survival, can become incredibly tiresome and drab without some distant focus on the Possible, and Comstockers knew this well. They recognized the essential nature of the arts and music in the easing of rather monotonous, pain-filled existences, especially among the miners who confronted industrial accidents regularly. They understood the importance of keeping certain egalitarian fables of success alive in the community, and this may be the very essence of what preserved the Comstock through numerous *borrascas* that destroyed communities of a similar size in other western places. “Successful artistic experiences and performances draw special attention to this interplay [between the Actual and Possible], wake us from habit, and thus provide that temporary sense of a life more deeply lived” (Turino, 2008, pp. 17-18). Years before he would return with Lotta Crabtree and his troupe, Mart Taylor, the first professional musician to visit the Comstock, entertained the city on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1860, addressing his opening song to “our liberal mining friends.” With hoots filling the room, Taylor sang:

The luring hope of gold, has tempted you to roam  
 Far from your friends and relatives, who mourn for you at home.  
 'Tis *hope* that lured you on, 'tis hope that does sustain,  
 And hope stands by you while you toil, yes, hope of golden gain.

Taylor’s lyrics both reminded the miners of the many sacrifices that they had made and continued to make (the Actual) and spurred them to persist, to stay true to the fantasies that had driven them first to California and then the Comstock (the Possible). A veteran of the California gold camps and the stages of San Francisco, Taylor knew how to enter-

tain miners. In the same song, he could give their hardships meaning, comfort them in their losses, and inspire them by retooling the faded fable of the “Argonaut.” He was warmly greeted in the budding communities of Washoe and went on to publish a large number of songsters including the *Gold Digger’s Song Book*.

From the miner’s perspective it merits noting that the community literally marked the threshold to the underworld, its fifty-plus miles of snaking subterranean tunnels a veritable Hades. In this place, men willingly descended thousands of feet into the ground, suffered through temperatures of 100° F. and more, and stared down disfiguration, disability, and death for a standard shift of at least eight hours a day. In deep cavernous holes lit feebly by candle light, they toiled for gold and silver, wealth which they would only sample in their \$4 to \$6 daily wages. Yet, by nineteenth-century standards, such wages were substantial, and eight hour days surprisingly short. Once their shifts were up, they gave themselves over rather enthusiastically to the pursuit of sensual hedonism — a day shift in hell meant sixteen in heaven, champagne oysters, and sleep included!

As is often the case in liminal spaces such as Virginia City, a strong sense of *communitas* emerged among diverse members of the Comstock’s nineteenth-century community who fractured into smaller neighborhoods and groupings often defined, at least loosely, by ethnicity and socioeconomics. Through parades, theaters, and community concerts, however, the city celebrated these cultural fragmentations, thereby constructing a community where many identities were not only tolerated but highlighted. In this way, the community allowed its inhabitants to embody several identities at once: their identity based on ethnic origin(s), their identity as a Comstocker, and their identity as an American. Due to the nature of the community, however, and the multiple ways in which

liminality was manifested, *communitas* was qualified by layers of meaning. For example, Comstock miners crossed over the same limen at the start of each shift, worked in the same inhumane conditions together and intensely bonded through shared experiences of hardship and endurance. Mine owners vied with one another to access the deep, rich veins of the “Mother Lode,” and so competitions among rival mining companies created more narrow classifications of identity, “belonging,” and *communitas*. The same can be said of union membership. Finally, the ethnicity of said miners working for said company provided another layer of *communitas*. Robert E. Park argues that such self-segregation is a feature of urbanity that comes with dangers: “Where individuals of the same race or of the same vocation live together in segregated groups, neighborhood sentiment tends to fuse together with racial antagonisms and class interests” (Park, 1915, p. 582). Moreover, he asserts that since cities permit immigrants to group together, they are better able to maintain their traditions and, therefore, *not* integrate. These were certainly concerns that Virginia City faced to varying degree, yet they found innovative means of overcoming these tendencies through entertainment, music, and inclusive public celebrations.

As a result, this fragmentation did not threaten the overall unity of the city because of the Comstock’s ability to celebrate a variety of cultures under the shared umbrella of civic identity. Through musical manifestations of ethnicity in civic parades, community concerts (including benefit concerts), dances, and other events, these emigrants and immigrants alike could embody their ethnic origins fully while sharing in the experience of being Comstockers and Western Americans. They could share a little piece of their homeland with the community while contributing to its cultural landscape and civic pride. Since they were both given a place of their own *and* opportunities to partici-

pate in the larger community, immigrants in the region tended toward far less aggressive displays of ethnicity.

Community building on the Comstock, in the vast majority of cases, involved consistent elements of: theater, music, dancing, civic parades, holidays, and alcohol among others. In fact, within the context of the community's cultural diversity *and* its impermanent nature, one could argue, that, perhaps, it was even *more* true. "Lessons of history, tradition, and culture are all contained in the music that people write and sing and listen to and carry with them" (Curtis, 1994, p. 262). Essentially, music and performance represented important strategies for community building, the maintenance of identity, and the acculturation of future generations (in both the culture of their residence and the culture of their ethnic origin) no matter how far removed they might be from the homeland both spatially and temporally.

The question of why performers of both national and international reputation have been consistently attracted to the stages of Washoe takes on a new scope in the context of Virginia City's existence as a liminal community. Not only did musicians and performers come because the money was in Washoe as were the theaters, not only did they come because the Comstock was a natural stopover point (an "in-between spot") during the overland journey to and from both coasts, but they came because Silverland *needed* and *demand*ed them. San Franciscans staked their imperial ambitions, their capital, and their community's very future on Comstock gold and silver.

But these so-called "Comstock colonizers" quickly realized that the deep veins of the Lode would not be easily accessed. They sat simultaneously upon the greatest wealth the United States had ever known and the greatest industrial problem that it had ever

faced. How were they to reach the silver and gold? The Comstock Lode was far too rich to leave in the hands of a bunch of nihilistic gunfighters, wayward vagabonds, and libertarian prospectors; none of these “rugged individuals” could singlehandedly access its greatest treasures. No, making the Comstock Lode a viable project required a vast assemblage of manpower — whole armies of miners, millers, machinists, loggers, carpenters, packers, railroaders, teamsters, and countless other industrial laborers. Skilled men from all over the world came to enlist in these armies. These vast industrial armies, in turn, required every possible resource necessary to support and motivate them. These resources included alcohol, entertainers, musicians, music halls and melodeons, boarding houses, prostitutes, and, eventually, wives, schools, opera houses, and fine restaurants. Getting to the Comstock Lode required a stable, skilled work force,<sup>90</sup> and a stable, skilled work force required a community so united in its ultimate purpose that the impossible could be achieved. And, the history of the area proves that, indeed, the impossible would be achieved, over and over again, from the square-set timbering of the mines to the Crown Point Trestle to the Schussler Pipe to the Sutro Tunnel.<sup>91</sup> Getting to the Comstock Lode marked, perhaps, the biggest communal effort America would see from the winning of the Civil War up to World War II.

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<sup>90</sup> The deep hard rock mines of the Comstock Lode required some of the most skilled mining engineers and miners in the world, and many of these men were German and Cornish/Irish, respectively. In particular, “the Cornish had a reputation for hard work and incomparable expertise in the mines that often ensured their employment” (James, 1998, p. 146). Good wages drew both the Cornish and the Irish to the Comstock. Working on the Comstock brought miners serious credentials and titles such as “hot plugs” or “hots.” (Both names refer to the scalding water that plagued Comstock miners at the deepest levels.) The mines of Idaho, Colorado, Montana, and even Australia were eager to hire them following the collapse of Storey County’s mining economy in the late nineteenth century. German mining engineers such as Deidesheimer earned equally impressive reputations and salaries.

<sup>91</sup> For more on the industrial innovations of the Comstock Lode and the dangers that its army of workers faced, see Brechin, 200; DeQuille, 1974; James, 1998; Lord, 1959; Moehring, 1997; Peck, 1993.

Entertainment and music were integral to the creation and maintenance of this community as time-honored, universal phenomena of community building and identity construction.

The pattern of relationships that is established during a musical performance and connects together its relationships, whether they be first-, second-, third-, or *nth*-order, models in metaphoric form, the pattern which connects us to ourselves, to other humans, and to the rest of the living world, and those are matters which are among the most important in human life. As in all human relationships the pattern is complex and often contradictory, and it is an image of our deepest desires and beliefs. If we would seek a reason for the central position that musicking occupies in human life, it is here. (Small, 1998, p. 22)

Entertainment and music created relationships, complex networks of relationship between diverse Comstock populations who were, otherwise, only very loosely bound by the inadequate links of gold fever. Entertainment and music united them in a common purpose, a common goal of conquering the Comstock Lode, no matter the risk.

Uniting a very diverse, temporary grouping of residents beneath the same banner of vision required the best and most ancient means available. Wild West versions of the USO, the entertainers and musicians of California, the broader United States, and even the world were tasked with uplifting, inspiring, and propelling Washoe's industrial workers back into the same unimaginable conditions day in and day out where they very necessarily toiled. In this context, San Francisco's omnipresent role in financing some of the finest entertainment venues and transporting some of the greatest performers of the era to the Comstock makes far more sense. These efforts stemmed from more than purely selfish motivations. Although San Franciscans definitely enjoyed the pleasures of Virginia City, the area meant far more to them than a place of recreation and hedonistic pursuits. While Virginia City *was* San Francisco's Las Vegas, the relationship cut far deeper.

Without Virginia gold and silver, the city by the bay could not possibly complete its mission of establishing an imperial Pacific presence. The elite businessmen of the bay (William C. Ralston, William Sharon) intuitively knew, just as did the mine owners, superintendents, officials, and politicians of what would become Storey County, that the successes of the mines lay in the successes of the community at large. They, therefore, employed whatever means necessary to promote a sense of ‘cohesive optimism’ and build a strong community. Music and entertainment<sup>92</sup> proved the essential mortar for this construction: “All music, any organization of sounds is then a tool for the creation or consolidation of a community, of a totality” (Attali, 1985, p. 6).

### *Creating Community, Constructing Theaters*

It is entirely false reasoning to suppose that any human being can devote himself exclusively to labor of any description. It will not do. Man must enjoy himself... laugh, sing, dance, eat, drink, and be merry... chat with his friends, exercise his mind in exciting gentle emotions, and his body in agreeable demonstrations of activity. The constitution of the human system demands this. It will not remain in health if it cannot obtain that variety... that sunshine of the heart... as indispensable as the material sunshine to the flower. (Gold Hill Daily News, 1864)

Northern Nevadans worked immeasurably hard and faced incalculable risks on a daily basis. As a result, they had constant anxieties to assuage, fears to repress, and a generous cash supply with which to do it. The extreme ethnic (and, even racial) diversity of the Comstock’s multicultural landscape meant that many residents, just like Piute and Afri-

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<sup>92</sup> While I do not wish to go so far as to suggest that the elite of San Francisco “conspired” to entertain Comstockers or even imply that every entertainer who came through the area had the same ultimate goal, I do wish to strongly suggest that many Comstock speculators saw the necessity in community building in the region. Moreover, they acknowledged the power of entertainment and music to facilitate this effort. Unlike other boom/bust mining towns, community building and an extremely organized work effort were crucial to mineral extraction on the Comstock due to the peculiar admixture of the extreme rigors of mining activity in the area and utter lack of natural resources necessary to support it.

can American performers and musicians, navigated ambiguous liminal spaces of identity in their everyday lives. Music and entertainment provided crucial means for smoothly traversing these complicated webs of dominant and repressed cultures. Moreover, musical activity represented opportunities for seemingly benign cultural expressions that were, more often than not, enthusiastically welcomed. Navigating the spaces between one's native culture(s) and one's adopted American culture, musical styles and entertainment provided crucial bridges to the past and its far-removed places and cultures. It also provided escape from the harsh realities of life on the Comstock. As a result, theater came to the community very early, even as the first staked tents of frantic '59 prospectors remained.

Built by the Westwood Troupe out of Camp Floyd in the Utah Territory, the first theater in Virginia City — christened the Howard Theater<sup>93</sup> — welcomed the public on September 29, 1860. Just seven weeks prior, the Troupe labored intensively to lay the theater foundations; construct the structure, stage, and benches; and, even produce their own scenery and costumes. Prior to those seven weeks, the Troupe blazed six hundred miles from Salt Lake City, Utah, across the Great Desert — then the most dangerous crossing of its day (this was the period of the Williams' Station massacre, Pyramid Lake War, and various minor conflicts) — to the area. Comprised of two families, the Westwoods and Tucketts, who immigrated together from England to St. Louis, they soon headed west in search of greater opportunities.

Among the performers was Mercy Westwood Tuckett, no doubt a welcome distraction for men who exponentially outnumbered women in the area. So determined was

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<sup>93</sup> The name Howard came from a purported financial backer of the project whose existence remains a mystery. Not only would the theater bear his name but eventually the street upon which the theater was located.

she to perform with the group that she traveled with an infant, having left her husband and two eldest children behind at Camp Floyd; she promised to send for them later. Predictably, as with so many marriages of the California widow(er) sort, divorce quickly followed. Despite such difficulties, Mercy along with her father, Philip (P. M.) Westwood, and the rest of the Troupe sought to plant firm roots at the base of the Comstock's Mount Davidson, and the documentary record gives every indication that they met with early successes. While sources disagree about the actual level of talent that they offered — Eliot Lord categorizes them as “strolling players” while Margaret Watson argues they were “seasoned actors and actresses” — they brought the area a large theatrical establishment wherein the ‘clannish’ nature of the first miners could be overcome through shared participation in theatrical and musicking experiences (Lord, 1883, p. 93; Watson, 1964, p. 42).

Virginia City did not have an established newspaper in 1860, and so it was left to the *Territorial Enterprise* (then, headquartered in Carson City) to cover the speedy construction process. Of the first theater in the area, a Carson City reporter wrote it was a “of respectable dimensions and appearance” (*Territorial Enterprise*, 1860b). But a Comstock correspondent for the *Sacramento Union* went so far as to question the validity of establishing an expansive theater of this nature in such a rugged location while demonstrating a reserved enthusiasm:

However inappropriate it may have seemed to those who last winter saw a few scattered tents and shanties dubbed with the sonorous title of Virginia City, none will... deny that we are fast assuming, if we have not already reached, a size that will fairly entitle us to the name of a city... the Howard Theatre is also completed and will open to-morrow night with “The Toodles,” and the time-honored farce of

the “Swiss Swains.”<sup>94</sup> The company is one from Salt Lake, where their performances are said to have been received with marked favor. Being the pioneers of the drama on the eastern slope, they will be, doubtless, well received. (Sacramento Union, 1860)

As the correspondent to the *Sacramento Union* would note, the theater provided light, comedic entertainment to the area, and the performers relied on their successes in Salt Lake City to promote the show. On opening night, it was clear that the Westwood Troupe had filled an important niche with the Howard Theater. Able to seat seven hundred, the facility filled to capacity and beyond. Such a large crowd gathered that men spilled out into the aisles, according to a number of local newspaper accounts.

Since the Westwood troupe was accustomed to opening their Camp Floyd shows with an overture from Johnston’s Seventh Infantry Band, which required a ten-piece orchestra, the troupe must have secured the services of local musicians, perhaps even borrowing from Fort Churchill.<sup>95</sup> Moreover, “since an orchestra — of how many pieces we know not — was a necessary adjunct of the theatre in those days, it seems safe to assume that an overture was played” (W. C. Miller, 1947, p. 14). As early as 1860, therefore, paid musicians most likely performed in the Howard Theater’s orchestra, evidencing music’s early and integral role in community building and daily life in Silverland. Unlike the eth-

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<sup>94</sup> *The Toodles* and the *Swiss Swains* were both produced in Haymarket, London, and first premiered in the United States in 1850. *The Toodles* was a farce with rather dark themes: deceit, betrayal, and lynching. But the witty dialogue between the main characters and constant mocking of Timothy Toodles helped maintain a light, comedic mood. Moreover, Timothy Toodles was a character that miners could get behind: perpetually “drunk in the legs, in the knees, in the heels, in the hands, and not in merely the preposterous necktie, the absurd hat, the thumbless gloves” (Watson, 1964, pp. 46-47; Wemyss, 1854, p. 17). The *Swiss Swains* was an operetta written by the comedian B. Webster, and so it was replete with trivial little musical numbers and absurd jokes. Along with *The Toodles*, it was very popular in America during the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>95</sup> In the 1860 Census recorded in mid-August, two musicians were listed as attached to Fort Churchill, 37-year old Charles DeFord of Rhode Island and 19-year old Julius Smith of German origin.

nically segregated saloons and gathering spots that locals were starting to carve out, the Howard Theater had the power to bring the *entire* community together as it very dramatically illustrated on opening night, a crucial factor in *all* future community building efforts from benefit concerts to civic parades. Besides performing in Virginia City, the Westwood troupe toured other areas of Washoe including Dayton, Franktown, Genoa, and Carson (Watson, 1964, p. 55).<sup>96</sup>

In early November of 1861 a surprising addition came to the Comstock from the Germanies via San Francisco, the Gruenwalds. Having just completed an engagement at Maguire's opulent opera house, the Jenny Lind, in San Francisco, the Gruenwalds were intent on introducing high opera to Silverland. This was a potentially risky move due to the sophisticated nature of the intended entertainment. Just four years prior, the introduction of high opera to Colorado theaters resulted in audience members who were "decidedly disappointed in their expectations" (Watson, 1964). Forty-niners turned Comstockers, however, had grown used to entertainment that covered the entire spectrum as the miners of the gold rush were rapidly followed by musicians and performers from all over the globe. A San Francisco *Daily Morning Call* article from December 2, 1860, announced the Gruenwalds' arrival: "THEATRICALS IN WASHOE. — There is a large company in Washoe at the head of which is Mr. and Mrs. Gruenwald, the well-known popular artists. They have recently been playing at the Howard Theatre, Virginia City" (*Daily Morning Call*, 1860). More than any other group, the Gruenwalds introduced sophisticat-

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<sup>96</sup> Eventually, members of the troupe would tour California while others would remain in the area and join the troupe of the famed Nova Scotian tragedian, James Stark, who would relocate from San Francisco, where he managed Maguire's Jenny Lind Theatre, to Virginia City.

ed entertainment to the area and established Virginia City as a theatrical suburb of San Francisco.<sup>97</sup>

The warm reception that the Gruenwalds received at the Howard eventually led them to settle in the area and establish the Melodeon or Gruenwald Theater on the west side of C Street near Union in February 1861. As a result, the Howard Street Theater had its first competition, and, since the Melodeon on C Street garnered rave reviews and the price of admission was less than that of the Howard, the Melodeon quickly dominated the Virginia City entertainment market. It would require James Stark, “the father of drama in California” and of the Washoe Dramatic Company to bring Shakespeare to Silverland in late 1861 thereby reviving the young Howard’s Theater and restoring its clientele. On November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1861, the *Territorial Enterprise* printed the following story, which was quoted in its entirety in the *Sacramento Union* and San Francisco’s *Golden Era*:

Another full house greeted Mr. Stark’s excellent company last evening. The unabated interest with which our citizens view the representations of this troupe shows the strong hold that Mr. Stark has on the community. To-night the great play of “Wm. Tell” will be performed, together with the amusing farce of “Irish Assurance and Yankee Modesty.” We are requested to state that persons who clamber over the roof to get in the window will hereafter find somebody there to receive the price of admission — either in tickets or money. (*Territorial Enterprise*, 1861)

Nearby areas followed suit and started constructing their own theaters and/or makeshift performance areas following in the footsteps of the Westwood Troupe’s marvelous construction project. By September 1861, the theaters of Washoe constituted a se-

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<sup>97</sup> With performances by the Gruenwalds, come the first documentary records of admissions prices for the Howard Theater. Not surprisingly, prices were equivalent to those charged at Maguire’s Jenny Lind Theater in San Francisco: Dress Circle and Orchestra Seats, \$1.00, Parquette, \$0.50, Gallery, \$0.25, and Reserved Seats, \$0.50 extra (Watson, 1964, p. 56).

rious circuit to which greater numbers of professional musicians and entertainers began traveling, including James Stark and company. This touring circuit included seven theaters and/or makeshift performance venues located in easy proximity to Washoe and Virginia City, according to the San Francisco newspaper the *Daily Morning Call*, and included the Melodeon or Gruenwald Theater, the Howard with a seating capacity of 700, a theater at Genoa with a seating capacity of 250, a theater at Carson City with a seating capacity of 300, a theater in Silver City with a seating capacity of 400, a theater in Nevada City with a seating capacity of 250, a theater in Franktown with a capacity of 200, and the Fort Churchill Barracks with a seating capacity of 1,000 (Watson, 1964).

The success of the Melodeon on C Street could not be denied, however, and soon a variety of new melodeons dotted Virginia City's cultural life, guaranteeing light comic operettas, farce, and minstrel would remain popular for many years to come. "The melodeon house challenged and continued to challenge legitimate theaters throughout the 1860's and '70's" (W. C. Miller, 1951, p. 1). The success of such theaters quickly caught the eye of business savvy Comstockers who ventured into similar enterprises. During the summer of 1862, Major G.W. Topliffe added another theater to the Virginia City cultural scene. Proprietor of the Union Hotel, Topliffe secured property at 49, 51, and 53 North C Street for his venture and built one of the first truly grand theaters of the Comstock. Topliffe's Theater had two ceremonious opening nights of which the *Golden Era* reported the following on July 13, 1862: "THE VIRGINIA CITY THEATER, just completed by Mr. Topliffe, was opened July 5th, McKean Buchanan and his daughter appearing in their 'Great Dramatic Novelty' — acts of 'Romeo and Juliet,' 'Hamlet,' and 'Richard III,' concluding with 'A Morning Call' (Golden Era, 1862).

Through the alteration of its cultural landscape, the Comstock and other intermittently booming Nevada mining towns soon presented lucrative opportunities for passing musicians, acting companies, and various ensembles of dancers, singers, and musicians. Moreover, the theaters of Washoe were notorious for their liberality, the enthusiasm of the crowds, and the coin-tossing generosity of their miners. Rapidly, “playing Washoe” suggested a mark of distinction for performers of various stripes, and the theaters of Silverland represented a community-building force in the region. The new talk of the town quickly became which shared performances of the week were most memorable, echoed in the amount of space afforded the newspaper reviews in columns by theatrical and musical critics. Unlike citizens of other mining camps, the residents of Virginia City not only appreciated but demanded the finest variety of entertainers and musicians available in that day.

In his semi-autobiographical account of life in Washoe entitled *Roughing It*, Mark Twain famously observed, “There were military companies, fire companies, brass-bands, banks, hotels, theaters, 'hurdy-gurdy' houses, wide-open gambling-palaces, political powwows, civic processions, street-fights, murders, inquests, riots, a whiskey-mill every fifteen steps,... a large police force, two Boards of Mining Brokers, a dozen breweries, and half a dozen jails and station-houses in full operation, and some talk of building a church” (Twain, 2008, p. 225). While this statement represents an exaggeration since church services in the area began with a Methodist congregation by 1859 and a Catholic addition by 1860, Twain certainly could have made more of the Comstockers’ heavy desire to construct large theaters and their insatiable thirst for any and all kinds of entertainment including rather sophisticated high opera and Shakespearean tragedies. “Stark, Buchanan,

Edwin Booth, and their peers performed on makeshift stages in mining camps around Sacramento and crossed the border into Nevada where they brought characterizations of Hamlet, Iago, Macbeth, Kate, Lear, and Othello to miners in Virginia City, Silver City, Dayton, and Carson City” (Levine, 2002, p. 19).

What began with melodeons and theaters would culminate in the celebrated opening of the great San Francisco opera house mogul, Thomas Maguire’s new establishment in 1863. Maguire’s willingness to gamble on the Comstock was based on trends established by a variety of well-supported theaters already located in the city including: the Melodeon; the Howard Theater; Topliffe’s Theater; E.W. Carey’s La Platte Hall (15 South B Street); a new District courthouse on B Street (whose District Court Room was available for high end entertainment); one or two other melodeons; a number of variety, hurdy-gurdy, and two-bit houses; and, an endless array of saloons.

### *Maguire’s Opera House and the Irish Presence*

[The fiddle] opens all the sluices of [the Irishman’s] heart, puts vigor in his veins, gives honey to a tongue that was, heaven knows, sweet without it, and gifts him with a pair of feather heels that Mercury might envy. (Carlton, 1845, p. 3; Legry, 2013, n.p.)

Irish expressions of identity through music were considerable on the Comstock, which is not surprising since immigrants from Erin came to the area early and were among the most stable residents. By the 1860 U.S. Census, they comprised 10% of the population marking the single largest demographic group apart from native-born Americans. Over time, demographics would further shift rendering the Irish presence indelibly felt at around one third of the total population (James, 1998, pp. 144-145). One of the peculiari-

ties of Irish immigration is that both Irishmen and Irishwomen tended to flock to the Comstock in nearly equal numbers. “That so many of Ireland’s daughters settled there put a unique stamp on the Comstock, giving the Irish community a sense of ethnic neighborhoods and solidarity unmatched by most other groups” (James, 1998, p. 145). Another norm-breaking aspect of Irish immigration to the Comstock is that many of the women arrived single, and so they numbered as the largest group of their gender on the Comstock. While there are numerous examples of Irish influence on the Comstock, those from the documentary record that deal with music are among the most tantalizing, especially when they provide concrete details about specific performers and performances.

For example, the *Virginia Evening Bulletin* reported on January 25, 1864, that Sutliff’s Music Hall was packed night after night by theater goers ready to be entertained by the “mirth, fun, and laughter” allotted there nightly, and, apparently, it was routinely Irish “mirth, fun, and laughter” that was on the menu. Audience members called for encores “as many as four times” for ethnically diverse performers O’Neil and Señorita Maria who were billed as Irish and Hispanic, respectively. Not only did the Comstockers appreciate Sutliff’s entertainers but they enjoyed the warm, insulated interior and the well-priced drinks. “Vying with Niagara Hall, Sutliff kept Charley Rhodes in the news; piled more \$20-cordwood into his stoves; lowered the price of drinks to the smallest coin used in Washoe; secured O’Neil to do his Irish characters and to introduce his ‘Darlin’ Biddy step’ into ‘Gowan’s Reel’; and gave such attractive programs that Comstockers could not resist this amusement house, now featuring not only O’Neil but Senorita Maria” (Watson, 1964, p. 249).

The massive Irish influx to the United States<sup>98</sup> that characterized the first half of the nineteenth century led to a drastic, sometimes violent, backlash from Americans, especially those who self-donned the moniker of “Nativists.” The Irish were discriminated against in a variety of ways in the United States and referred to by a variety of demeaning labels, which implied that they were of an inferior background to other whites and should be segregated. Life began to change for the Irish, however, after the American Civil War where many of their young men fought and proved their “American-ness” to the nation; moreover, they became enculturated to nineteenth-century cultural trends.

One of the unfortunate ways that they were able to prove their “whiteness” was by adopting racist attitudes of the dominant white discourse in their dealings with African Americans, and so Dixon factored this historical background into her analysis of material culture from the site of an Irish saloon on C Street (near the Barbary Coast) called the Hibernia. “Not at all unlike African Americans in the Boston Saloon, the Irish created solidarity among themselves and found a haven from prejudicial treatment in places like the Hibernia” (K. J. Dixon, 2005, p. 158). Although Dixon did not recover any musical instrument parts during the excavation of the Hibernia, we can draw some possible conclusions about the types of music that would have been offered there based on the documentary record and traditional Irish folk music, which made its way to the United States with its first immigrants. In fact, by the nineteenth century, Irish Folk music was gaining appeal not only in the United States but in Europe as well. Featuring instrumentation such

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<sup>98</sup> It is estimated that more than three million Irish immigrants came to the United States during the early nineteenth century. Their large numbers made them a perceived threat to Americans who feared they would have to compete with them for jobs, have trouble enculturating such vast numbers, and worried about Papists and Catholics establishing more control in the United States (K. J. Dixon, 2005, p. 158).

as the Irish harp, the fiddle, the uilleann pipes,<sup>99</sup> and eventually, even the accordion, Irish songs often fell into one of the following categories: drinking songs, ballads, and laments. Songs such as traditional ballads or laments were often sung unaccompanied in strong, almost wailing tones although they could be accompanied by instrumentation, too. In terms of instrumental and dance music, there were reels (in 4/4 meter), hornpipes, and jigs (with jigs often in 6/8 time). Later, polkas, mazurkas, and highlands songs came into popularity. The Highlands style was basically the Irish version of the Scottish Strathspey, a dance in 4/4 meter quite similar to a hornpipe but at a slower, more “dignified” tempo. As Irish music came to have a greater and greater impact on American popular music as the nineteenth century progressed, so the Irish people were able to make names for themselves, and this was abundantly apparent in Virginia City.

Despite anti-Irish prejudice, they contributed in many ways to the Comstock. County Cork was the origin point for many, since it boasted the only deep, hard-rock mines in all of Ireland. They, like the Cornish, brought crucial expertise to Comstock mines. Moreover, some of the biggest success stories of Virginia City came from their ranks. For inspiration, the Irish simply had to look to John Mackay and the Bonanza Firm. The Comstock made wealth accumulation seem possible, even for one of the most downtrodden people groups of Europe.

Another individual to whom they could look for inspiration was Thomas Maguire. By far, he engineered the greatest Irish contribution to the musical landscape with the

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<sup>99</sup> Uilleann pipes are the proper name for the Irish version of the bagpipe, which is differentiated from other bagpipes by its unique tone and two octave range, including sharps and flats. It is made up of the chanter, drones, and regulators; the regulator includes closed keys that the player can manipulate through wrist actions thereby allowing the piper to play basic chords providing rhythmic and harmonic accompaniment. These pipes provide much flexibility in terms of embellishment a fundamental aspect of Irish piping.

grand opening of Maguire's Opera House on July 2, 1863, while the Battle of Gettysburg raged faraway in Pennsylvania. Maguire's Virginia City opera house was large, welcoming, and opulent. Monumental to the history of the city's cultural life, Maguire intended it to be a lovely reflection of his magnificent San Francisco opera house. In the nineteenth-century American West, opera houses stood at the pinnacle of civilization: "Public buildings, churches, meeting halls, and in the larger towns, that ultimate badge of respectability, the opera house, testified to an increasing interest in political and cultural life" (West, 1979, p. 36).

Maguire ambitiously constructed his Comstock jewel one foot larger than his San Francisco endeavor. Its proscenium stage measured 50 by 35 square feet and afforded a two-dimensional view of performances. Four luxuriously-furnished private boxes, lining both sides of the stage, provided the wealthiest theatergoers with enhanced comfort and more importantly — a hefty dose of prestige. A savvy businessman, Maguire installed two saloons inside the main entrance of the theater and a billiard parlor above where patrons could tarry and provide Maguire with income independent of the opera house. Despite the lavish attention to detail, however, the realities of western life were never far away. For example, guests to the opera house complained of a "horsey smell" that wafted up from the livery stable located below the theater.

Excavations (2008, 2009) of the former site of Maguire's Opera House located on D Street have yielded a wealth of artifacts that are still largely being interpreted, however, the sizeable number of intact and fragmented champagne bottles removed from the northern edges of the site favorably suggest the position of the two saloons located just inside the main entrance of the theater. The presence of oyster shells from both the Pacif-

ic and Chesapeake Bay underscore the opulence of the venue and suggest a possible niche market associated with “oyster saloons.” These finds correspond nicely with artifacts recovered from Piper’s Old Corner Bar and the Boston Saloon. “Local folklore tends to highlight the more opulent saloon menu items, indicating that people from all walks of life enjoyed champagne and oysters, symbols of the boomtown’s ostentatious wealth, in the community’s drinking houses” (K. J. Dixon, 2005, p. 93). But Dixon cautions against making any preemptive assumptions about the frequency with which such items were enjoyed.<sup>100</sup> Although such artifacts were recovered from both Piper’s and the Boston, the number of oyster shells was relatively small in relation to the fabulous place myths surrounding the area.

Despite a passion for opera houses, Thomas Maguire dabbled in the melodeon business, too. Observing that the melodeons competed very effectively with his grand opera house and generally remained packed each night while his masterpiece languished only partially full, Maguire wanted to get in on the action: “More than a flash in the pan, minstrelsy for many months — already four by September — remained a Washoe attraction” (Watson, 1964, p. 199). The melodeon’s light comic appeal, popular music, and competitive prices represented a difficult triad to counter without competing on the same playing field, and so Maguire veered from “high culture” into melodeon-style entertain-

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<sup>100</sup> While stories of free flowing champagne are supported by a disproportionately high distribution of shards from bottles and associated stemware in high concentration at a number of excavation sites (including excavations of unbroken, unopened bottles at the former site of Maguire’s Opera House (c. 1875) during the summer of 2009 by the University of Nevada, Reno), the fables about generous oyster consumption have not been so easily corroborated. In her book *Boomtown Saloon*, Kelly Dixon observes that, “oyster shells appeared much less frequently. Even though a few showed up at all four saloons, their relative paucity suggests that the folklore has exaggerated the lavish nature of certain menu items in Virginia City’s drinking houses. Specialty businesses were described as “oyster saloons,” and it is likely that the existence of such places, along with historical reports of miners dining on various delicacies, encouraged folklore centered on the splendor to be had in the community’s saloons” (K. J. Dixon, 2005, pp. 93-94).

ment. For singularly pragmatic reasons, “Tom Maguire used the simple expedient of dividing audiences. Seemingly in competition against himself, Maguire planned to open yet another theatre, weather the further lull this would cause and, when the competing house closed, take over the field” (Watson, 1964, p. 153).

Maguire and Johnny Burns, thus, leased Topliff’s Music Hall, which, by this times, had fallen into disuse and renamed it “The Virginia Melodeon.” Burns refitted the theater while Maguire travelled to San Francisco to rally a group of enthusiastic minstrels capable of reasserting Maguire’s dominance over the stages of Washoe. These performers included first-rate minstrel entertainers such as Lotta Crabtree, Carrie Howard, Walter Bray, Jake Wallace, Ned Hamilton, and W.H. Smith. Filled to capacity on opening night, Topliff’s Theater enjoyed renewed vigor as the Virginia Melodeon, and the citizens of the Comstock yet again enjoyed the benefits of being a sought after audience. Despite the many successes of the Virginia Melodeon, however, Maguire was not ultimately the savviest of businessmen. He eventually fell into financial trouble and, on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 1867, a neighboring German immigrant and small-time saloon owner, John Piper, stepped in to relieve him of his pride and joy, his namesake opera house. Soon, Maguire’s Opera House would be reborn as the iconic Piper’s Opera House with financial backing from John W. Mackay, and the German mark on Virginia City’s sociocultural and musical landscapes would be truly felt. The story of Germanic music on the Comstock, however, dates back much earlier than Piper’s acquisition.

### *Piper's Opera House and the German Presence*

The theaters of Silverland attracted famed entertainers and musicians from all over the United States and even the world, and many of those performers relied on ethnicity, either actual or perceived, to distinguish themselves from other performers as well as attract audiences. In the 1860 census, out of a total population of 3,017 residents, 230 traced their origin back to Germany, which brought the German population in Virginia City in as the third most populous after emigrants from Ireland. Understandably, Germanic music, along with British music, was well represented in the area early.<sup>101</sup> By 1861, the Teutonic Gruenwalds had established the melodeon on C Street, which advertised its unique mixture of varied and light entertainment in the San Francisco *Weekly Alta California*. “Amusements in Virginia City. – There will be a performance at the Melodeon on C Street, to-night, and another on Sunday night. A new farce, entitled, “The Last Chance in Virginia City, or the Speculator and his Jackass,” will be presented each evening” (Weekly Alta California, 1861).

A cleverly written farce that incorporated local themes and coloring, *The Last Chance in Virginia City* was a fast success as were the Gruenwalds with their combination of high opera and theater, with a surprising number of pieces performed in their native tongue. “Choosing from their San Francisco repertoire, Mr. and Mrs. Gruenwald sang comic duets in German, which were ‘especially enjoyed’” (Watson, 1964, p. 56). The Gruenwalds paved the way, too, for a German musical monopoly of the Comstock. For Germans, in particular, they could exploit their common ancestry, boasting great

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<sup>101</sup> It is also little wonder that the two big opera house impresarios of Virginia City were Irish and German, respectively.

composers such as Bach, Mendelssohn, and Beethoven in advertising entertainment of a certain level of sophistication. In this way, Comstockers truly felt as though they were getting something special and unique.

There were any number of reasons why the Melodeon on C became so successful besides the Gruenwalds' evocation of their Germanic ancestry. Among these were its choice of entertainment and comfortable ambience. A light, comical piece such as *The Last Chance in Virginia City* expertly played on the real fears, loneliness, and pain that miners experienced on a day-to-day basis in their pursuit of the glittery stuff. Being able to communally laugh over the same fears was not only heartening and cathartic but enhanced community building. Miners, who were able to identify very readily with the actions of the characters on stage, commiserated and bonded with one another over this theatrical experience. The Gruenwalds provided just the types of entertainment generally offered in the melodeons, music halls, and theaters of San Francisco. Comstockers must have felt strangely consoled and connected to their Californian brethren as they took in the same comedic dramas. Because of the Melodeon on C, they felt less acutely aware of all that they were missing in the big city.

Melodeons, in fact, enjoyed a great amount of success in Virginia City and San Francisco, and part of their appeal came from the variety-style entertainment that they featured including fast-paced and quick-witted skits, dance numbers, and musical acts:

M — irth, melody and music hold their court,  
 E — ach evening, at that popular resort.  
 L — ight hearts and happy faces there are found;  
 O — n every side their joyous shouts resound;  
 D — elightful dances, and soul-stirring song —  
 E — ndless fun delights the laughing throng  
 O — n all occasions pleasure reigns supreme;

N — ight glides on smoothly as an angel's dream.

(Watson, 1964, p. 60)

The tone of melodeon entertainment was usually crude and vividly brazen; respectable women were barred from entry, although pleasant female company in the form of waitresses and entertainers was abundant. The subject matter for melodeon performances was tailored specifically to miners, which provides further indication of the types of entertainment offered.

Irreverent melodeon pieces, however, were not the only means whereby Germans entertained the Comstock. In November 1863, the Germania Singing (or Glee) Society was created. Composed of amateur German musicians and singers, the society produced high quality entertainment ranging across the full spectrum of musical composition and often sung in their native language. In April 1864, the *Virginia Evening Bulletin* described a concert given by the Germania Singing Society that included a guest performance by the Virginia Glee Club (presumably of North American and British descent). This concert was unique for several reasons. First, the price of admission was \$1.50, considerably more than the \$1.00 usually charged at Maguire's Opera House or the \$0.50 required for entrance to a melodeon. Second, this program included the first attempt at comic opera in the area, and it was met with resounding success and many requests for encore performances. Third, musical critiques of the event offer crucial insight into the German experience on the Comstock and the generally enthusiastic way that the community at large welcomed celebrations of Teutonic ethnicity, albeit ever coupled with the slight disdain for which Comstock journalists were noted. After emphasizing the success

of the concert, which packed Maguire's Opera House, the article contrasts the performing styles and music of each group:

The music by the orchestra who performed the overtures to Massianello and Fra Diavolo was magnificent. The singing by the Germania and Virginia Glee Clubs, though differing in style as wide as the poles asunder, was perfect in both. The sweet familiar ballad-like glees of the four Virginians, sung to tunes heard in days lang syne recalled to mind scenes too dearly beloved ever to be forgotten, while the powerful musical and well-trained voices of the twenty Germanians, sounding rich and full in the music of their Faderland [*sic*], filled the theatre with harmony; although nine-tenths of the audience did not understand a syllable of the language in which these choruses were sung. (Virginia Evening Bulletin, 1864a)

Demonstrated in the article is the variety of entertainment offered by the society, from orchestral overtures to choir pieces to musical comedy, which represented a mashing of genre very common to nineteenth-century American theatrical and musical performances (Levine, 2002). The underlying goals of preserving German culture and language on the Comstock are also clearly visible. "The comic opera of the Four Bald Heads [*sic*] was the most perfect thing of this kind in dress acting and singing ever seen in the Territory; and although conducted entirely in German, the comicalities and excellent acting were fully appreciated by the hundreds of ladies and their cavaliers who were present" (Virginia Evening Bulletin, 1864a).

Prior to the event, the community rallied around the Germans in other ways. The music shop Dale and Company<sup>102</sup> loaned a grand piano for the occasion. Dale and Company, furthermore, advertised two new musical selections (featured in the concert) for sale in their store, the sheet music to *Mother Kissed Me in My Dreams* by noted Ameri-

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<sup>102</sup> According to the Virginia and Truckee Railroad Directories from 1871 to 1872, the site for R.L. Higgins Music Store, successor to Dale and Company, was 35 South C Street.

can composer J.R. Thomas who was inspired by news of the battle of Antietam and *The Hand Organ Polka* by Sep Winner with its obvious Germanic overtones. Clearly, the community appreciated its musicians of Germanic descent and willingly paid admission and a half for such shows, and, conversely, performers from the Germanies with a musical predisposition or interest (such as John Piper), marketed their ethnic reputation for sophisticated entertainment to sell tickets. In so doing, they created a specific niche and socioeconomic distinction based upon their ethnicity... the heirs, as it were, of the great Baroque Classical and Romantic composers from Handel to Schubert. They also created a comfortable space for the expression of identity.

After the fire of 1875 destroyed Maguire's Opera House (by this time known as Piper's Opera House), John Piper rebuilt on B Street across from the International Hotel. The *Territorial Enterprise* reported that Piper's elaborate design for the new opera house echoed that of Maguire's Jenny Lind Theater in San Francisco, which he would have been intimately familiar with, having hailed originally from the city by the bay. Moreover, Piper enlisted the help of R. Stackhouse, the builder of Maguire's Opera House, to realize Piper's plans and create "an opulent wooden edifice, the most elaborate, elegant and exquisite of Piper's opera houses" (Cafferata, 2008, pp. 21-22). His stage manager would be David Belasco, and an eight-year old Maud Adams would perform there in May 1878 as Adrienne Renaud in a production of *A Celebrated Case*. Unfortunately, this incarnation of Piper's Opera House would burn to the ground in 1883.

Among the best archaeological evidence for the important role of Germanic emigrants in Virginia City's high end entertainment culture remains the third incarnation of Virginia City's opera house known as Piper's, which stands to this day. Not only was this

opera house elegantly furnished and designed, but its bar managed to earn its own distinguished reputation. In *Boomtown Saloons*, Dixon discusses the diverse array of material culture recovered from the site of Piper's Old Corner Bar indicative of an affluent leisure establishment. "Piper's Old Corner Bar boasted the most opulent interior decor and fixtures of the four saloons [excavated in 2001], illustrating its place at the classy end of Virginia City drinking establishments" (K. J. Dixon, 2005, p. 155). A bizarre juxtaposition of coral, seashells, and a crab claw surrounded by shattered flat glass found at the site suggests that Piper's Old Corner bar may have boasted a curio cabinet of sorts or, perhaps, a marine aquarium, a curiosity invented in the 1850s whose "ensuing social



Figure 3.3 Piano keys recovered from Piper's Old Corner Bar. Image courtesy of Ronald James.

craze... [led] to their placement in almost any home or enterprise that attempted to boast of affluence and modernity” (K. J. Dixon, 2005, p. 65). Piper’s Old Corner Bar was referred to as a “Gentlemen’s Club” offering fine brandies, wines, and cigars (Territorial Enterprise, 1867). “That this reference specifies ‘gentlemen’ suggests that relatively respectable members of the community patronized Piper’s saloon” (K. J. Dixon, 2005, pp. 127-128). In terms of music and entertainment, several piano keys were recovered from the site suggesting in-house piano music rather than the banjos and horns of African American minstrels or the growling hurdy-gurdies of the melodeons.

### *Ethnicity and “Otherness” on the Comstock*

Besides Germanic immigrants, Virginia City had a well-established Hispanic population from its earliest days. During the 1860 Census, 99 Hispanics including 17 women were counted. “Many Mexicans numbered among the early miners. Only a few years before, the entire region had been part of Mexico” (James, 1998, p. 4). Besides Señorita Maria’s performances at Sutliff’s opulent music hall, the *Territorial Enterprise* demonstrates the extent to which Mexican identity was maintained in an article dated May 5, 1866, which mentions the celebration of a traditional Mexican festival accompanied by Vincente Mendoza singing the *Grand March Saragossa*.

If far less common as residents of mining communities in the region, Italians had their own impact on the musical landscape of the Comstock. That said, their sense of “Otherness” did not always work to their benefit. In the 1860 Census, Italians numbered nine males. Four years later, a number of itinerate Italian musicians made such an im-

pression with their harp renditions of Italian classics that the *Daily Union* gave them detailed coverage:

There are several Italians in town, playing the harp at saloons for what they can raise by collections. The soft, voluptuous music, chopped up piecemeal, as it is by their fingers upon the strings, nevertheless reminds one of a land where the heat at noonday, tempered by the sea breeze and the morning air, comes laden with the odor of orange blossoms. (*Daily Union*, 1864)

A musical critic from the *Virginia Evening Bulletin* was fast to respond to this account adding negative, ethnic-based rhetoric slamming the performance, prosody, and dietary predilections of the wandering Italian musicians. But the author also shows a contradictory level of respect for Italian composers of international prestige. In the aggregate, the Comstock's reception of Italians can certainly be assessed as far more ambiguous than the greetings and role enjoyed by the Germans:

And garlic, you might have added. Orange blossoms is good, [*sic*] but these fellows always put us in mind of bad macaroni and filthy cheese, old clothes and time-gone poverty. If these wandering musicians would confine themselves to such airs as "When this Cruel War is Over," "John Brown's Body," "Dixie," "The Boys that Wore the Gree," [*sic*] "Der Bully Lager Beir," "Der Boldt Solger Boy," [*sic*] and such like, we could stomach them, but when they have so little respect for the memory of their departed countrymen, Bellini, Rossini, and others, as to attempt to draw out their sublime compositions on most villainous, untuned catgut, we wish them back to their land of sunshine and flowers, soft moonlights and cheap fish. (*Virginia Evening Bulletin*, 1864b)

The Chinese represented a vibrant Comstock community, although they are another example of "Otherness" that tended to inspire a sense of alienation, bewilderment, and blatant racism. Among non-Euro-American Comstockers, their successes were clearly evident and threatening. For example, the Chinese Yee family amassed a substantial

fortune through the import of Chinese goods to their shop, Quong Hi Loy and Company, located on Union Street in Virginia City. The Yees, like the Winnemuccas, successfully employed cultural liminality to translate the Euro-American fascination with exoticism into a thriving family business. There were Chinese physicians such as Dr. Song Wing and his wife, Choney Wing, and Dr. Son Haong and his wife, Pooty Chin, who “were affluent by Chinese standards and likely lived in the most prestigious part of Chinatown” (James, 1998, pp. 227-228).

But as their numbers in the population grew, the Chinese were met with increasing hostility from Euro-Americans who perceived them as threats to mining and job security. About 90% of those migrating to the United States from China came from three counties in Guangdong (Siyi, Sanyi, and Zhongshan,) and they spoke dialects of Cantonese so distinct as to be almost unrecognizable from county to county (Chung, 2011, p. 4). With no little measure of sarcasm, Mark Twain would weigh in on the unjust treatment that many Chinese faced in the west.

Of course there was a large Chinese population in Virginia — it is the case with every town and city on the Pacific Coast. They are a harmless race when white men either let them alone or treat them no worse than dogs; in fact they are almost entirely harmless anyhow, for they seldom think of resenting the vilest insults or the cruelest injuries. They are as industrious as the day is long. A disorderly Chinaman is rare, and a lazy one does not exist. So long as a Chinaman has strength to use his hands he needs no support from anybody; white men often complain of want of work, but a Chinaman offers no such complaint; he always manages to find something to do. He is a great convenience to everybody — even to the worst class of white men, for he bears the most of their sins, suffering fines for their petty thefts, imprisonment for their robberies, and death for their murders. Any white man can swear a Chinaman’s life away in the courts, but no Chinaman can testify against a white man. Ours is the ‘land of the free’ — nobody denies that — nobody challenges it. [Maybe it is because we won’t let other people testify.] As I write, news comes that in broad daylight in San Francisco, some boys have stoned an inoffensive Chinaman to

death, and that although a large crowd witnessed the shameful deed, no one interfered. (Twain, 1985, p. 175)

Twain's disparaging tone emphasizes the injustices faced by the Chinese in the United States during the nineteenth century. In the media, their exoticism was re-written as the "sinister" and "dangerous." They were portrayed as threatening the jobs of Euro-Americans and faced everything from segregation to burdensome taxes to exclusion to outright violence. Many turned to the logging industry where it is believed that between 1870 and 1910, upwards of 50 to 75% of Tahoe's logging force were Chinese (Chung, 2011, p. 8).

Examples of this treatment run rampant in nineteenth-century newspapers where they were criticized for following a different religion, eating different foods, speaking different languages, adhering to different marriage practices, wearing different clothes, keeping their hair in queues, and performing different types of music. For example, in the area dubbed "China Town," the exotic sounds of Asian musicians equally heightened strains of curiosity and prejudice. For the Fourth of July festivities of 1861, twenty Chinese musicians performed in honor of the arrival of the Nevada Territory's first governor, James W. Nye. Initially receiving the Celestial serenade with solemn applause, that was not to last among the locals. The foreign harmonies and discordant mixture of Asian tunings and pitches quickly inspired the Comstockers to uproarious laughter and catcalling that was more than vicious. Since the music could not be recorded and no musicologists were on the scene that day, we will never know exactly what those musicians played. But there were certainly a number of important distinctions

between nineteenth-century Chinese and Euro-American music that would have made it particularly difficult for the latter group to appreciate said Celestials.

The Chinese Folk Music tradition stretches back about 7,000 years as attested by bone flutes found at Jehu Village in Henan Province that date to the Neolithic Age (Jin, 2011, p. 5). According to tradition, the Chinese tonal system was based on the twelve tones of the *lii*, bamboo pipes first tuned by Ling Lun during the reign of the Yellow Emperor. The first pitch was known as the *huangzhong* or yellow bell and fluctuated depending on the emperor ruling over China at the time.<sup>103</sup> It is believed that the *huangzhong* could exist anywhere between middle C# and the F above and that the *lii* were subsequently tuned to the sounds of birds including the phoenix. As a result, the twelve-tone system was not equally tempered as was the Western musical system (thanks to J.S. Bach). As a result, the intervals between the twelve tones of the Chinese tonal system could sound distorted and/or dissonant to Euro-American ears unaccustomed to such intervals and pitches; the music might even seem decidedly harsh to Western ears.<sup>104</sup> Within the twelve-tone system, songs were generally organized around a seven-tone scale or heptatonic scale with a five-tone or pentatonic core known as the *wu sheng*. To facilitate transpositions of a single mode as well as modulations from one mode to another, each seven-tone scale included two changing tones known as *bian*.

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<sup>103</sup> Chinese music was considered to represent a purifying force, and sounds were believed to be quite powerful. As a result, music was not played merely for entertainment purposes. Since the Chinese traditionally believed that musical tones could literally affect the harmony of the universe, one of the primary jobs of a new emperor was to search out and establish a true standard of pitch for his dynasty. It is for this reason that the *huangzhong* changed over time (Jin, 2011).

<sup>104</sup> Later, after the Chinese adopted the well-tempered system, however, many purists would argue that traditional Chinese instruments had lost much of their expressive power and color as a result of the new system.

In terms of instruments, the Chinese classified anywhere from two hundred to six hundred distinct instruments based on the materials from which they were primarily constructed: gold, stone, earth, leather, silk, wood, gourd, and bamboo. These eight categories could further be narrowed down to four categories based on how they were played: wind, bowed, plucked strings, or percussion; these four classes of instruments comprised traditional Chinese orchestras (Jin, 2011, p. 52). Besides instrumental music, the Chinese created vocal music including opera, and they cultivated thin, non-resonant voices often in the falsetto. These vocal selections tended to be solo works rather than choral pieces.

Another major difference between Euro-American and Chinese music involved harmony and harmonic progressions. While Euro-American music of all types relied fundamentally on harmonic progressions for expression, sonic contrast, and a sense of propulsion forward, such was not the case in traditional Chinese music whose musicians instead relied on rhythm to achieve these ends. The result was a radically foreign sounding Chinese music that was difficult for Euro-Americans to appreciate.

Some popular instruments of Chinese Folk Music included the *fanxiang*, a percussion instrument comprised of a set of sixteen iron slabs suspended in a wooden frame, cymbals, gongs, and narrow wooden clappers, which looked like small wooden books. A clapper was manipulated to make sound by rapidly squeezing it between the hands. Apart from percussive instruments, there were mouth organs such as the *sheng*, plucked string instruments such as the lute-like *pipa*, and single-reed instruments such as the *guan*. These are but a few of the

wide variety of instruments played by Chinese performers, and, unfortunately, because of the lack of specificity in the historical record, it is difficult to know what the Celestials played during the aforementioned performance. The underlying point is, however, that due to divergent esthetics, it was very difficult for the Chinese and Euro-American musical traditions to occupy the same stage. This lack of cultural understanding and tolerance was epitomized in an article from the *Virginia City Evening Bulletin* in April 1864, which reported on a concert of Chinese musicians in Chinatown proclaiming, “How the Chinese can take comfort in such music, God only (who probably made them) knows!... The only possible use for an object of such music that we can conceive is that it may be intended to frighten the devil out of town” (*Virginia City Evening Bulletin*, 1867).

Finally, gender had its own embodiment as a force for “Otherness,” and it is particularly fascinating to see how female performers were treated on the Comstock. In an exploration of the 1860 to 1880 census records, twenty individuals were listed as musicians by trade. Of these, all were male, white, and between the ages of 14 and 53. Most came from North America although a few immigrated from Germany, Italy, and Spain. While this does not say much about who was musicking on the Comstock in their leisure times, it does indicate who did it professionally and was in residence during census-taking. During the same period of time, fourteen individuals listed their occupation as Music Teacher. Of these fourteen, nine were white females between the ages of 21 and 35.

So, who were the female performers on the Comstock? Although bawdy music halls downtown barred entry to “decent” ladies, they also transported select female per-

formers on a path to national celebrity. Performers such as Lotta Crabtree and the Creole Jewess Adah Isaacs Menken rebelled against social conventions to make a place for themselves on the western stage. But they existed at the fringes of society. Female performers actively cultivated the air of “Otherness” by dressing in blatantly provocative ways, smoking publically, and engaging in scandalous performances rather like modern day pop stars such as Madonna and Britney Spears.

### *Multicultural Celebrations on the Comstock*

The Irish...with the Knights of the Red Branch, the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and such societies galore...; the braw Caledonians, who exulted in the games, where their men of might put the stone and tossed the caber; the French and French-Canadians, the Italians and Slavonians<sup>105</sup> and Mexicans, all celebrating their own holidays in glorious care-free fashion — with many of these I was so fortunate as to foregather; welcomed into their midst, to partake of their national viands and refreshments. (Drury, 1948)

Besides examining various forms of cultural expression, it is telling to examine a citizenry’s capacity for community-wide multicultural expressions, especially in terms of the effectiveness with which entertainment and music can facilitate community building. The events of April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1865, provide just such a window for examination. April 1865 was particularly emotional for Comstockers (and the nation at large) as heady celebrations following Lee’s surrender at Appomattox turned into despair at the news of Abraham Lincoln’s assassination by John Wilkes Booth, a celebrated actor, brother of Edwin Booth, and notorious Southern sympathizer. Two thousand people assembled at Gold Hill

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<sup>105</sup> The Kingdom of Slavonia was conferred to Austria and its allies by the Ottoman Turks in the Treaty of Karlowitz, which brought the Austrian-Turkish War to an end after the disastrous Siege of Vienna in 1529. Slavonia was a historical region comprised of five Croatian counties. In 1868, the Croatian-Hungarian Settlement united the Kingdoms of Croatia and Slavonia to form one nation, the Kingdom of Croatia-Slavonia.

for a processional to the popular lookout at Fort Homestead including community officials; the Metropolitan Brass Band; five hundred volunteer firefighters; Mexicans carrying both the American and Mexican flags; the Provost Guard; the Emmet Guard; a hearse bearing a symbolic, though empty, flag-draped coffin for the president; the National Guard; local churchmen in carriages; and, members of the bar. Then, came numerous fraternal orders and organizations including “the Freemasons, the Odd Fellows, the Washoe Typographical Association, the Sons of Temperance, the Jewish Order of B’nai B’rith, the Eureka Benevolent Society, the Irish Fenian Brotherhood, the German Singing Society, the Turnverein Society, the Swiss Association, the Virginia Board of Brokers, superintendents and employees of the Gould and Curry, Savage, Potosi, and Chollar Mines,” and a significant grouping of citizenry (James, 1998, p. 72). Bringing up the rear of the procession were “our African residents, who bore a beautiful banner engraved with the following words: ‘He was our friend — faithful and just to us, though dead, he liveth. Hail! And Farewell’” (Gold Hill Daily News, 1865, p. 1; James, 1998, pp. 154-155; Virginia Daily Union, 1865, p. 2). The remarkably diverse nature of this procession says much about the Comstock and the people whose combined efforts made it remarkable. Clearly, Comstockers used parades, celebrations, and music to tie the many identities of their community together.

For a city comprised almost entirely of emigrants and immigrants, many of whom were transient and would never visit their place of cultural origin again, asserting a distinct cultural identity was essential, and they did this through organizations, associations, pageantry, pomp, and music. In particular, music became essential to memory. The act of creating, performing, and/or listening to music could reproduce, at will, lost and forgotten

places and cultures, conspicuously or inconspicuously identify and communicate with fellow sojourners, steep children in “foreign” cultures that they might otherwise come to perceive as irrelevant, permit various modes of escape from reality, and permit non-members of a given cultural identity pleasurable experiences in common.

A constant, unwavering companion, music followed westerners in travel and migration permitting the physical production of place. “Music plays a unique and often hidden or taken-for-granted role in the production of place. Through its peculiar nature it foregrounds the creation and performance of place through human bodies in action and motion” (Cohen, 1998, p. 288). A performative act, music is *done* by all it engages, whether the performer, audience member, or bystander. In a liminal place such as Virginia City, this translated into embodied community events where the superficial vestiges of sociocultural, ethnic, and class identities could be cast aside, ever so briefly, in the embrace of events that closely tied the community together through their fundamental shared humanity.

For residents of Virginia City theatrical performance and musicking were essential to a healthy community as attested by the city’s longstanding preoccupation with maintaining a functioning opera house and their preponderance to not only attract but demand performances from musicians of all stripes (Barnett, 2010). More specifically, the construction of public opera houses and musical theaters in Virginia City provided important amenities for growing communities and the addition of those cultural institutions represented the attainment of benchmarks widely thought as signal evidence of civic growth. As remains the case with Piper’s Opera House, such establishments represented instruments of municipal prestige and were significant markers of nineteenth-century cul-

ture. Today, buildings such as Piper's Opera House provide unique windows into the nature of historic western communities. Interpreting these sites with the help of historical documents and cultural material can provide insightful data in connection with a better understanding of the American West.

In their book *American Theaters: Performance Halls of the Nineteenth Century*, David Naylor and Joan Dillon emphasize the importance of these theaters to the culture of their area: "The theaters built in nineteenth-century America's cities and towns were the chief repositories of their communities' cultural hopes and dreams. Each town's aspirations to deserve its spot on the map were caught up with the scale and grandeur of their public buildings, and theaters often were the most prominent emblem of local pride. Even the most ramshackle opera house carried a heavy symbolic load" (Naylor, 2006, p. 14). Considering Virginia City's love affair with entertainment, its deep affinity for musicians, and its enthusiastic support of a variety of performance types, this definitely applies. Theaters came surprisingly early (1860) to Virginia City suggesting a much smoother (and quicker) transition from lawless frontier mining camp to sophisticated industrial urban center. The surrounding area of Washoe quickly followed suit supporting a surprising number of early theaters from Genoa to Carson City.

The acts of dramatic performance and musicking were powerful and necessary for the development and maintenance of a diverse community. But cities born from the instigation of mining showed marked tendencies toward impermanence — and for a variety of reasons. Theaters and musical groups were considered signs of quality and sustainability. After all, drama and music inspired memory, produced place, communicated identity, and reproduced culture. Moreover, they created community, a particularly important function

in a liminal place such as the Comstock. Gregory Bateson (1972, 1979) and Thomas Turino (2008) each argue that the arts and music “are essential to human survival because they serve the function of integrating different parts of the self and integrating individuals with each other and their environment” (Turino, 2008, p. 12).<sup>106</sup> In temporary places with high population turnovers such as the communities of the Comstock, strategies for integration became supremely important. Moreover, due to the varied composition of the region’s denizens, music drew otherwise fragmented individuals together through shared performance and musicking. As a result, once fin-de-siècle mining depressions set in and the communities of the Comstock lost all polarity, slid into decline, and drifted toward virtual collapse, residents who obstinately remained would rely on performance and musicking to solidify an urban core.

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<sup>106</sup> For a deeper examination of this notion, see also Bateson, 1972a; Bateson, 1972b; and, Bateson, 1979.

## ***Chapter Four: Nineteenth-Century Virginia City, Nevada, Jewel of the San Francisco Mining Pyramid***

About this time a magnificent spectacle dazzled my vision — the whole constellation of the Great Menken came flashing out of the heavens like a vast spray of gas-jets, and shed a glory abroad over the universe as it fell!  
(Twain, 1864)

### *San Francisco Stars, Comstock Constellations*

On August 7, 1863, a steamer bound for fame carried the Creole Jewess from New Orleans, Adah Isaacs Menken, through the Golden Gate. In San Francisco, she enjoyed enormous fame; crowds lined the streets just to catch a glimpse of her impeccable, daring fashion as she traveled in open carriages with other performers or rode brazenly on horseback through the city. She smoked cigars, chopped her hair short to take on male roles, fenced like an expert, was accused of bigamy, and tantalized audiences with quasi-nude performances, very much defying the edicts of propriety for her day. The result? She was heartily welcomed by San Franciscans who devoured her every wink, her every word, and her every performance. “California’s ‘golden ambience,’ as Menken called it, moved her to uninhibited public displays of laughter, tears, poetic outpourings, and impromptu dances. Reporters followed her everywhere and recorded her every word and gesture” (Rochlin, 1984, p. 174).

The “Menken,” as she was adoringly nicknamed, exemplified the Bohemian lifestyle and was enthusiastically embraced by the West Coast for her rejection of societal strictures and her abundant eccentricity, something that won her far fewer accolades in the more staid cities of the East Coast. But she was made for the city by the bay and its Comstock playground. Beginning on August 24, 1863, Thomas Maguire featured her



Figure 4.1 Famed and infamous American actress, Adah Isaacs Menken, as the “French Spy” by Charles D. Fredericks & Company, 587 Broadway, New York, New York, 1863.

at his San Francisco opera house in the lead role of *Mazeppa*, which required her, during the play's climactic scene, to appear seemingly nude onstage, mesmerizing all in the audience. "Prudery is obsolete now. The Shakespearean 'modesty of nature' has a new interpretation," a San Francisco theater critic observed (Watson, 1964, p. 255). Another critic described her dramatic debut this way: "Adah's abundant charms and wealth of muscle need no encomiums from my pen. As she takes no pains to conceal them, they speak for themselves" (Watson, 1964, p. 255).

The level of tolerance afforded her, one could argue, represent telling features of urbanity, especially western urbanity where dense male populations set a certain moral tone very accepting of Bohemian demonstrations of eccentricity, especially of the feminine variety. As sociologist Robert E. Park argued, "The city is rooted in the habits and customs of the people who inhabit it. The consequence is that the city possesses a moral as well as a physical organization, and these two mutually interact in characteristic ways to mold and modify one another" (Park, 1915, p. 578). Park, furthermore, observed that while small cities might begrudgingly endure eccentrics, larger cities embraced them: "The small community often tolerates eccentricity. The city, on the contrary rewards it. Neither the criminal, the defective, nor the genius has the same opportunity to develop his innate disposition in a small town, that he invariably finds in a good city" (Park, 1915, pp. 68-609). Adah Isaacs Menken was such a controversial figure that even the most urbane audiences of New York were shocked rather than titillated. San Francisco, "the city of the grand flourish," however, would be quite another story as the Menken was enthusiastically received (Hunt, 2007). After all, San Franciscans loved dancers, poets, artists, and Bohemians, and she fit every one of these criteria to a tee. The city parted ways with

her sadly as she moved on to the most natural next destination, Virginia City, San Francisco's crown jewel. There, she would, in many respects, play for the same audience — certainly in spirit and sometimes in body — that followed her at Thomas Maguire's in 1863. The 'moral tone' would prove just as welcoming.

In *Performing Menken: Adah Isaacs Menken and the Birth of American Celebrity*, Renée M. Sentilles argues that Adah Isaacs Menken represented the first true American celebrity, and this was by no accident. Not only was she born at the right time and place, but she knew how to cultivate an allure that captivated her fans while sustaining long-term admiration. First and foremost, she knew how to manipulate the press, and she did so with panache and expertise. By the 1830s, the furtive beginnings of the American Industrial Revolution meant that paper was more cheaply manufactured than ever before. As a result, newspapers went from being rather costly commodities supplied through private subscriptions to readily accessible rags sold on nearly every street corner of major cities. With greater availability came increased competition, and newspapers found themselves vying for readers. In order to appeal to the masses, newspapers started featuring articles about performers and entertainers (and the personal details of their lives) to attract readers. Readers, in turn, felt personally connected to these celebrities and became invested in their lives and performances; they became fans. "Celebrities were and are media creations; without the media, they cannot exist. By sharing seemingly personal information, the media makes a public figure a celebrity, that is, a distant social figure with whom spectators perceive themselves as sharing a personal relationship" (Sentilles, 2003, p. 5). Among the first of these was the Menken, whose ability to seduce and maintain the attention of journalists was legendary: "Celebrities gave an intimate, personal feeling to a

world that was suddenly expanding beyond comprehension. Menken came into being as a celebrity just as the machinery to create and maintain celebrity was being put into place” (Sentilles, 2003, p. 5). Moreover, she provided American audiences with something pleasant to focus on rather than the grim news from smoldering Civil War battlefields.

Second, Adah Isaacs Menken realized the importance of mystery to the seduction of her fans and the media, and so she kept her origins rather tightly under wraps. The mystery and ambiguity of a woman who dressed like a man (when she was dressed at all), shared titillating and downright indecent details of her personal life with the general public, and yet refused to give a fact as simple as her parents’ names or her place of birth intrigued the nation even more. The question marks in her life only intensified her appeal as a performer and public figure. Most likely born Adah (or, Adelaide) Théodore in New Orleans between 1835 and 1839, her parents were Magdaleine Jean Louis Janneaux and Auguste Théodore (Mankowitz, 1982). Magdeleine was a beautiful Creole and Auguste a highly respected “free” African American. Fluent in French, English, and Spanish, Adah came to understand her exotic appeal as a mixed race performer at a very young age (Barca, 2004; Menken, 2002). After studying as a ballerina in the French Opera House of New Orleans, she danced in Havana, Cuba, earning the honorary title of “Queen of the Plaza” (Dickson, 1947). At some point, rumor had it that she performed at a hippodrome where she honed her accomplishments as an equestrienne. These skills would come in handy in San Francisco and Virginia City for multiple reasons.

Third, Adah Isaacs Menken kept the attention of her fans by consistently stupefying them with the bizarre circumstances of her life that she *did* choose to reveal. During her time at the hippodrome, for example, something went terribly wrong, and she ended

up a captive of Texas Indians before escaping and taking up the craft of poetry.<sup>107</sup> While in Texas, she married at least one, if not two, musicians. The latter was a handsome, highly talented Jewish musician, Alexander Isaacs Menken, and, many speculated that she was, more than likely, of Jewish origin herself. In fact, she even published poetry inspired by Jewish themes in the *American Israelite* after her writing caught the attention of American Reform leader, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. Later, she would publish articles and poetry in the *Jewish Messenger* in New York, too. Mr. Menken eventually left his wife because she refused to stop smoking cigars in public, an act of such low propriety that he could not ignore it, and she headed back to the stages to perform, seducing and/or marrying many more men along the way. Since she never divorced Menken, this led to a blitz of media coverage further enhancing her legend. Yet, this poetess who often met with a literary group in New York (including the likes of Walt Whitman) and one in the west (including Bret Harte, Joaquin Miller, and Mark Twain) made her living portraying young men in scant costumes with no small measure of leg. She was, in so many words, the Janis Joplin of her day — intensely sexual, unabashed in her rejection of societal norms, and hopelessly deluged by fame. Her untimely death at the age of thirty-three in Paris furthered cemented a stardom of intense blaze.

Scanning the papers of San Francisco as Comstockers were long in the habit of doing —and vice versa, of course — the imaginations of the denizens of Virginia City were replete with images of the “naked Menken” whom they absolutely demanded to see in person. Bay Area newspapers “warned they should prepare to be astonished at a rare

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<sup>107</sup> This part of the story is particularly lacking in corroboration although it did much for her exotic reputation. See Chapter Four for further discussion of exoticism in performance.

exhibition of mental and physical development, and intellectual muscularity when this petted child of genius drops down among you” (Watson, 1964, p. 257). Their patience would be taxed. Even though Sutliff’s was running a production of *Mazeppa*, the Menken refused to perform there. When offered Maguire’s Virginia City Opera House, she delayed demanding a new horse upon which to perform and new scenery befitting the finest theaters of San Francisco. Maguire indulged these extravagant wishes while she languished in sophisticated comfort at the International Hotel. Maguire’s Opera House on D Street was among the most grandiose and newest entertainment spaces on the Comstock, having opened the year prior. Its large stage and splendid construction adequately accommodated the additional twenty dancers for the *Corps de Ballet*, full orchestra under the direction of Hubert Schreiner,<sup>108</sup> and live horse. While waiting for the stallion necessary for her performances to arrive, she received rather awkward visits from Dan DeQuille and Mark Twain, bombastic-yellow-journalists-turned-bashful-admirers, who reviewed her poetry and offered suggestions. On opening night, March 2, 1864, her first show was sold out. So was the next night’s and the one after that. The ladies and gentlemen of Virginia City flocked to their opera house decked out in their finery — furs, hats, gloves, and capes — and women were just as intrigued as men by the Menken’s gender-bending performances.

Upon arrival at the opera house, the lush strains of the orchestra performed an overture comprised of a medley of *Mazeppa*’s main musical themes under Schreiner’s direction and brought the theater to attention while earning effusive praise from local papers who reported, “The music at this theatre is worth all the balance of the performance”

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<sup>108</sup> Hubert Schreiner was often mentioned in Comstock newspapers where he was praised as being a first-rate violinist and concertmaster.

(Watson, 1964, p. 259). Upon taking the stage, Adah Isaacs Menken dazzled Comstockers, leaving members of the audience (including its musical and theatrical critics) entirely befuddled as betrayed in their gushing accounts. Playing the title role in *Mazeppa*, the drama was based on an 1819 poem by Lord Byron in which Ivan Mazeppa risks death to pursue an adulterous relationship with the Countess Theresa at the court of King John II Casimir Vasa. When Mazeppa is eventually found out, the Count has him kidnapped, stripped, and lashed haphazardly to the back of a wild horse — presumably a sentence of death. To stage this, most theaters employed a naked dummy resembling the actor in the title role, but the Menken would have none of this. Donning a nude-colored body stocking, she was literally lashed to the back of her steed who then charged wildly off the stage. This feat inevitably culminated in foot stomping and wild cheering from the audience.

The Menken remained on a tour of Washoe for twenty-nine days where she was unabashedly wooed by Dan DeQuille and Mark Twain — via the Territorial Enterprise — at the loss of any journalistic reputation to which either man still clung. As a critical newspaperman from the Humboldt Register responded to one of their effusive columns: “MENKENIZED — The local of the Enterprise is awfully spooney in his comments on Menken’s performance. He had better take some of Mrs. Wilson’s soothing syrup and get to bed earlier of nights” (Register, 1864).

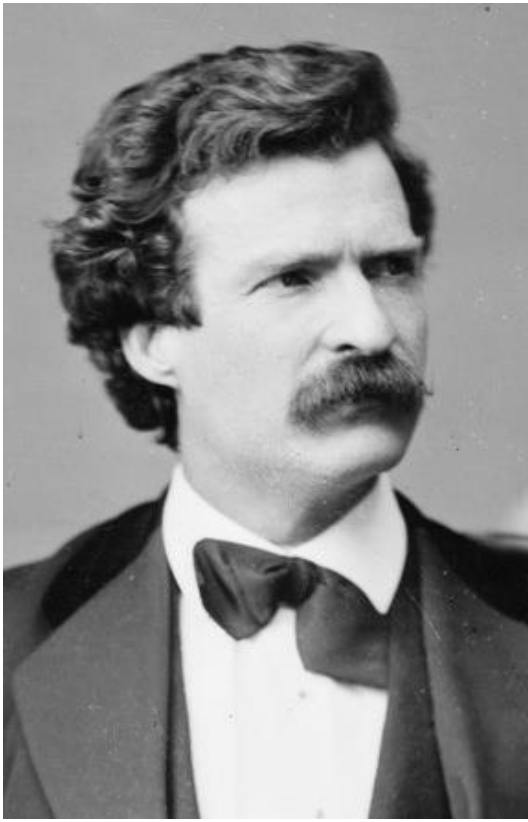
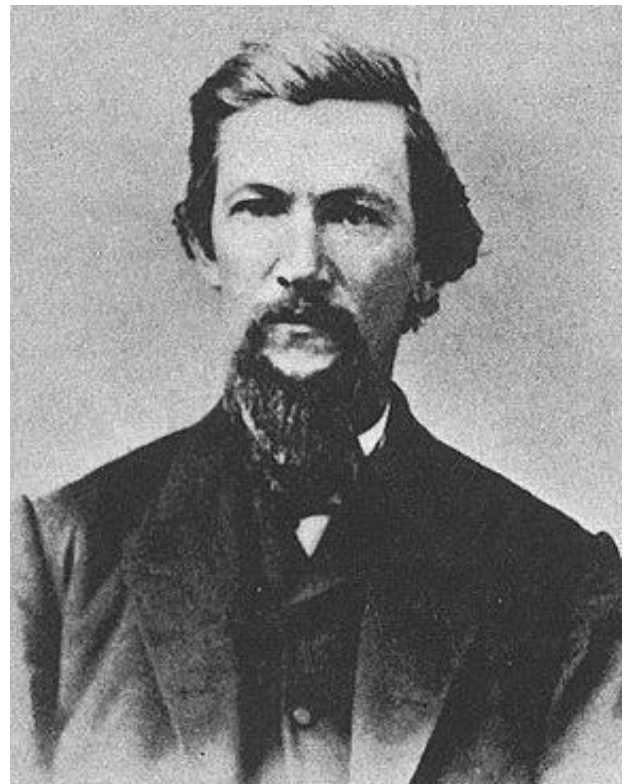


Figure 4.2 Detail of cropped portrait of Samuel Langhorne Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, with noted nineteenth century authors by Mathew Brady (1871). Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Figure 4.3 Portrait of Dan DeQuille. Image courtesy the *Nevada Observer* (<http://www.nevadaobserver.com/Dan%20DeQuille.jpg>.)



The story of Adah Isaacs Menken's enormous success in San Francisco and Virginia City is as much a testament to the interconnectivity and the interplay between two civic centers of the west — San Francisco and Virginia City — as it is a story of American stardom and the birth of mass media. The Menken performed in two theaters owned by the same opera impresario, Thomas Maguire. These two theaters were built to nearly identical dimensions and in a similar style (although Maguire did boast that his Comstock theater was one foot larger), and so this provided Adah Isaacs Menken with a sense of comfort and familiarity in both locations. The relatively similar layouts and stage dimensions certainly helped her successfully pull off the wild feats that she performed on horseback, too. Besides theaters of consistent dimension owned by the same individual, the Menken received unparalleled promotion and praise as the journalists of the Bay Area and the Comstock bandied back and forth over their prized celebrity. She was, quite literally, the talk of both cities. These newspapermen appealed to an interconnected readership of citizens that often traveled back and forth between the two cities, alternately living and working in each and guaranteed success in both venues. One of the primary reasons that Virginia City, Nevada, could draw on the most popular entertainers, musicians, and performers of the nineteenth century, like Adah Isaacs Menken, was the complex, interconnectivity established with San Francisco. This belies a deeper pattern of the American West, the conquest of the frontier, not through rugged individuals and cowboys but through the construction of civic centers to reach into the hinterland.

### *San Francisco's Colonization of the Comstock*

The city has majesty, one that is achieved by distancing itself as far as possible from bondage to earth. The city began as an attempt to bring the order and majesty of heaven down to earth, and it proceeded from there by cutting itself from agricultural roots, civilizing winter, turning night into day, and disciplining the sensuous human body in the interest of developing the mind. Humans have done all these things such that, in the city, one can experience the heights and the depths — in a word, the sublime. (Tuan, 2013, p. 113)

The story of the “Old West” is the story of the city. Westward expansion and urbanity cannot be disentangled. The city and its relationship to its hinterlands, then, is a feature of the West often overlooked to the detriment of history. Conurbations formed at trade points, or where freight was delivered or transshipped, or at times where people congregated at markets where surplus goods were sold. Urban places grew with time to larger assemblages, sometimes into entire cities. Through transit lines, cities connected to smaller towns, or even camps where activities such as mining or logging or other resource extraction took place. The network was defined, mappable, and — to some — valuable beyond the dreams of avarice.

There is simply no way around the fundamental fact that the American West — if not the entire continent — was conquered through the development of urban centers or hubs tasked with gaining control over nearby hinterlands. Once these urban cores and their hinterlands were connected (like the dots on a puzzle) by the transcontinental railroad (and its sister lines), Manifest Destiny proceeded nearly unhindered. The result was a Western frontier conquered in less than a century rather than the thousand years originally predicted by grandees of the Revolutionary War generation, most notably Thomas

Jefferson — who after all was responsible for the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the United States in 1803.

Among those cities that took upon themselves the domination of an expansive, ambitious hinterland corridor was San Francisco — a sleepy religious outpost established as a mission by the Spanish in the eighteenth century to serve as a safe harbor, but seemingly destined, a hundred years later, to dominate the Pacific realm as a surging city. Geography poised it perfectly for just such a destiny: “San Francisco owes much of its special character to its isolation at the tip of a hill-studded peninsula. The city’s many hills, and the bay and ocean that border it on three sides, have had a great influence on the way San Francisco developed. Indeed, it is safe to say that much of The City’s identity was, and is shaped by its geology and geography” (Richards, 1992, p. 1). This hold over the Pacific, however, would never have occurred without San Francisco’s “ace in the hole,” the nineteenth-century industrial titan, Virginia City, Nevada, which produced between \$350 and \$400 million in silver and gold during the Comstock Bonanza (Brechtin, 2001, p. 43; Straka, 2007, p. 4).

As William Cronon so aptly points out in *Nature’s Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, a primary topoi of the history of the American West was “an expanding metropolitan economy creating ever more elaborate and intimate linkages between city and country” (Cronon, 1991, p. xiii). The relationship between San Francisco, California, and Virginia City, Nevada, epitomized this theme. In fact, Virginia City’s nineteenth-century community shared intimate historical, socio-cultural, and economic ties with its parent community — the great peninsular metropolis that claimed it was seated upon a hundred hills — San Francisco. One need only compare nineteenth-century City Directories of

San Francisco and Virginia City to find the same businesses, the same social establishments, the same theaters. In some cases, as with the opera mogul Thomas Maguire, these businesses were even owned by the same people. The fabulous mineral wealth upon which the Comstock sat bound it intricately to San Francisco: “Historically, San Francisco owes much of its culture and image to the vast riches of Nevada’s Comstock Lode and the queen of that mining boom, Virginia City. Comstock gold [and silver] in Frisco banks built The City and its fortunes and then rebuilt them in the wake of every fire and disaster that befell the city by the bay” (Laughlin, 1995, p. 80).

In some respects, the relationship verged on outright colonization as San Francisco (and the rest of the nation, for that matter) exploited the Comstock, and, eventually, the greater state of Nevada, for the region’s raw natural resources, while importing manufactured products to it at an exorbitant rate:

Nevada’s original destiny, to furnish raw materials only, explains why she has been a colony of the United States. She has produced soda, borax, lead, copper, and wool, only to find that Congress permitted these products to enter America on the free list. Thus Nevada has had to sell these products to Eastern manufacturers at a low price, kept low by world competition, and then buy back factory-made articles — copper wire, borated soap, rifle bullets, and winter overcoats — at high prices, kept high by a tariff on imported goods.

Also, Nevada’s bullion has been a subsidy to the nation. It, however, has played a significant role in American history and in world finance, not without glory to its place of origin. For one thing, it was of crucial aid to the Northern cause during the Civil War. “Nevada! Coin thy golden crags, with Freedom’s image and name,” wrote Emerson in his “Boston Hymn.” (Lillard, 1969, p. 47)

While the Southern California historian Richard G. Lillard certainly takes some artistic liberties in this assessment, the main point is both sound and relevant. Nevada’s relationship to the United States was historically that of a landlocked colony. Virginia City, alt-

hough certainly glorified by the nation, represented simply a high-end marker of this imperial interchange.<sup>109</sup>

The concept of the colonization of the American West is one that numerous authors have explored over the twentieth century including Richard G. Lillard, Howard R. Lamar, the New Western Historians, William Robbins, and Gray Brechin. Robbins, for example, argues that a small handful of ambitious, elite families bent on empire (the Guggenheims, Goulds, Harrimans, Hearsts, Morgans, and Mellons) ultimately shaped the destiny of the American West rather than the romanticized, ragtag collection of rugged individuals envisioned in Frederick Jackson Turner's vaunted Frontier Thesis.<sup>110</sup> The machinations of a few wealthy families in the West are carefully examined, too, in Gray Brechin's monumental work about San Francisco's imperial capitalists entitled *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (1999), which analyzes in greater detail the interconnectivity of urban centers and their hinterlands.

All colonization arguments aside, one must acknowledge that a community located in the most rugged, arid environs of northern Nevada at an elevation of 6,150 feet with scant and non-potable water at best; destitute, barren soil and an utter lack of nearly every

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<sup>109</sup> It is important to note here that this imperialistic relationship was by no means unique to Nevada. A very persuasive argument can be made that ALL of the Western territories basically represented colonies of the East before their statehood was officially ratified. As the Yale historian Howard R. Lamar puts it, "By 1889, every territory in the West was calling its federal officials colonial tyrants and comparing its plight to that of one of the thirteen colonies" (Lamar, 1966, p. 12).

<sup>110</sup> While Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis has been smashed nearly to bits — in some respects — by New Historians such as Patty Limerick, Richard White, William Cronon, Donald Worster, and their successors, we must never underestimate its cultural implications and prevalence in the twentieth and even twenty-first centuries. Thus, I include this caution from Limerick with regard to "cultural persistence": "To analyze how white Americans thought about the West, it helps to think anthropologically. One lesson of anthropology is the extraordinary power of cultural persistence; with American Indians, for instance, beliefs and values will persist even when the supporting economic and political structures have vanished. What holds for Indians holds as well for white Americans; the values they attached to westward expansion persist, in cheerful defiance of contrary evidence" (Limerick, 1987, p. 36).

natural resource necessary for basic survival (let alone community building) would seem entirely non-viable absent the awesome industrial complex that sprang up between the Comstock and San Francisco to sustain it. Without constant nourishment via an umbilical cord wielding civilization, resources, and capital, the Comstock would have rapidly ceased to exist —no matter how great the “Gold Fever” of the first prospectors. The city by the bay and its hinterlands provided the people, equipment, infrastructure, and finance necessary to achieve the impossible — unlock the Comstock Lode’s wealth-laden mineral veins thousands of miles beneath the earth in one of the most remote, inhospitable regions of the American West. “San Francisco quickly emerged as a manufacturing hub supplying a large portion of the Pacific coast and the interior. It produced slaughtered beef, glassware, blue jeans, and especially mining equipment. From south of Market Street came hoses and huge nozzles for mining, pumps and stamps, ore cleaners and amalgamating pans, retorts and boilers bound for the Comstock.... In a remarkably short span of time San Francisco’s industry was supplying a market second in size only to Chicago’s” (West, 2013, p. 113). The interconnectivity between San Francisco and Virginia City, therefore, was extremely complex and mutually constructed. The age-old mining adage, “It takes a mine to run a mine,” proved particularly fitting in the context of the development of Comstock mines.<sup>111</sup>

Unlike the rest of Nevada, Virginia City represented a remote crown jewel of the San Francisco Mining Pyramid, and so it benefitted from particularly intimate ties with

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<sup>111</sup> See Gray Brechin’s *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* pp. 30-36 and Ronald James’ *The Roar and the Silence A History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode* pg. 12 for greater exploration of this mining idiom, one well-established in Europe by German prospectors during the Middle Ages and later reiterated by Mexican miners in the New World. More specifically, Mexican miners argued that “it takes a gold mine to run a silver mine.”

its colonial mother. This strikes upon an important concept that William Robbins recognizes: “the way in which the metropolis, as an expression of strategic and powerful elements within the world of a modernizing capitalist system, conditioned life in the countryside” (Robbins, 1994, p. 166).

In the case of the Comstock, many San Franciscans traveled freely between the two locales, alternately living in San Francisco and working and/or speculating on the Comstock. The careers and fortunes of these men were made on the Comstock and enjoyed in San Francisco or along the East Coast: George Hurst, John Mackay, William Chapman Ralston, William Sharon, and Alfred Sutro. With lavishly high expectations for even the most basic accoutrements of civilization, they transported sophisticated amenities to their Nevada home-away-from-home. As a result, Virginia City relied not only upon the development capital, new machinery, industrial innovations, and lumber of the city by the bay (and its contado) but also enjoyed its finest luxury goods, professional performers, and even some of its architectural achievements. A little bit of San Francisco’s “energy” was captured and transported directly to the Comstock, and this represented a respite from the otherwise harsh living and working conditions in the area. Virginia City functioned as a suburb or (in its very broadest sense) as a bedroom community of the San Francisco Bay Area. This was immeasurably facilitated by the construction of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad first to Carson City in 1869, and then to the transcontinental Central Pacific Railroad in Reno on August 24, 1872. By the 1870s, trains left Virginia City in the afternoon, stopped in Carson City for dinner, hooked up to comfortable Pullman sleeper cars in Reno, and made the overnight journey to Oakland, California. Waking in Oakland, passengers benefitted from a brief interlude to freshen up before catching

the ferry to San Francisco. The two cities were never more connected; the commute was pleasant and convenient.

In its tendency to exaggerate the affluence of its community, Virginia City established the reputation of an exurb of San Francisco, a community of great affluence and some of the most innovative industrial marvels of the nineteenth century. These two great industrial powerhouses of the nineteenth-century west shared intricately woven destinies beginning as early as the mid-1850s, and the bonds between the two would have immeasurable consequences on each city's urban landscapes and technological growth.

### *Strange Bedfellows: San Francisco & Virginia City*

San Francisco, California, and Virginia City, Nevada, represent two extreme geographical poles. The communities that developed in each display these differences to this day. While the former — founded in 1776 by Spanish explorers Lieutenant José Joaquín Moraga and Francisco Palóu and named for Saint Francis of Assisi — blossomed into a dignified Victorian city of empire on a seven-by-seven-mile square tip of peninsula overlooking San Francisco Bay and significant stretches of the Pacific Ocean, the latter was haphazardly scrambled together even as overly exuberant promises of quick wealth adulated the gold-obsessed minds of its careless builders (Solnit, 2010, pp. 1-9). Astonishingly, both cities were constructed by many of the same hands.

Settlements around Gold Canyon rose abruptly, perilously, and unceremoniously from rugged mountainsides where bland waves of sagebrush, scrubby gray-green junipers, and stunted, albeit stubborn, piñon pines provided little to no shade. Instead of

sporting the namesake of a Catholic saint, the area around McLaughlin and O’Riley’s<sup>112</sup> initial silver strike briefly enjoyed the benign, albeit ironic, label Mount Pleasant. But the official moniker “Comstock” honored Henry T. “Pancake” Comstock, a comparatively unsuccessful, mentally unstable miner who accidentally stumbled across McLaughlin and O’Riley’s Washoe Silver Strike (as he had the Grosh brothers’ cabin), fast-talked his name and that of a friend onto the claim, and then managed to squander away the whole opportunity due to his incomparable indolence. Too lazy to cook his own bread, Henry T. Comstock earned the nickname “Pancake” as the only food he was willing to fry. After strong arming his and Penrod’s way onto the McLaughlin and O’Riley claim, Comstock employed Native Americans to work for him as he refused to do anything except the “heavy talking.”<sup>113</sup>

Virginia City’s christening is no less irreverent although the community had a much greater shot at respectability, at least initially. Originally named the town of Ophir on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1859, after the first assay of processed material from McLaughlin and O’Riley’s claim pronounced the silver strike official, the appellation made ambitious reference and, perhaps paid solemn reverence, to the Old Testament passage, “And they came to Ophir, and fetched from thence gold, four hundred and twenty talents” (1 Kings 9:28). The name was retained by the Ophir mine, the original site of the first silver strike. But residents of the sprawling, booming mining camp had other plans.

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<sup>112</sup> In the historical research for this chapter, I ran across a handful of variant spellings for Peter O’Riley, including O’Reilly and O’Reilley. The O’Riley spelling that I use throughout this chapter tended to predominate, and so I use it here for ease of recognition and consistency.

<sup>113</sup> In his book *The Roar and the Silence*, Ron James approaches the legends surrounding Henry T. “Pancake” Comstock with care arguing that they were, perhaps, largely exaggerated (if not outright invented) by William Wright (a.k.a. Dan DeQuille) in his book *The Big Bonanza*.

In September of the same year, miners held a meeting in which they rechristened the growing city after one of its earliest claimants, James “Old Virginny” Finney. Again, William Wright was the first to spin a few tall tales about “Old Virginny” including the actual naming of the city. According to the Wright legend, Finney — who just happened to be a raging alcoholic — tripped while walking inebriated down the town’s growing main street. Breaking his bottle of whiskey in the process, Finney was disinclined to waste a good drink. Rising to his feet (and thinking remarkably clearly) he announced that he was hereby baptizing the town in honor of his place of birth, the commonwealth of Virginia. Having attained the loftiest of Biblical names and one that any mining town would be proud of, the city located in modern-day Storey County quickly rejected this saintly moniker in favor of a whiskey-soaked slur bestowed by a drunken baptizer.

Whatever the case may be with regard to the veracity of Wright’s claims about the inauguration of the Comstock and the baptism of Virginia City, the image of this area was rough-and-ready from the get-go, while San Francisco’s denizens attempted to cultivate an appearance of dignity and elegance (despite areas such as the Barbary Coast and the Tenderloin, whose reputations would plague the city for decades and, in the case of the Tenderloin, still does!) To the nineteenth century mind, San Francisco’s geographic location equated far more readily with a stable, respectable community. “A belief in the intrinsic connection between moral character and environment remained a fundamental American premise in the nineteenth century.” On the other hand, the Comstock sorely missed the mark. “In a nation still espousing Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian ideal — the perception that agricultural productivity was the defining point of a civilized society — barrenness was the most damaging stereotype imaginable. Immigrants in the nineteenth-

century West sought both fertile land they could farm and beauty their eyes could register. To the majority of Americans, oceans of sagebrush hardly fit the bill” (Barber, 2008, pp. 18-19).

A prime example of this is Samuel Clemens’ initial reaction to seeing the Comstock. He and his brother Orion arrived in 1861. Later, under the pseudonym Mark Twain, he made the following observations about the Comstock’s environment:

Visibly our new home was a desert, walled in by barren, snow-clad mountains. There was not a tree in sight. There was no vegetation but the endless sagebrush and greasewood. All nature was gray with it. We were plowing through great depths of powdery alkali dust that rose in thick clouds and floated across the plain like smoke from a burning house. We were coated in it like millers... We moved in the midst of solitude, silence, and desolation. (Twain, 2008, pp. 120-121)

While the landscape surrounding the Comstock certainly fits this description, miners were not particularly interested in pastoral scenery or pleasant vistas. They came to Nevada hot on the pursuit of one item — or, rather, two after 1859 — silver and gold. The inhospitable scenery was of little consequence to fortune seekers flooding the region beyond practical considerations associated with travel, claim staking, securing mining jobs, and eking out existences. In fact, a number of elite San Franciscans had the object of empire in their sights, and they needed the extravagant wealth pouring out of rough-and-tumble Comstock mines to finance those designs. Perhaps, Virginia City was a god-forsaken spot, but it could still pay amazing dividends. So, a complex interconnectivity and dichotomy emerged at the same time between these two cities. Both were underscored and emphasized by geography.

The cities, however, did share a handful of common features. First, the weather of each was disparaged. And, in particular, by the same man: Mark Twain. Apparently, he was none too impressed by the climate in either location, which is ironic since he certainly spent a fair amount of time during the 1860s suffering back and forth in each. Of San Francisco, he is purported to have stated, “The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco.” Since the City is surrounded on three sides by water, its temperatures are heavily impacted by the cool currents of the Pacific Ocean, which actually produces a rather mild climate year round. One too cold for Twain’s tastes, it appears. Of the Great Basin, he purportedly observed, “Nevada has two seasons, winter and summer, and they alternate daily.” He probably never uttered either phrase, though each is routinely attributed to him, and therefore they have staying power. These represent additional instances of cultural persistence, which can never be underestimated. Moreover, they indicate to what extent Mark Twain’s literary and cultural presence was felt in each of these communities during the nineteenth century.

Besides unseasonable weather, both cities straddle some rather challenging, steep terrain. San Francisco sits atop over fifty hills (some brag it is more like one hundred), and many of its most well-known neighborhoods derive their names from these geographical features (e.g. Nob Hill, Russian Hill, and Twin Peaks). Virginia City's historic downtown corridor is located high in the Virginia Range, which runs parallel to the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada.

Dominating the landscapes of both cities are topographical features bearing the same name, Mount Davidson. At 928 feet, San Francisco’s Mount Davidson represents San Francisco’s highest natural point and is located near the geographical center of the

city, just south of Twin Peaks. Originally named Blue Mountain, it was considered to be one of San Francisco's original "Seven Hills" (with all of the allusions to Ancient Rome), and it was purchased in 1881 by Adolph Sutro. Sutro is another example of an incredibly successful individual who graced both the San Francisco and Virginia City scenes. During the boom years of the Comstock, he worked on the original Mount Davidson located high above the Comstock before making his millions and retreating to San Francisco to build many monumental structures and even serve as mayor.<sup>114</sup> Since the Depression era, Mount Davidson's crest has been crowned with a 103 foot concrete cross; each year, this cross is illuminated and a solemn ceremony is held to commemorate Easter. It was renamed in 1911 after the nineteenth-century geographer, geodesist, and President of the Academy of Sciences, George Davidson. Besides San Francisco's Mount Davidson and Virginia City's aforementioned Mount Davidson, there is another namesake peak in Alaska (Proctor; Proctor). Virginia City's Mount Davidson represents the highest point in the city with an elevation of 7,868 feet above the actual settlement located around 6,150 feet. It is famous for a flag pole that was erected for the Fourth of July celebration held in 1863. Mark Twain talked fondly about this flag pole in Chapter 55 of his semi-autobiographical, semi-salacious book *Roughing It*, even relating a story of quasi-religious significance in conjunction with Mount Davidson.<sup>115</sup>

It was not without regret that I took a last look at the tiny flag (it was thirty-five feet long and ten feet wide) fluttering like a lady's handkerchief from the topmost peak of Mount Davidson, two thousand feet above Virginia's roofs, and felt that doubtless I was bidding a permanent farewell to a city which had afforded me the

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<sup>114</sup> By the time of his death in 1898, it is estimated that Adolph Sutro owned about 10% of San Francisco, which amounted to about 12,000 acres from Baker Beach to Lake Merced (Proctor).

<sup>115</sup> For more details on hiking up to the flagpole, check out: <http://www.summitpost.org/mount-davidson-nv/153745>.

most vigorous enjoyment of life I had ever experienced. And this reminds me of an incident which the dullest memory Virginia could boast at the time it happened must vividly recall, at times, till its possessor dies. Late one summer afternoon we had a rain shower. That was astonishing enough, in itself, to set the whole town buzzing, for it only rains (during a week or two weeks) in the winter in Nevada, and even then not enough at a time to make it worthwhile for any merchant to keep umbrellas for sale. But the rain was not the chief wonder. It only lasted five or ten minutes; while the people were still talking about it all the heavens gathered to themselves a dense blackness as of midnight. All the vast eastern front of Mount Davidson, over-looking the city, put on such a funereal gloom that only the nearness and solidity of the mountain made its outlines even faintly distinguishable from the dead blackness of the heavens they rested against. This unaccustomed sight turned all eyes toward the mountain; and as they looked, a little tongue of rich golden flame was seen waving and quivering in the heart of the midnight, away up on the extreme summit! In a few minutes the streets were packed with people, gazing with hardly an uttered word, at the one brilliant mote in the brooding world of darkness. It flicked like a candle-flame, and looked no larger; but with such a background it was wonderfully bright, small as it was. It was the flag! — though no one suspected it at first, it seemed so like a supernatural visitor of some kind — a mysterious messenger of good tidings, some were fain to believe. It was the nation's emblem transfigured by the departing rays of a sun that was entirely palled from view; and on no other object did the glory fall, in all the broad panorama of mountain ranges and deserts. Not even upon the staff of the flag — for that, a needle in the distance at any time, was now untouched by the light and undistinguishable in the gloom. For a whole hour the weird visitor winked and burned in its lofty solitude, and still the thousands of uplifted eyes watched it with fascinated interest. How the people were wrought up! The superstition grew apace that this was a mystic courier come with great news from the war — the poetry of the idea excusing and commending it — and on it spread, from heart to heart, from lip to lip and from street to street, till there was a general impulse to have out the military and welcome the bright waif with a salvo of artillery! (Twain, 2008, pp. 304-305).

### *Comstock Industrial Marvels, Morbidity, & Mishaps*

When the water reached Virginia City there was great rejoicing. Cannon were fired, bands of music paraded the streets, and rockets were sent up all over the city. Many persons went out and filled bottles with this first water from the Sierras [*sic*], and a bottle of it is still preserved in the cabinet of the Pacific Coast Pioneers. (DeQuille, 1974, pp. 172-173)

One of the greatest technological innovations that residents of the Comstock would witness during the mid-nineteenth century was the construction of a thirty-mile long water pipe capable of transporting two million gallons of pure Sierra Nevada spring water per day across the Washoe Valley, over Mount Davidson, and into Virginia City. “Where water is fugitive, the pursuit of the precious fluid has sculpted the vision of communities,” which is expertly demonstrated in the lengths to which Virginians went to secure its steady and plentiful supply via the Schussler pipe (Berry, 1997, p. 80). Constructed at the Risdon Iron Works in San Francisco from 700 tons of iron, the pipe was manufactured to withstand 800 pounds of pressure per square inch and 1,850 feet of water at its greatest drop. Its 1,524 joints of pipe relied on 35 tons of lead caulk to prevent leaks. The community, previously constrained by water limitations, rejoiced at the sense of liberation that Herman Schussler’s pipe brought. The Bonanza Firm, which included such familiar names as John W. Mackay, James G. Fair, James C. Flood, and William S. O’Brien funded the successful project. With a secure water supply, Virginia City’s growth appeared to be guaranteed in 1873, and a number of other important industrial advances seemed to point to the community’s continued longevity. Evidences of community stability reaffirmed the confidence of investors, financiers, and locals alike, however, the city’s destiny remained capriciously linked to the quartz ore veins beneath its foundations. The

vision of Virginia City as a liminal, temporary community of transients can be difficult to reconcile with many of its impressive and massive public works projects, which certainly would have pointed to more permanent intentions in other communities, but one must remember that these were all intimately linked to the city's major economic engine, mining.

By as early as 1861, two years after the first Rush to Washoe, truly astonishing things were happening in Virginia City and its environs, in large part due to the capital, machinery, and engineers of San Francisco. Just as a sophisticated, multi-storied city rose above the hilly streets of Virginia City and its suburbs dominated by nearly 50 mills, so, too, an intricate subterranean system of state-of-the-art mining construction descended deep below the earth numbering just as many miles. During the day, as women, children, non-mining citizens, and the elderly carried on various activities above ground, a whole city of miners worked thousands of feet below, a man-sized ant farm bustling with activity. Some miners worked softer areas with picks; others used hand drills; and, still others employed black powder to blast away the most obdurate surfaces. Ore loads were either carried to the surface by miners (such as at the Mexican Mine) or brought to the surface using hand carts. By the late 1860s, technologies such as the mechanical rock drill and dynamite replaced hand drills and black powder; new hoisting systems including large steam engines and high cages emptied tunnels thousands of feet below the earth of their ore loads; and, massive Cornish pumps kept the depths dry.

Finally, in 1869, the construction of the narrow gauge Virginia & Truckee railroad from Carson City to the communities of the Comstock provided the surest means of transporting mining equipment, supplies, and timber to the mines while removing mas-

sive quantities of mill-ready ore. Moreover, it further secured the Comstock's place along the transcontinental transportation network. "Mining centers [such as the Comstock] that were plugged into the continental transportation network could quickly acquire the necessary equipment and labor, creating what were, in effect, sophisticated underground factories in an astonishingly short span of time" (West, 2013, pp. 112-113).

The V&T railroad represented one of the most romanticized, sentimentalized aspects of this transcontinental transportation network in the twentieth century because of the combined forces of Hollywood and noted authors such as Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg. But it was certainly welcomed by the nineteenth-century denizens of Virginia City, too. Many had, after all, grown weary of dodging the ample, odiferous artifacts left by passing teamster and packer trains as well as living with the clear and ever present danger of being crushed beneath a stampeding wagon. Like Schussler's pipe, construction of the V&T's route required a high degree of engineering precision. "The route required six tunnels, at a total length of 2,400 feet, and about 6,000 degrees of turns, the equivalent of almost seventeen complete circles. Playing on one of the line's early names — the Virginia, Carson, and Truckee River — people nicknamed it the Very Crooked and Terribly Rough Railroad" (James, 1998, p. 80).<sup>116</sup> Despite the rough ride, the V&T railroad would prove invaluable in its capacity to supply the mining community and feed its mills.

The Comstock faced no end of geographical and geological difficulty in accessing the rich veins running beneath the city's floorboards; its engineers and innovators demon-

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<sup>116</sup>For a more detailed description of the V&T railroad's construction and function, please see James, 1998, pp. 80-84 and DeQuille, 1974, pp. 165-167.

strated infinite resourcefulness in attempting to overcome these challenges. One of the greatest problems faced by mine owners, ironically, involved water, lots of it. Twelve years before the arid community hired Herman Schussler to pipe water from the Sierra to its citizens, its miners encountered torrents of subterranean water. Non-potable and generally toxic, this water flooded mine shafts and represented a major impediment to accessing the “Comstock Lode.”

As a result, monstrous water pipes were constructed to pull water from the mine shafts, and they grew in stature and strength over time. “The pumps followed an evolution much like a dinosaur: they became increasingly large over time and demanded more and more fuel. A pump installed at the Union shaft in 1879 had a flywheel 40 feet in diameter that weighed 110 tons (Lord, 1959, facing p. 346). The cylinder that sucked up water hundreds of feet below ground was 5 feet 4 inches in diameter with a stroke of 6 feet 9 inches, capable of clearing a small water-filled room with one cycle of its action” (James, 1998, p. 58). Pumps required steam engines to operate, and they had to be operated twenty-four hours a day to keep the mines from flooding. (The water was generally non-potable.) One can only imagine the constant din of machinery blaring through Virginia City. The roar of industrial progress — whether from mills, pumps, V&T steam engines, or mining operations — provided an unceasing symphony of rumbles, whistles, and percussion — the sounds of nineteenth-century progress.

One of the most ingenious innovations, by far, would be Philipp Deidesheimer’s square-set timbering, which literally provided the underground buttressing necessary to support the massive honeycomb of tunnels being carved out by miners following the area’s gold and silver veins. Square-set timbering conquered a number of steep challenges

facing Comstock miners in 1860 including: 1) the size of the Comstock Lode (veins of ore 40 to 50 feet wide, in some places); 2) the soft, water-soaked clay composition of the soil they tunneled following the quartz ore; 3) and, the increased instability of these clays when exposed to air. Using milled wooden supports measuring eighteen inches by eighteen inches and from four to seven feet depending on their intended placement either vertically or horizontally, the ends of each support were finished so that they could be joined together to form cells or blocks of support. These blocks could then be locked together to create a wooden skeleton of sorts. Diagonal braces and/or plank ceilings/floors could be added to further insure against potential cave-ins. "It was an ingenious system that could fill any size underground void with supports as stable as the mountain itself. In addition, carpenters could assemble the square-sets as miners removed ore so that all were afforded maximum protection from a collapse of the mine" (James, 1998, p. 55). An immediate success, soon mine owners across the Comstock were sinking hundreds of thousands of feet of lumber into adits and shafts, constructing inverted subterranean high rises.

Drainage, ventilation, ore removal, and mine safety presented constant obstacles for mine owners as tragically illustrated by the Yellow Jacket mine disaster. In the early morning hours of April 7, 1869, a fire started in the 800-level of the Yellow Jacket. To this day, no one knows what started the blaze, but the assumption was that an unextinguished candle from the night shift managed to catch nearby timbering on fire. Unfortunately, for all of its benefits, Deidesheimer's square-set timbering meant that mines were quite literally tinderboxes, and so underground blazes represented one of the most distinct threats miners and mine owners faced. By 7:00 am, portions of the Yellow Jacket's timbering were so completely consumed that massive cave-ins began, and these cave-ins

pushed deadly amounts of poisonous air into adits and adjoining tunnels between various mines including the Kentuck and the Crown Point. The blaze went undetected for quite some time because of the shift change from night to day, and so countless miners on the morning shift were lowered to their deaths in all three mines, engulfed by the poisonous fumes emanating from the Yellow Jacket at the 800-level, unable to communicate with the shaft elevator operators above-ground. Anywhere from thirty-four to forty-five men perished in the blaze, many of their bodies cremated on the spot leaving no trace of their earthly remains. The subterranean fire continued to grow, and by April 10<sup>th</sup>, the desperate decision was made to seal the shafts in the hopes of depriving the fire of oxygen. The fire, however, would not be so easily extinguished. In fact, “reports indicate that the rock walls nearest the sealed fire remained hot three years later” (James, 1998, p. 88).

The Yellow Jacket mine disaster persuaded the communities of the Comstock to support yet another great industrial marvel of the nineteenth century, the Sutro Tunnel, which its visionary, Adolph Sutro, argued would provide ventilation, passive drainage, ore removal, and a means of escape for miners in a similar situation. After all, countless miners working below the 800-foot level had no means of escape whatsoever from the noxious fumes associated with the Yellow Jacket blaze. The Sutro Tunnel, a four mile shaft leading from the heart of the Comstock’s mines down to what would be the community of Sutro near the Carson River, would connect the mines at a depth of 1,663 feet to the outside world. Sutro, who originally proposed the construction of his tunnel four years prior, argued passionately that it would have permitted countless trapped miners an escape route, not only from the poisonous fumes pouring from the Yellow Jacket, but

from the very mines that entombed them. With \$50,000 of support from local unions, he was finally able to begin the project on October 19, 1869.

An ambitious construction that required nearly a decade to build, Sutro's Tunnel "called for complex engineering of nearly four miles of excavation with no dips or turns, at a steady, slight incline to facilitate drainage and wide enough for ore carts traveling in two directions at once" (James, 1998, p. 89). Like Comstock deep shaft mines, Sutro's Tunnel swallowed extraordinary quantities of wood: "1,000 board feet of lumber for every five feet of tunnel" (James, 1998, pp. 88-89). It solved a number of practical problems and provided an increased sense of stability. Ranking along with the Fourth Ward School, Maguire's Opera House, the Virginia & Truckee railroad, and Schussler's water pipe, the progressing Sutro Tunnel not only represented industrial innovation but the heady optimism and confidence that many Virginia City denizens had in the mines located directly beneath their feet. They would flay the forests of the Sierra Nevada in their attempt to further secure this sense of prosperity and permanence.

### *Mechanization and the Decimation of the Eastern Sierra*

When the Forty-Niners first reached California during its infamous Gold Rush, they descended like locusts consuming forests, poisoning waterways, and exploiting a variety of natural resources in their obsessive frenzy to locate riches. In 1859, the frenzy turned eastward. Much of this consumption, especially in northern Nevada, would have been difficult if not impossible (at least so quickly and on such a vast scale) were it not for mechanization and the transcontinental transportation network that developed in the mid-to late-nineteenth century. Following the 1859 Rush to Washoe, industrialization and

mechanization activity, supported by an ever expanding transcontinental transportation network (first of teamsters and packers and later of steam engines,) reached a frenetic apex along the eastern slopes of the Sierra and the mountains surrounding the Comstock Lode. Although ironically referred to as the “Jewel of the Sierra,” the forests surrounding Lake Tahoe quickly became victims of a massive industrial rape.

As San Francisco’s westernmost outpost, Virginia City was fully deputized and charged with the execution of this massive environmental onslaught. The jagged, treeless eastern slopes of the Sierra attest to crimes against nature waged thereupon just over 150 years ago. In the early 1860s, upon first seeing crystalline Lake Tahoe and its verdant forests, Mark Twain wrote that it was the “most beautiful jewel in all the world!” By 1883, when the California legislature requested that the Nevada legislature preserve the forests of Tahoe — the better to promote tourism — its counterpart’s response was that there were, in fact, no trees left to save. Devouring pristine Sierra forests, the mining behemoth burned through logs for fuel (since no viable source of coal was readily available to the area) and filled its subterranean workspaces with square-set timbers, hauled over the Carson Range and delivered by flume and wagon to Virginia City and its surrounding mining districts. By 1865 alone, more wood supported the subterranean depths of Nevada mines than was erected as above-ground structures *statewide* (Nielson, 1990, p. 41).

Just as miners on the Comstock demonstrated a particular talent for detaching from their natural surroundings and reconstituting them as dead, exploitable tracts of land, so the lumber barons of the Sierra converted pristine, old-growth forests into numerical figures and monetary sums even before the cutting began. Mechanization certainly assisted them in this endeavor. Editor of the *Truckee Republican* and noted Donner

Party historian C.F. McGlashan possessed a particularly calculated and unsettling penchant for describing the forests of Tahoe in their glory and, then, with another stroke of the pen reducing them to feet of lumber and profit calculations:

The lumbering interests [of Tahoe] are immense. The high mountain walls which encircle the lake are covered luxuriantly with forests. The best timber is at the foot of the lake and in the largest quantities. Twelve thousand feet of logs will come this year from the south end of the lake, six from Sugar Pine Point, five from Tahoe City, and seven from Bay City and Griffs. The Carson and Tahoe Lumbering and Fluming Company are letting exceedingly large contracts. M.C. Gardner alone has a contract to supply 60,000,000 feet of logs during the next six years. He supplies 6 million feet this year and at the rate of 12,000,000 per annum thereafter. (Nielson, 1990, pp. 41-42)

McGlashan's timber calculations for M.C. Gardner represented just one of many such logging enterprises on the slopes of the Sierra Nevada surrounding Lake Tahoe. As the lumber industry increased their decimation, a complex system of industrial infrastructure arose to support Tahoe's logging industry. The eastern Sierra was soon mechanized much to its detriment.

Some steam engines carried timber to be milled. Others transported wood to flumes, which scattered logs haphazardly down the steep mountainside slopes below. From Glenbrook, a narrow gauge railway climbed to the summit to transport timber. Steam ships named the *Emerald* and the *Truckee* worked nonstop, day and night, hauling massive lumber rafts across the lake. At the end of this process waited vast trains of teamsters and packers who undertook the arduous journey of pulling loads of logs up Gold Canyon powered by long lines of mule teams.<sup>117</sup> Once in Virginia City, the skeletal

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<sup>117</sup> This venture was nothing compared to the return trips, however, where hauling gold bearing ore resulted in difficult, dangerous travel. "The first shipment by Walsh and Comstock in 1859 weighed 3,151 pounds. It took half a dozen mules to pull the wagon along the poorly engineered and maintained roads" (James, 1998, p. 28).

remnants of the “Sierra jewel” rapidly vanished beneath the scavenger earth. “By 1875 those that were harvesting Tahoe’s precious trees were delivering to the hungry mines of Virginia City an incredible 29,000,000 board feet of lumber a year” (Nielson, 1990, pp. 41-43).

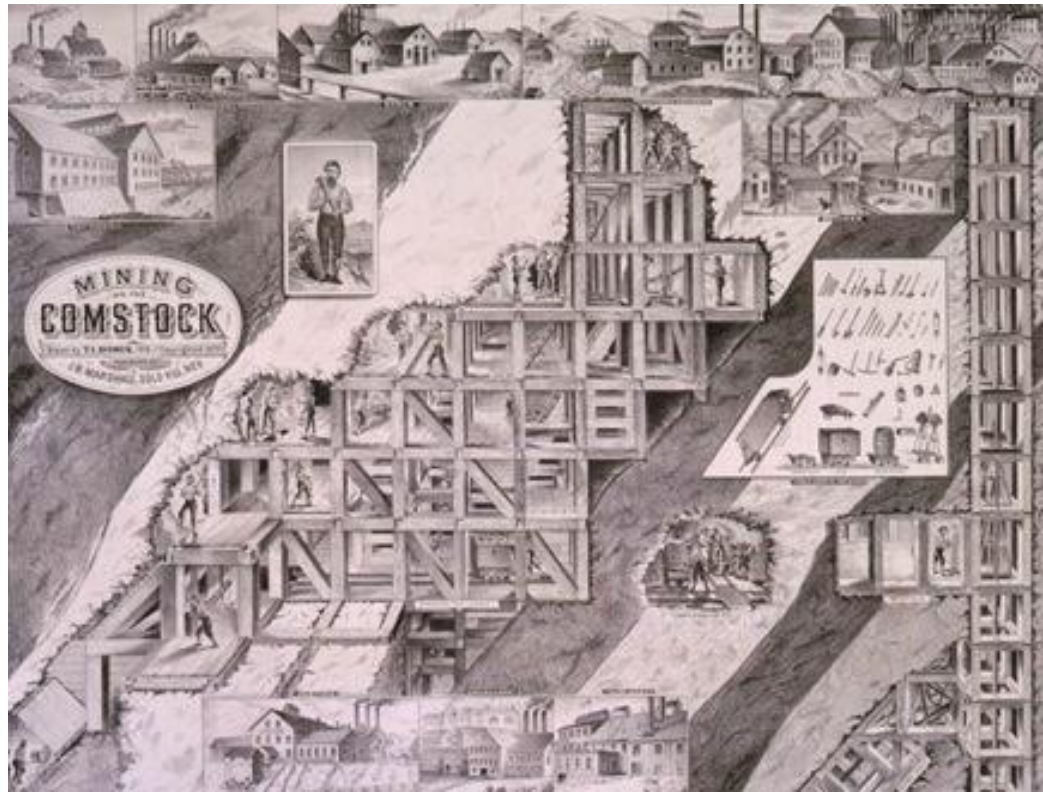


Figure 4.4 *Mining on the Comstock* cross section of Virginia City’s Belcher Mine depicting Deidesheimer’s square-set timbering solution, which became the ‘graveyard of the Sierra’ by J. B. Marshall of Gold Hill, Nevada. Image courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

Comstockers equated lumber with gold, and lumber barons preyed mercilessly on what was arguably one of the most beautiful natural landscapes in the United States, if not the world. A contemporary of the destruction, Dan DeQuille would lament, “Not less than eighty million feet of timber and lumber are annually consumed on the Comstock lode. In a single mine — the Consolidated Virginia — timber is being buried at the rate of six million feet per annum, and in all other mines in like proportion. At the same time about 250,000 cords of wood are consumed” (DeQuille, 1974, p. 174).<sup>118</sup>

It is well worth noting, however, that such destruction did not exist without at least some detractors. In a 1956 article entitled “The Machine in the Garden,” which would later be expanded into the 1964 book bearing the same name, Leo Marx argues that America entered the Industrial Revolution at approximately the same time that its first serious wave of literary figures came to maturity (Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and others). American literature, from its inception, was intimately linked with industrialization and mechanization (even when the explicit allusions to these forces appear to be lacking in the work of its greatest authors). While the aforementioned authors did not formally confront industrialization and mechanization in their work, a careful

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<sup>118</sup> Today, Tahoe continues to suffer as a result of nineteenth century logging, which is epitomized in high tree die off. In some areas, it is estimated that between 30% and 80% percent of Tahoe’s evergreen forests are in the process of dying as attested by swathes of orange and brown trees. While the original forests of the Sierra near Tahoe tended to be dominated by Jeffrey, Ponderosa, Lodgepole, and Sugar Pines with ample space on the forest floor, now, the forests surrounding Tahoe tend to be dense, brushy, and dominated by firs, all second-growth timber that has not been properly thinned, and years of drought coupled with beetle infestations have taken a severe toll. “Before the area was populated, wildfires would have thinned out the firs and allowed the fire-resistant pines to re-establish themselves. But by the early 1900s, Tahoe was becoming a popular resort for the rich, and these natural thinning fires were not allowed to happen” (Barnum, 1995, n.p.). The U.S. Forest Service is now looking at a variety of ways to restore the area to its pre-1840s composition. But this involves massive expenditures, controversial plans, and convincing a rather conservative community to not only accept but support radical change. In this case, multiple generations continue to pay for the gambles made by nineteenth-century Comstockers in the quest to timber Mount Davidson’s subterranean depths with a superstructure that could support mining operations past the 3,000 foot depth.



Figure 4.5 Bonner Shafter, Gould and Curry Mine around 1874. Image courtesy of the University of Nevada, Reno Special Collections Department.

analysis of the literary themes that they emphasized, namely Promethean and Faustian, yields some very significant correlations to a time and place where human ingenuity and innovation appeared to be far out-strapping human morality and ethic.

Interestingly, Marx notes that Nathaniel Hawthorne made a trip to Berkshire, Massachusetts, in 1838 where he was first confronted with the environmental impacts of industrialization. Near the mountain streams near North Adams, Hawthorne spied indus-

trial factories. It is important to observe that between 1829 and 1837, the textile industry in the North Adams area increased by nearly 400%. Hawthorne was horrified by the machines intermingled with verdant green hills, and so “he took elaborate notes, and conceived the idea of a malignant steam engine which attacked and killed its human attendants” (Marx, 1956, pp. 29-30). This proto-Iron Man never made it into a publishable story, but the concept highlights the horrified reactions some nineteenth-century Americans had toward industrialization even as mechanization overtook the pastoral. “In the language of literature, a machine (railroad or steamship) bursting on a peaceful natural setting represented a symbolic version of the trauma inflicted on American society by unexpectedly rapid mechanization” (Trachtenberg, 2007, p. 39). No place was this more true than in the Sierra and Lake Tahoe. Of all the ways that the northern Nevada landscape was immeasurably marred and transformed by industrialization, the destruction of Tahoe’s old-growth forests sickened the enlightened few. Dan DeQuille correctly observed, “The Comstock lode may truthfully be said to be the tomb of the forests of the Sierras [*sic*]” (DeQuille, 1974, p. 174).

### *Other Consequences of the Comstock Industrial Complex*

The strongest argument of the detractors is that the fields are devastated by mining operations, for which reason formerly Italians were warned by law that no one should dig the earth for metals and so injure their very fertile fields, their vineyards, and their olive groves. Also, [critics] argue that the woods and groves are cut down, for there is need of an endless amount of wood for timbers, machines, and the smelting of metals. And when the woods and groves are felled, then are exterminated the beasts and birds, very many of which furnish a pleasant and agreeable food for man. Further, when the ores are washed, the water which has been used poisons the brooks and streams, and either destroys the fish or drives them away. *Therefore the inhabitants of these regions, on account of the devastation of their fields, woods, groves, brooks, and rivers, find great difficulty in pro-*

*curing the necessities of life, and by reason of the destruction of the timber they are forced to great expense in erecting buildings. Thus it is said, it is clear to all that there is greater detriment from mining than the value of the metals which the mining produces* [emphasis added]. (Agricola, 1950, p. 638; Brechin, 2001, p. 25; Wilson, 1998, p. 170)

The above passage is excerpted from *De Re Metallica* by Renaissance scholar and town physician, Georg Bauer. Published posthumously in 1555 under the Latinized pseudonym Georgius Agricola, the author's astute observations (as a physician) of the real human and environmental costs associated with mining are startling. Nonetheless, Agricola held stock in local mines, and so his work represents a mining apologetic celebrating the rich yields pulled forth from mines in Joachimsthal in the Erzgebirge. Attempting to unravel the arguments of mining's detractors in this particular excerpt,<sup>119</sup> Agricola's arguments against the "frivolous" protestations of proto-environmentalists actually graphically describe the environmental impacts associated with mining. Like a prophetic voice from the past, his descriptions of mining activity and its consequences apply acutely to the destruction of Tahoe, the Truckee Meadows, Washoe Valley, and the Comstock during the mid-to late-nineteenth century. While Agricola uses *De Re Metallica* to later counter the arguments provided here thereby attempting to bolster mining's popular image, this passage describes the effects of San Francisco's "Megamachine" on northern Nevada with both clarity and prescience.

Besides deforestation and the dramatic effects of resulting erosion, Nevadan waterways were burdened with poisonous toxins and mining tailings. The Carson River

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<sup>119</sup> This area, Joachimsthal in the Erzgebirge, is located in what is modern-day Prague in the northwest. See Gray Brechin's *Imperial San Francisco: Urban Power, Earthly Ruin* (pp. 25-29) for closer analysis of Agricola's work.

transformed into a cesspool of heavy metals and sediments, and its seasonal cycle was irreversibly altered by the loss of climate stabilizing highland tree-scapes.<sup>120</sup>

Stamp mills and amalgamating works lined Washoe Lake and the Carson River. Mills sent milky plumes of rock dust, mercury, arsenic, salt, and acids down the Carson. The air thundered with the continual percussion of stamp mills, underground explosions, and steam whistles signaling changing shifts or the arrival of trains. Chimneys belched their sulfuric smoke over Virginia City, while heavy metals and sewage poisoned the municipal water supply. But it was the need for energy to keep the big machines running, and for timber for the mines, that extended Virginia City's desolation farthest into the hinterlands, and in this respect it acted as San Francisco's proxy for destruction through remote-control technology developed and built south of Market Street. (Brechin, 2001, p. 44)

In northeastern California and northern Nevada, all of Agricola's best made predictions came together with frightening rapidity. Although the scope of this paper does not permit a lengthy investigation of hydraulic mining operations in northern California, the environmental damage was frightening. Ironically, during the 1854 annual meeting of the California Pioneers, E.J.C. Kewen (a local attorney) alluded to and celebrated the effects of hydraulic mining as the "spirit of necromancy." Necromancy refers to the very blackest of black magic, and in this scope, it was a magic that could reduce mountains to valleys, valleys to tailings heaps, and rivers to muddy silt almost overnight. Another type of necromancy extended from Gold Canyon to the Truckee Meadows to Washoe Valley, and it left death and destruction in its path (Brechin, 2001, pp. 30-49).

This environmental exploitation required a system within which it operated, and Lewis Mumford attempted to adequately describe it through his concept of the "Megamachine." Describing Mumford's concept, Gray Brechin aptly notes, "From that

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<sup>120</sup> As a result, both waterways remain dangerously toxic to this day. In fact, carefully posted warnings around Washoe Lake warn fishermen not to eat any of their catch.

most fundamental of industries [mining] issue the others, and from the union of all five [mechanization, metallurgy, militarization, moneymaking, and mining], joined in a crystalline lattice of enduring stability and hierarchical organization, the pyramid derives its accelerating power to transform both human society and the organic world, to its own growing peril and to that of all those who unwittingly constitute its motive power”

(Brechin, 2001, pp. 44, 19). The Forty-Niners turned Comstockers of nineteenth-century America sacrificed resources that were not theirs to claim, and, as a result, they rendered the portion afforded future generations very meager, at best. But such considerations have little place in a world transfigured by a highly contagious gold fever. Even when San Francisco’s precious port became encumbered in silt and its lovely Pacific portal turned the color of coffee from upstream hydraulicking, city fathers (and members of the Society of California Pioneers) remained too fevered by gold to consider the implications of their actions.

The industry and technology required to access gold and silver deposits buried deep beneath Mount Davidson and the surrounding canyons bred urban networks that were absolutely essential to both Virginia City and the larger San Francisco region. Rapidly and hungrily, both cities gobbled up the raw materials and natural resources of their hinterlands to satisfy an increasingly unquenchable avarice.



Figure 4.6 Photograph of a plaque commemorating the hydraulic mining that ravaged the Sierra during the nineteenth century.

Taken together, the entire Comstock complex, with its miles of square-set bracing, sluice boxes, flumes, railroads, water siphons, pipes, wires, and machinery both above and below the ground, comprised a massive industrial system that required towns at strategic points. Moreover, thousands of lumberjacks, teamsters, millworkers, miners, machinists, repairmen, scrapers, and builders of the vast wooden, earthen, and metal infrastructures required places to live, work, and play. (Moehring, 1997, p. 341)

Besides establishing a complex network of communities tied to Virginia City, which was, in turn, bound to San Francisco, unearthing the precious riches of the Mother Lode required arduous work in truly challenging conditions. Industrial mining accidents were commonplace as attested by gravestones still standing in the Gold Hill cemetery and Virginia City's Silver Terrace cemetery as well as countless nineteenth-century obituaries posted in area newspapers. "Fire, poisonous gas, explosions, cave-ins, and other hazards killed or injured more than 900 miners between 1863 and 1880, giving the Comstock Lode one of the worst industrial accident rates in the world during these decades" (Peck, 1993, p. 704). While modern-day Virginia City floods viewers with images of gunfights and Wild West lore, the historic Virginia City was a place far more acquainted with industrial accidents than Mexican stand-offs.

While much has been made and continues to be made about the wealth pulled from Comstock mines, the costs must be considered: the pollution, the deforestation, and the loss of human life, just to name a few. As previously mentioned, most estimates place the Comstock Lode's ultimate yield at around \$350 to \$400 million, which roughly equates to about \$6 billion in today's currency. Shockingly, however, there was so much graft involved in mine speculation in the area that, in the end, only five of its hundreds of publically traded mines paid more in dividends than they collected in assessments. As

Gray Brechin points out, between the corruption and the infrastructure costs associated with attempting to access the Mother Lode, profit margins were slim, indeed. “Millions drained away in fraud, waste, bribery, litigation, inefficiency, or simply in building the infrastructure necessary to extract ore from the flanks of a desert mountain” (Brechin, 2001, p. 42). According to Alexander del Mar, mining engineer and director of the Bureau of Statistics at the U.S. Treasury Department from 1866-1869, the Comstock Lode actually cost nearly five times as much money as it added to the United States’ economy, winning Nevada the title of the United States’ “Great Rotten Borough” (Ostrander, 1966).

### *Utopian Dreams, Dystopian Realities*

While San Francisco and Virginia City certainly shared many of the same inhabitants and wealth and resources flowed between them during the nineteenth century, San Francisco insatiably consumed the varied resources of its contado, and the Comstock was certainly no less a victim of this parasitical process. An inhospitable, barren geographical location simply justified exploitation, in the minds of nineteenth century passers-by and inhabitants alike, while forging intimate linkages between the two.

After all, the communities of the Comstock were all but unviable, absent an influx of resources and nurture (of a sort) from their colonial mother. Besides being considered bereft of beauty, many basic natural resources were lacking. While there were definitely residents of Virginia City, Nevada, dedicated to constructing a long term, stable community, the boom/bust cycle of placer mining upon which the industrial marvel was situated always threatened the community’s longevity. As a result, many of those who claimed to be Comstockers at one time or another did so with little to no intention of actually re-

maintaining in the community. Camping out in Virginia City — whether in canvas tents or fancy Victorian mansions — was the norm.

Like the city of workers in Fritz Lang's dystopian masterpiece *Metropolis* (1927), Virginia City was cast as a dystopian community. One might strike it rich on the Comstock and accumulate vast wealth gleaned from the area. But it was no place for a respectable family or long term home. Rather, one retired to San Francisco or the East Coast for that. One invested the wealth of the Comstock into the development of a genteel, dignified lifestyle and community far away from Washoe just as the industrialists of *Metropolis* built their utopia far removed from the harsh industrial realities of its economic underpinnings. As San Francisco's colony, it became as much a major stopover point for those seeking to amass fortunes as it was for actors, performers, and musicians touring overland and entertaining on both coasts of the United States. It was a rather luxurious location largely because of the extravagant expectations nineteenth century individuals had, even during camping expeditions, and because of some Comstockers' intense desires to present their community as more stable and viable than other boom/bust towns.

Virginia City functioned as an exurb of San Francisco, and this served several purposes. In its tendency toward advertising affluence and prosperity, the Comstock represented an exurb of the San Francisco Mining Pyramid placing a vastly exaggerated emphasis on fine living, extravagant fashions, exotic entertainment, and the myth of easy wealth. Some of the most permanent features of the city (e.g. Maguire's Opera House, Piper's two opera houses, and the Fourth Ward School), were constructed partially to evoke this image. But there was more to it than that. Inevitably, living in the midst of the

fabled Mother Lode — a strike of international importance — had a profound effect on the attitudes and perceptions of the area’s residents. They felt a particularly intense need to present successful portraits of their community, and civic pride grew with each particularly rich extraction of ore.

Virginia City, Nevada, earned the title of the “Richest Spot on the Earth” not only because of its proximity to the Comstock Lode and its fabled forty-foot-wide quartz ore veins but because of the way residents in the area advertised their personal wealth. Realizing that the community had to project affluence in order to keep speculators invested in their mines, residents indulged in styles not generally accessible in other regions, and so newspaper stories spread like mad about the wild extravagance observable on the Comstock. Some stories claimed that even the lowliest miners were able to enjoy unprecedented delicacies in Virginia City. In his book *Virginia City and the Silver Region of the Comstock Lode*, Douglas McDonald perpetuates many of these (often unfounded) place myths, writing:

Some of the very wealthy were not content with building mansions and ornate mine offices, but were known to order silver and gold trimmings for their carriages, put silver shoes on favorite horses, and give away small silver ingots as gifts. This lavish spending extended even to the common miners, who were particularly fond of consuming the traditional Comstock treat of champagne and fresh oysters. So many of these shellfish were freighted over from California packed in ice that great mounds of empty oyster shells were still visible at the old municipal dump in Virginia City as late as the 1970’s. (McDonald, 1982, p. 106)

Comstockers, of all classes, consuming gourmet food and beverages on a par with millionaires was not the sole mark of affluence in the region. A number of historical sources report that Comstock women —again, regardless of their socioeconomic standing —

placed an inordinate amount of priority on fashion. In fact, they were among the best dressed in the United States. According to Mary McNair Mathews' firsthand account of life on the Comstock in the mid-nineteenth century, she had "never lived in a place where people dressed more richly or extravagantly than in Virginia City. It is not only a few millionaires who indulge in it, but every woman on the Comstock who has a husband earning \$4 or \$6 a day, up to the superintendent, who gets \$500 or \$1,000 a month, as some of them do who have two or three mines to look after. And many families live up to every cent of their wages or salary" (Mathews, 1985, p. 130). Besides gourmet fare and high fashion, Millionaires' Row blossomed along South B Street, named for its fantastically wealthy inhabitants.

Comstockers wholeheartedly embraced and immortalized the folkloric rise of certain members of their community, nearly overnight, due to rich strikes. Perhaps, they did so hoping that a bit of the same luck might rub off on them. "The magic of a place where fabulous wealth was within one's grasp affected the outlook of its citizens, shaping the community's point of view and its folklore about itself" (James, 1998, p. 234). Of course, on a very pragmatic level, the cultivation of a permanent, well-to-do community guaranteed the area a certain level of economic stability, at least for a while. A flourishing economy on the Comstock (or, at the very least, the appearance of one) assuaged some San Francisco stockholders' fears of *borrasca*, the ever present and very real fear that the great mineral veins of the Comstock might simply thin out and dry up. Robert Louis Stevenson would liken the San Francisco Mining Exchange to a great mechanical pump — not unlike the Cornish pumps sucking oceans of water out of Comstock mines each day

— that was “continually pumping up the savings of the low quarters into the pockets of the millionaires upon [Nob Hill]” (Brechtin, 2001, p. 43).

### *Auri Sacra Fames: Oh, For the Midas Touch!*

Those involved in deep hard rock mining on the Comstock relied upon the legends of quick-made millions to bolster their courage, justify their sacrifices, and drape otherwise irrational, even extreme, episodes of risk taking in a type of logical garb. Many members of the growing American middle class including journalist and geologist turned Nevada historian, Eliot Lord, saw Comstock miners, above all else, as high-risk gamblers.

During his tour of the Comstock in 1876, Lord observed, “The miners’ fondness for gambling leads them to regard the possibility of death... as a risk that every gamester must face, and they stake their lives on the cost because they consider the chances in favor of their preservation” (Lord, 1883, p. 405). Over time, this willingness of miners, particularly the Comstock’s professional mining class comprised largely of Cornish immigrants, came to distinguish themselves from members of the middle class chiefly through their penchant for risk taking, and so many frontier miners came to embrace and take no small measure of pride in their public personae as “gamblers” of the highest stakes.

That’s not to say that miners were the only individuals who “gambled” on the Comstock. Business owners and prostitutes relocated from more established parts of the country hoping that their ambitions of “mining the miners” would prove profitable. Mine owners, bankers, stock owners, and investors all took financial risks in the hopes that Virginia City’s big bonanza might continue indefinitely (and this despite very obvious

examples of the temporal nature of mining epitomized in other boom/bust communities scattered across the West, including many parts of California).

Nonetheless, miners put far more on the table each time they descended into the mines. Thus, the very nature of the gamble distinguished these working-class miners from their middle and upper class brethren. Or, perhaps, the *auri sacra fames* simply drove them further. No matter what, on the Comstock, “the substance and meaning of risks varied tremendously along occupational, gender, and racial lines. The experience of risk and the cost of failure depended a great deal on what was at stake in the gamble — a day’s wages, a person’s reputation, the well-being of one’s family, a percentage of company profits, an arm, or a life itself” (Peck, 1993, p. 701).

The concept of the self-made millionaire striking it rich on the Comstock overnight was not only attractive. It subverted traditional distinctions of class, lineage, and ethnicity, a concept that democratically minded Americans could thoroughly embrace. Its myth proved a potent fable of longed for equality in an increasingly industrialized and corporatized America groaning under the weight of its own technology and productivity. Moreover, it provided an alluring reason for miners to return day after day to their infernal labor. But no matter what they risked, no matter how close their proximity (on a day to day basis) to fabulous wealth, miners on the Comstock still represented the proletariat — workers without control over the means of production. The deck, thus, was always stacked against the average miner as a direct result of the interconnectivity between San Francisco and the Comstock and, in particular, the carefully constructed mining pyramid upon which the whole endeavor was built.

Whether it be Brechin's concept of the San Francisco Mining Pyramid or the aforementioned work of Lewis Mumford on modernization, industrialization, and what he termed the "Megamachine," the industrial complex established between San Francisco and the Comstock ultimately allowed a small core of individuals to gain ever increasing control over the Comstock Lode. If mining represented the apex of this "Megamachine," then deep hard rock mining along Gold Canyon epitomized the apex of mining itself. It required an obdurate defiance of human limitations and the natural laws of the earth. Blindly clinging to a faith in innovative, often untested new technologies, the miners of the Comstock worked thousands of feet below the earth in tremendously difficult conditions. Without an obsessive focus on what they might gain (but never actually would) through this toil, the "Megamachine" inspired miners to take terrifying chances entombed deep beneath the earth. Human nature dictates that the basic instinct of survival can only be surmounted by significant motivation. In this case, the motivation was *auri sacra fames*.<sup>121</sup> Thus, as Mumford argues, the genius of the "Megamachine" lies in the subtle psychological manipulations and deceptions implied at its core. Its chief architects manage to cloak it in utter invisibility by so thoroughly habituating their fellow brothers and sisters in humanity to its operation that its machinations become nearly imperceptible. Ultimately, they achieve this in large part because the "Megamachine's" mechanisms and moving parts are, in reality, human bodies "driven by carefully inculcated belief systems"

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<sup>121</sup> Virgil referred to the obsessive quest for gold as the *auri sacra fames* ("the great golden hunger") — a hunger never satiated but rather compounded by all efforts to appease it. In the wake of destruction and desertification left by ancient mining operations such as Laurium (located in what is the modern-day southeastern part of Attica, Greece), it is little wonder that great thinkers such as Plato and Virgil had such grave misgivings about the long term consequences of the mining enterprise. In *The Romance of Mining*, Rickard observes, "Laurium, like most mining districts, was denuded of its trees at an early date.... Today only a few stunted pines survive, but in the spring, wildflowers and herbs give a brief touch of beauty to the dreary landscape of this forlorn part of the ancient world"(Rickard, 1947, p. 92).

(Brechtin, 2001, p. 19). The belief systems upon which the Comstock's "Megamachine" was constructed measured manifold, but the two chief notions were: first, that individuals could, indeed, still strike it rich and, second, that the solid silver mountain upon which Virginia City and its environs sat was nearly inexhaustible.

Myths of lucky Comstockers such as John Mackay, Lemuel "Sandy" Bowers, and George Hearst claimed the local imagination long after the possibilities for "striking it rich" passed. "The Comstock matured, however, and as corporate structure solidified the area, the hallmarks of the freewheeling early days vanished" (James, 1998, p. 68). Ironically, outward signs of a maturing community tended to lift the spirits of Comstockers while giving them the sense that wealth was becoming even more freely accessible. In reality, however, the polar opposite was true. Under the watchful eyes of Californian investors, the Comstock went corporate within less than a decade, and the period of equal potential for wealth quickly dried up.

By 1870, the mining district went even further. It was monopolized and by one man, William Sharon. According to the 1870 U.S. Census, only about 18% of employed males owned any type of land in the vicinity. Moreover, "by 1870, very few "capitalists" in fact lived in Virginia City or Gold Hill; much of the community and most of its extracted wealth was in fact owned by the Bank of California and its superintendent, William Sharon, *who lived in San Francisco* [emphasis added]" (Peck, 1993, p. 704). The pulse of democracy and social equality remained long after Comstock opportunity dried up, however, and it was in the best interests of men like Sharon and institutions like the Bank of California to keep this spirit alive.

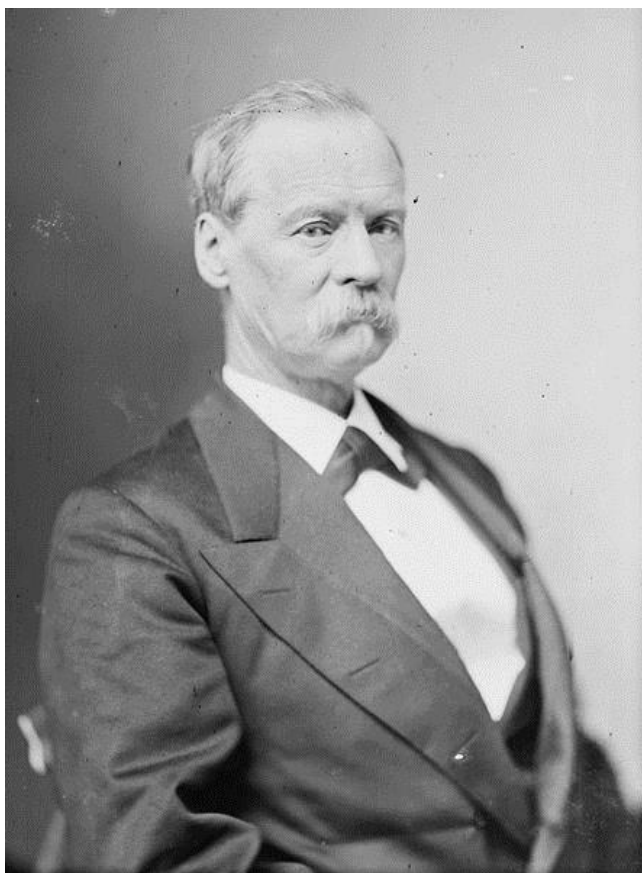
It is little wonder, ultimately, why Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" with its emphasis on the egalitarian nature of the West became the carefully cultivated vision of America's Gilded Age. Just like the Comstock's fables of overnight millionaires, Turner's "Frontier Thesis" provided ample grease for the machinery of America's industrial revolution well after workers might have otherwise become disillusioned by income disparities and social inequalities. Instead, workers across the nation dreamed of the infinite possibilities of the West, whether or not they actually ever got to see any of them.

In the twentieth century, Hollywood would bring many of these dreams to life, however fleetingly, on the big screen. These legends of an egalitarian American culture where nearly anyone could strike it rich concealed the actual slight-of-hand tricks that men like Sharon were involved in while playing with America's economy and its future. They manipulated the economy of the Comstock and San Francisco to suit their own needs thereby guaranteeing the longevity of their empire. As James notes, "A willingness to manipulate the economy to the detriment of others [was] a valuable attribute as one scrambled for success" (James, 1998, p. 231).

Despite the odds created by Sharon's monopoly, many miners still dreamed of attaining vast, unequalled treasure on the Comstock, and so they kept working. Comparatively high wages (\$4 per day) further added to the romantic allure and illusion of a more democratized, equalized frontier. Moreover, the very nature of underground work further solidified the impression of egalitarianism. According to the account of Miriam Lesley writing in 1877, "The mines embrace every class of men, socially speaking, from the

lowest grade of laborer to the ex-United States Senator, or man of title” (Leslie, 1877, p. 282).

Proud of their earnings, many miners tended to spend lavishly in their leisure time, enjoying the myriad sensual pursuits offered on the Comstock between their regular descents into Hell. They dreamed of the kind of luck that the Bowers or Mackay epitomized — even while becoming increasingly mired in the sludge of the debt-carrying wage worker. Living paycheck to paycheck, pretending to be wealthy, their excessive lifestyles only intensified a general longing to achieve status while insuring that they would not. Perhaps, working in such close proximity to the valuable ores needed to per-



petuate the area’s bonanza represented both a temporary salve and terrible irritant to men claimed by “Gold Fever.” They literally touched silver and gold every day, yet remained untransformed. Wealth through association did not occur. The talent of King Midas was never conferred upon them.

Figure 4.7 William Sharon photographed by William Brady and Levin Corbin Handy. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

### *The Theater as a Microcosm of Society*

While the Bank of California monopolized the Comstock and opportunities for socio-economic improvement dried up for working class Comstockers, entertainment and the theater, in particular, played particularly crucial and public roles in promoting the democratic myth of the American West. The spirit of egalitarianism was reflected in the very wide scope of entertainment offered — entertainment appealing to a diverse swathe of classes and ethnicities. As Lawrence W. Levine points out in *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, “At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the theater was a microcosm; it housed both the entire spectrum of the population and the complete range of entertainment from tragedy to farce, juggling to ballet, opera to minstrelsy” (Levine, 2002, p. 56).

Such was certainly the case on the stages of Washoe where, in a single performance, everything from Shakespeare to Rossini to Stephen Foster could appear in a grand and sweeping homage to Western Civilization. On the Comstock, this extended much farther to performances commemorating the Irish, the Cornish, the English, Italians, African Americans, and the Germanies. In particular, entire performances in German held mass appeal for Comstockers who hailed from all parts of the world. So, particularly in Virginia City, the theater allowed various classes, ethnicities, and races to interact in meaningful ways thereby furthering the appearance of a democratic spirit.

The phenomenon of meaningful social interactions is one that Erving Goffman addresses in his book *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*, a study of the concept of self, role theory, and face-to-face interaction processes. Goffman argues that the theater, where all classes and ranks are present and all are involved in the same

activity, constitutes a “focused gathering.” Goffman carefully distinguishes a “focused gathering” from a social group by arguing that a “focused gathering” represents an encounter or a situated activity. This encounter represents a unit of social organization embedded within a larger social structure. Levine terms this a “microcosm.” Whereas groups have members, encounters or “focused gatherings” have participants. Thus, a “focused gathering” implies physical presence in some type of activity.

According to Goffman and later Levine, this “focused gathering” allows otherwise divergent people to interact with one another through shared experiences. “In the theater people not only sat under one roof, they interacted. In this sense, the theater in the first half of the nineteenth century constituted a microcosm of still another sort: a microcosm of the relations between the various socioeconomic groups in America” (Levine, 2002, p. 56). As a result, theater going in Virginia City represented a crucial means of egalitarian social interaction. The act of enjoying a “focused gathering” with people of diverse classes, races, and ethnicities, allowed Comstockers to continue to believe that they were in charge of their own destinies, no matter what the actual case might be. Ultimately, the continued fostering of this spirit kept Comstock mines full and money in the coffers of the Bank of San Francisco.

It is important to note that just as the Comstock was rapidly corporatized, so, too, entertainment venues such as theaters, melodeons, and dance halls underwent dramatic changes as America skittered into the fin-de-siècle Gilded Age. By the end of the century, in fact, in many parts of the nation, theaters would represent anything but a microcosm of society. Classes and races would be segregated as “highbrow” culture was distinguished from “lowbrow culture.”

*San Francisco's "Megamachine" and the "Battle Born" State*

As previously explored, the fervor to access *aurum* and its sister mineral, *argentum*,<sup>122</sup> set former Forty-Niners turned Comstockers on a Machiavellian path of reckless environmental destruction foreshadowed by the precedents of their ancient Greco-Roman, medieval Germanic, and Renaissance counterparts. The early miners whose examples they looked back to left pollution, destruction, warfare, and famine in their wakes, too, as attested by ancient mining sites such as Laurium. For Forty-Niners who declared Nevada's austere landscape bleak, inhospitable, and godforsaken from first sight, the devastation and destruction of its landscape was very easily justified. In the nineteenth-century industrial mindset, land utility trumped all else. Beyond its mineral content, ultimately, the Great Basin was portrayed as scarred, damaged, and useless.

While California's rich Central Valley allowed it to transition from a mining hub rather quickly into a fertile, agrarian clime that would capture the national imagination with its picturesque scenery and ample produce, Nevada's aridity sentenced it to the subservient role of an exploitable colony and, eventually, a dumping ground as typified by attempts to establish a national nuclear dumping ground at Yucca Mountain, which has been aggressively opposed by many Nevadans.<sup>123</sup> The concept of the desert as a useless void or wasteland clearly persists.

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<sup>122</sup> In Latin, these terms mean respectively gold and silver.

<sup>123</sup> The fight continues today to utilize the Yucca Mountain repository for the disposal of about 77,000 tons of nuclear waste for thousands of years; Nevada, to date, boasts no nuclear waste generating energy plants. Located just 90 miles from northwest Las Vegas, the most populous city in Nevada, apparently the city's famed motto "What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas" could be expanded to "What's shipped to Nevada, stays in Nevada... for millennia" by as early as 2017. Groups such as Citizen Alert spearheaded much of the publicity to stop the creation of a nuclear dumping ground in southern Nevada. But the fight definitely continues. See (Werner, 2006a, 2006b).

For miners willing to risk their very lives and limbs daily, the carnage of the natural environment gave little to no pause. Just like the thousands upon thousands of tons of earth impeding access to the Comstock Lode's rich gold and silver veins, the cannibalization of any and all natural resources in the area simply represented another obstacle to wealth that had to be overcome with the efficiency and calculation of mechanization and industrialization. Logging Tahoe represented merely another means to an end. Moreover, because Nevada's landscape was generally considered less appealing to the nineteenth century mind than that of the Central Valley and because many Comstockers believed that Virginia City sat atop a whole mountain of silver, inhabitants (the vast majority of whom were temporary residents) aptly detached from the landscape, a necessary psychological step in any move toward environmental depletion and destruction on a vast scale. As Brechin points out, "The miner's realm is necessarily dead, divisible, and detached, a treasure trove for the taking and leaving. To regard it otherwise would make the wounds inflicted on the earth unendurably painful" (Brechin, 2001, p. 17).

Inevitably, Virginia City and its surrounding mining communities represented places of exploitation, morbidity, and decay. Linkages to San Francisco and the Bay Area became increasingly necessary as mining destroyed the quality of life in the very communities upon which the industry and its pyramid or "Megamachine" were founded. Like the Olympians' hungry Titan father, Cronus, mining devoured its own offspring, miner and mining community alike. As a result, the goal of many individuals involved intimately in the process of mining was ultimately escape. They gravitated toward the amassing of enough material wealth on the Comstock to eventually relocate to California or back East, far removed from Nevada's ravaged bosom.

Most of the Comstock's princes sought to leave the area and invariably built their mansions elsewhere. The Virginia City houses that residents commonly referred to as mansions are humble by comparison to what the rich built in other places. These were functional abodes, fashioned slightly better than others to communicate success and to provide comfort while staying in the mining town. California came to have most of the true mansions. James C. Flood,<sup>124</sup> for example, built a gargantuan architectural beast known as the Wedding Cake, in Menlo Park, and he constructed yet another mansion in San Francisco. (James, 1998, p. 231)

This great desire to strike it rich and then get out of Dodge carried with it deep psychological consequences for the Comstock's communities. Temporary thinking led to many instances of haphazard construction and a level of mobility that eventually devastated the area once *borrasca* settled in. "It reinforced an aspect of the Comstock's self-image that could be characterized as colonial, making it a region to be exploited but not truly settled. The ramifications of these imagined riches were at least as important to the nature of the society as was the actual distribution of wealth" (James, 1998, p. 232). Temporary intent and the colonial mentality made the wholesale slaughter of local ecosystems much easier to witness, too.

The steep industrial challenges faced on the Comstock fueled the city's assemblage of its own mini empire — a microcosm of San Francisco's Mining Pyramid — which facilitated the utilization and exploitation of raw materials from neighboring communities along the inner and outer belts of its periphery. The communities of Virginia City, Gold Hill, and Silver City comprised the urban core of the mining district. As each of these industrial hotspots emerged, subsequent infrastructure led to the outward impression of one very vast, sprawling community. In the *Big Bonanza*, Dan DeQuille observed,

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<sup>124</sup> One of the "Bonanza Kings," James C. Flood displayed a singular ability to capitalize on a rich body of ore while astutely manipulating stock. As a result, he went from being a carriage builder to being listed as one of the 100 wealthiest Americans of his time thanks to the Comstock.

“Gold Canyon between Gold Hill and Silver City is filled with mills, hoisting works, business houses, and residences, and from Silver City to Virginia City, a distance of five miles, may be said to be one town” (DeQuille, 1974, p. 343). Rising to meet the nearly insurmountable and largely unprecedented demands of hard rock mining thousands of feet below the Comstock, a long trail of feeder communities emerged. Like stations along a vast conveyor belt, each community specialized in the creation, production, acquisition, or distribution of some commodity linked intimately to the area’s mining industry. According to UNLV historian Eugene Moehring:

Fed by supplies and capital from San Francisco, Sacramento, and California’s urban networks, a local system of towns and villages, linked together by pack trails, toll roads, and flumes, had begun to form by the early 1860s. This multifunctional system boasted an impressive number of commuter and milling towns; peripheral mining centers; road junction, tollhouse, and (by 1870) railroad communities, as well as lumber, flume, and provisioning centers; and military posts. Taken together, the entire Comstock complex, with its miles of square-set bracing, sluice boxes, flumes, railroads, water siphons, pipes, wires, and machinery both above and below the ground, comprised a massive industrial system that required towns at strategic points. (Moehring, 1997, pp. 340-341)

About fifty communities sprang up around the Comstock in order to fuel the industrial behemoth, and, in the wake of this mining giant, whole Sierra forests were devoured, local waterways diverted or outright destroyed, and fragile ecosystems ravaged by mercury, heavy metal poisoning, and tons of toxic mine waste and tailings. The eastern slopes of the Sierra would never be the same. Even today, northwestern Nevada’s lunar landscapes and poisoned waterways display the profound scars inflicted during the pursuit of the Comstock Lode.

Since time immemorial, the industry of mining has existed in polarity to that of agriculture. While agricultural pursuits first led humanity to civilize and establish perma-

ment, stable communities and thriving populations, mining first led humans to the Bronze and Iron Ages, both periods marked by widespread warfare and conquest. One can argue that it is possible to conduct the former in a conscientious, sustainable way that will benefit humans for multiple generations whereas the latter leads to contamination, wholesale destruction, and irreversible damage to the land and surrounding waterways. The latter gobbles up land in an unsustainable way making the seizure of others' land possessions — and, ultimately warfare and violence — inevitably necessary. The latter provides the tools and irresistible means of waging those wars. “The saying *pecunia nervus belli* became a commonplace of the Renaissance: money is the sinews of war. The arms race begun then has never ceased” (Brechin, 2001, p. 23). It is remarkably fitting then that Nevada's state motto is “Battle Born” and that one of its chief claims to fame remains having economically bolstered the Union during the Civil War, thereby permitting it to forever break the yoke of the stiff-necked Confederacy.

The costs of mining versus its yields have long been debated, and they are tied inextricably to the level of value a given culture places on its natural landscapes and ecological systems. Environmental destruction, on a massive scale, of incredibly sensitive ecologies rendered the Comstock even more unlivable than what its first settlers encountered. In fact, the community desperately relied on the long trains of teamsters and packers to tirelessly supply much needed, albeit highly overpriced, goods. According to the *Territorial Enterprise*, “the local trade of our valleys employs all the teams that can be procured. They are charging \$100 per [1,000 board feet of lumber]... for hauling from here to Virginia City, a distance of 15 miles” (*Territorial Enterprise*, 1860a). Again, the ties between the Comstock and San Francisco deepened with time and exploitation.

Mechanization would further solidify these linkages as the Virginia and Truckee railroad put teamsters and packers out of work while providing the community a far more reliable, stable means of transportation of much needed goods.

Viewing the history of the American West far removed from Turner's lavish, romantic Frontier Thesis, two interrelated layers of conquest emerge: (1) urbanization and colonization of hinterlands made possible through (2) rapid industrialization and mechanization. Both actively contributed to the very quick subjugation of the American West during the nineteenth century. Remember, going back just a generation or so to the end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the generation of Americans who not only remembered colonization at the hands of Britain but also fought to free themselves from it during the revolution, predicted that it would take nearly 1,000 years to reach the Pacific.

Men such as Thomas Jefferson famously suggested that America's frontier was nearly inexhaustible. Moreover, this free, abundant land psychologically signified liberty for the first generation of liberated Americans. Jefferson and his peers argued that the nation's wealth was based on agricultural land more than any other commodity. "They counted on free land as perpetual assurance of independence from Europe, of unending prosperity flowing from a vast inland empire. Agriculture then seemed to most Americans the surest foundation for national wealth, and uncharted acres beyond the Appalachians stirred visions of a Western "garden" tended by yeoman-farmers" (Trachtenberg, 2007, p. 11). Yet, within less than a century, the West was conquered and mining, rather than agriculture, led the charge. A new generation of Americans emerged with very different notions about the world than their revolutionary parents and grandparents.

For many Americans, even prior to the Civil War, mechanization more than agriculture symbolized the truest means of exercising and maintaining their democratic republican ideals, and so Mumford's "Megamachine" emerged in quick order. With the California Gold Strike, the "Megamachine's" principle tool, mining, captured the national imagination, and a new concept of the American West and the American dream emerged. "Factories, railroads, and telegraph wires seemed the very engines of a democratic future." They certainly played a chief role in winning the Civil War for the North (as did the Comstock Lode). Yet, just as the 1890 closing of the U.S. frontier threw many Americans into psychological distress, so mechanization could not be viewed in anything less than a contradictory light even as early as the 1870s.

From 1873 to 1896, an international depression inflicted woes on the American populace, and it was a depression created, in large part, by mechanization resulting in overproduction and steeply dropping prices. "Recurrent cycles of boom and collapse seemed as inexorable as the quickening pace of technological innovation. Even in the shadow of glorious new machines displayed at the fairs, the public sense of crisis deepened" (Trachtenberg, 2007, pp. 38, 40). San Francisco's Mining Pyramid would eventually come crashing down during this depression as the Comstock's mineral wealth dried up, the final and most lasting testament to the interconnectivity shared by these two great urban centers. But in the interim, Virginia City, Nevada, marked the hot spot for Forty-Niners, Comstockers, San Franciscans, Easterners, and Internationals who wanted to "see the elephant."<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> A mid-nineteenth century Americanism used to allude to overwhelming emotions or experiences. The phrase was often employed by pioneers and Forty-Niners to describe their incredible experiences while journeying through the American West.

### *Virginia City as San Francisco's Playground*

Diversion and entertainment were absolutely vital to the Comstock, and Virginia City represented the ultimate playground for both its San Franciscan part-time and Nevada semi-permanent residents. As early as 1860, Virginia City sported its first theater, and performers touring to and from the Bay Area quickly made the town a favorite stopover point. The Comstock came to represent both immeasurable wealth and incomparable freedom. Although they were not the first to coin the phrase, one could truly say of Virginia City, “What happens in Old Virginia, stays in Old Virginia.”

Some called it an entertainment capital. Others declared it a breeding ground for vice. Inevitably, and due in large part to its relationship as a colony of San Francisco and what Derrida would argue is the human predisposition to construct thought in terms of binary dualities, Virginia City came to represent the “Other” although many members of its community fought the trend. Nonetheless, while San Francisco was heralded as a prosperous, wholesome, and viable urban center, Virginia City came to exist, at least from the point of view of the media, in stark contrast as a wasteland of moral and industrial corruption — even its sophisticated affluence came to be portrayed as lavish excess of the worst kind. As San Francisco vied for respectability and its imperial ambitions increased, it was portrayed in opposition to Virginia City, and so the Nevada community served a vital role in defining San Francisco’s public image.

At the same time, Virginia City business owners, newspaper journalists, entertainers, and prostitutes came to embrace and celebrate this marginalized image refashioning their community a nineteenth-century Las Vegas. In order to maintain the area’s viability as a pleasure district, these individuals evoked the mystery, exoticism, intrigue,

and danger that are inevitably linked to the concept of the “Other,” and so, in short order, the Comstock served the role of the Orient for the United States — a place that had to be seen to be believed, a place existing well outside the norms and rules of proper society, a place of lawlessness, licentiousness, and legend (Saïd, 1978). Each city developed opposing moral orientations with Virginia City branded as a town of lawless Sabbath-breakers, vagabonds, outlaws, and prostitutes. Sabbath-breakers they were, indeed, for the forsaken city and its deep sunken mines maintained massive hydraulic pumps active twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week to drain the subterranean depths of its abundant, insistent geothermically heated ground water. “In its frantic attempts to harvest gold and silver, the Comstock seldom stopped its labor, further underscoring the contrast between those who worshiped and those who worked on the Sabbath” (James, 1998, p. 203).

In an attempt by San Francisco elites to repair their own city’s public image (after all, what columnist Herb Caen called Baghdad-by-the-Bay was a port town with every depraved association therein) through building projects, monuments, displays of civic pride, and the contrast of their wholesome city with the purported depravity of the Comstock, they thickly poured on Classical allusions. Forty-Niners took on Classical titles such as “Argonauts,” and California prospectors envisioned working freely above ground and with democratic zeal, became the idealized Livian farmers/generals of a new age.

#### SAN FRANCISCO

Imperial Rome on Seven Hills  
 Sat, and her greatness from afar  
 Was seen by all the world.  
 But in her day the world itself  
 A single hemisphere barely encompassed.  
 Imperial San Francisco from her hundred hills  
 Looks out upon a field so vast

That all the glories of the day long gone  
 Are overcast,  
 And through her ever open gate  
 The nations of the earth their treasures bring.  
 Fair city of the West,  
 Translucent mirror of the Golden State,  
 Fit portal of an empire great and free,  
 We thee salute.  
 (Braden, July 1899)

Thirty years before Braden set pen to paper, the editor of the *Territorial Enterprise*, Joe Goodman, wrote the following words about Washoe as “Poet of the Day” for Fourth of July 1863. Again, he employed Classical allusions to empire building thereby providing Comstockers with a grandiose sense of their purpose and motivation.

#### WASHOE

The mighty tide of Empire dashed  
 Upon a continent’s bold strand,  
 And rolling back its billows washed  
 And fertilized a desert land.

They came, the founders of a State,  
 The men with spirits bold and free,  
 Who snatched the magic wand of Fate  
 And shaped their own high destiny.

They smote with it the barren rock —  
 A silver stream was disentombed;  
 A mountain sank beneath the shock.  
 The arid valleys rose and bloomed.

In canons, deserts, plains, and glades,  
 On mountains towering to the skies,  
 The broad foundations have been laid  
 On which our noble State shall rise.

(Goodman, 1863)

The authors of these poems shared similar perspectives with regard to how they wished their cities to be viewed. But Braden's is a poem stemming from the confidence of fin-de-siècle San Francisco where empire was seemingly being realized. Goodman's poem, while mentioning empire building, is more readily focused on statehood. While Goodman employs inspiring language to make the lives of Comstock industrial workers sound more heroic and romantic, the words did not change the facts for miners on the Comstock who toiled below ground out of sight and mind of Nob Hill and its millionaires.

Just as the "hill men" of ancient mining centers such as Laurium were hidden away, so Virginia City housed all of the industrial horrors that San Franciscans like William C. Ralston generally wished to ignore. "Providentially for the reputations of those who own them, mines are usually located in mountainous regions far from the cities they enrich and the estates they create. Their remoteness permits city dwellers to remain ignorant of those [mine] workers... The distinction is seldom lost on the miners themselves, who watch the "sums defying belief" leave their towns to enrich those living in distant cities" (Brechin, 2001, p. 21, inset ). Large quantities of Comstock gold and silver quickly left the area and found their ways into the building funds in San Francisco or war funds for the Union.

Perhaps because of the hardships associated with the Great Basin's geography and the mining lifestyle, the demand for amenities such as musical and theatrical entertainment was greater still. "Early Nevada people worked hard because the desert, distances, isolation, and the business of living were hard task-masters" (Watson, 1964, p. 23). Unique factors associated with Comstock mining sharply enhanced the perceived need.



Figure 4.8 Lithograph from Frank Leslie's 1878 Illustrated Newspaper depicting life as a miner on the Comstock. In this image, "hill men" of Virginia City are forced to take a break due to the extreme temperatures encountered at the lower depths. Image courtesy of the Nevada Historical Society.

With higher wages and shorter shifts than most nineteenth-century workers, Comstock miners were often free to pursue a variety of pleasures. "In their leisure the people could follow their desires to the limit of their imaginations and available facilities. The theatre was an important factor in their lives" (Watson, 1964, p. 23).

Theatrical performances and musicking played crucial roles in the development of the Comstock and western settlements in nineteenth-century America. The high quality and great diversity of many of Virginia City's performers, however, distinguished the entertainment provided on the Comstock from that offered in other western mining towns. "The most prominent actors and actresses of the day... who played before the rulers of Europe – were drawn to the candle-, oil-, and gas-lit stages of the desert" (Watson, 1964, p. 23). The appeal of Comstock theaters to professional musicians and performers stemmed largely from the high level of connectivity to other urban centers in the West, namely San Francisco.

Geographically, Virginia City represented a crucial stop over point and stage opportunity for those entertainers travelling between San Francisco and Salt Lake City, Utah or Denver, Colorado. In fact, it was THE only major urban frontier center, and this made it a prime destination for international performers heading to and from California. Being "booked for Washoe" came with no small amount of prestige and honor; many performers were anxious to head over the Sierra. Because of the large influx of pioneers from California and its proximity, the Comstock was really an extension of the Bay Area, and this was reflected in its entertainment.

Nevada was a good theatrical field when its principal towns were scarcely more than camps. Virginia City had a theater in 1860 — the old Howard — while its population was little, if any, over 1,000, Topliffe built the big

theater on North C Street early in 1862, and Maguire's Opera House, on D Street, was opened in the summer of 1863... For years every star and dramatic attraction that came to the Pacific Coast was billed in Virginia City as in San Francisco, and not infrequently the engagement in the former place was the more profitable one. (Thompson, 1881, p. 715)

The relationship and interconnectivity between San Francisco and Virginia City were both unambiguously reciprocal. Virginia City represented the outermost edge of the San Francisco Mining Pyramid, and so, on one hand, much of the gold and silver recovered from the Comstock Lode funded major building projects in San Francisco. On the other hand, ties to California and many of its stars and businessmen helped to establish a surprisingly sophisticated, even cosmopolitan, culture in an otherwise very young mining community. Many arrivals in Virginia City intended to temporarily “camp out,” make a killing, and then retire in affluence to San Francisco or the East. “Having made millions, the Comstock princes and their behavior spoke volumes about the nature of their society. With only rare exception, those who made their fortune left the Comstock. They became the carpetbagger rich, interested in stripping the area of its wealth and then leaving for California, the East or Europe” (James, 1998, p. 231).

The mineral wealth from Virginia City fueled urban development in the Bay Area while providing an exurb and playground for both the wealth-seeking and the wealth-established. “Urban financiers regarded the camps themselves as temporary expedients, to be discarded as soon as the mines were gutted of their paying ore. Saloons and prostitutes substituted for the amenities of true settlement” (Brechin, 2001, p. 39). So did melodions, dance halls, and opera houses. From amateur and professional musicians to itinerant performers, the Comstock benefited from some of the most popular performers and musicians that the nineteenth century could provide (e.g. Mart Taylor, James Stark,

Edwin Booth, Maude Adams, Lillie Langtry, Lotta Crabtree, Adah Isaacs Menken, etc.) a reflection not only of its geography but also the demographically diverse origins of its residents, the peculiarity of Virginia City's mining complex, the fabulous extent of its wealth, and the very strong ties fostered by members of its community with the Bay Area. If exhuming the "Comstock Lode" required camping out for an untold length of time, then the skilled hard rock miners and affluent financiers of the Comstock meant to do so in style, luxury, and sophistication.

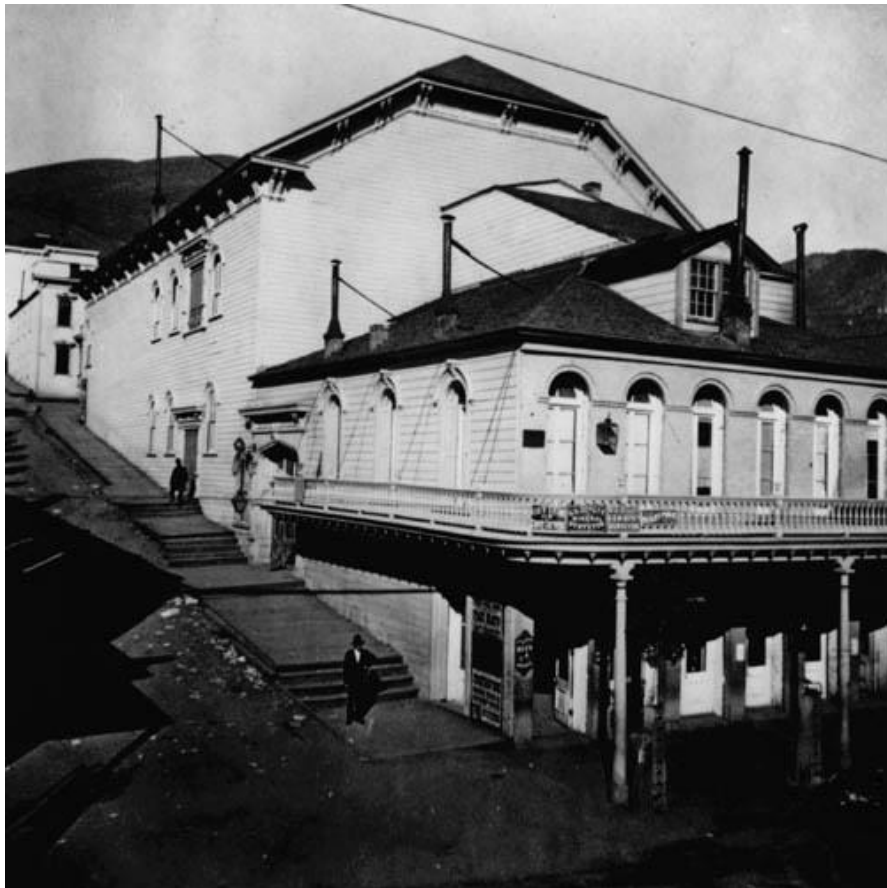


Figure 4.9 Photograph of the second incarnation of Piper's Opera House taken in 1878 by famed photographer Carleton Watkins. Image courtesy of: <http://www.onlinenevada.org/articles/nineteenth-century-nevada-drama>.

### *Disorderly Houses & Red-Light Districts*

As years passed and Virginia City developed, Comstockers carefully cultivated the image of an affluent exurb of San Francisco even as their newspaper journalists exaggerated, wove, and sometimes entirely fabricated salacious stories about the city's "Wild West" underbelly further underscoring the strange dichotomy of wealth and corruption overtaking the city's public image in relation to San Francisco. "The sinful distractions of the Comstock were certainly no more prevalent than in any other place in the mining West," but precious few places in the American West received as much national and international attention as the Comstock" (James, 1998, p. 190). Well, that is except for San Francisco, Virginia City's wayward "mother." For, although some elite San Franciscans were trying desperately to reform their city's image, portions of the city stagnated in violence, prostitution, and moral decay.

Condensed around the Barbary Coast and the Tenderloin, San Francisco's seedier scenes gained national and even international attention, and there was certainly a level of interconnectivity between the wayfarers and thugs that populated its slums and those in Virginia City. In fact, it can be somewhat difficult to determine which place most influenced the other in this respect. On one hand, Virginia City's Barbary Coast, a miniature — though no less disreputable — tribute to San Francisco's dark side and namesake, marked a neighborhood of vagabonds, drug dealers, prostitutes, and criminals. On the other hand, a Comstock madam such as Inez Leonard could relocate to the Tenderloin and open a brothel drawing almost entirely from her former Comstock clientele (Nolte, 2012). It actually made a great deal of sense for Comstockers, (e.g. prostitutes, bar owners, musicians, and service industry workers) to head over to San Francisco as the Com-

stock played out. They simply followed their clients, their clients' money, and Virginia City's money chugging over the Sierra to San Francisco.

San Francisco's unsavory red-light district, the Barbary Coast, advertised panoply modes of entertainment from saloons to dance halls to bars to brothels. Stretching nine blocks and centered around a three block area of Pacific Street (now Avenue), its core started near Portsmouth Square and ended at the first shipping docks at Buena Vista Cove. Infamous for its salacious stories of Chinese opium dens, general lawlessness, incidents of vigilante justice, and rampant prostitution (with a particular proclivity for Chinese sex slaves and sex trafficking), the Barbary Coast became synonymous with corruption and crime. Ironically, it symbolized one of the oldest areas of San Francisco having emerged directly from the first mining camps of the 1849 California Gold Rush.

The Barbary Coast is the haunt of the low and the vile of every kind. The petty thief, the house burglar, the tramp, the whoremonger, lewd women, cutthroats, murderers, all are found here. Dance-halls and concert-saloons, where bleary-eyed men and faded women drink vile liquor, smoke offensive tobacco, engage in vulgar conduct, sing obscene songs and say and do everything to heap upon themselves more degradation, are numerous. Low gambling houses, thronged with riot-loving rowdies, in all stages of intoxication, are there. Opium dens, where heathen Chinese and God-forsaken men and women are sprawled in miscellaneous confusion, disgustingly drowsy or completely overcome, are there. Licentiousness, debauchery, pollution, loathsome disease, insanity from dissipation, misery, poverty, wealth, profanity, blasphemy, and death, are there. And Hell, yawning to receive the putrid mass, is there also. (Lloyd, 1876, pp. 79-80)

Trying to re-appropriate San Francisco's civic reputation would take a heavy hand and reformer's zeal, and this, by no means, guaranteed success. Virginia City's Barbary Coast was really no better, and, unsurprisingly, both districts shared at least some of the same transients moving aimlessly from one strike — or, one criminal opportunity — to the next.

Located at the southern end of C Street across the way from what would become the site of the Fourth Ward School, Virginia City's Barbary Coast contained a bizarre mixture of some of the most disreputable bars and "disorderly houses,"<sup>126</sup> and, after the fire of 1875, housed the red-light district, which was relocated from D Street. "In the 1860s and 1870s, a block on the western uphill side of South C Street became known as the Barbary Coast because, like its San Francisco namesake, it was 'the roughest and worst place in town....' Although the area had a reputation for attracting the darker elements of society, the fire exacerbated the problem with refugees [from the red-light district], making the intrusion on C Street all the more noticeable" (James, 1998, pp. 177-178). This created serious community tensions after 1877 (with the construction of the Fourth Ward School) between parents whose children were forced to walk past the Barbary Coast several times a day to and from school (and at lunchtime) and the working girls of the street. By June 1877, such was the public outcry that a remodeling of the Barbary Coast commenced and undesirables were relocated back to the rebuilt red-light district on D Street.

As community tensions cleared Virginia City's Barbary Coast and mining depressions made the Comstock an increasingly less viable place for many prostitutes, some "working girls" relocated from Virginia City to San Francisco. In fact, Miss Inez Leonard, formerly of Virginia City, had the distinction of single-handedly transporting prostitution to San Francisco's Tenderloin district in 1884. Located just south of the Barbary Coast, the Tenderloin would rise to international disrepute by 1891, a spillover from the Barbary Coast. Leonard opened an upscale parlor house in the Tenderloin and advertised

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<sup>126</sup> A "disorderly house" was a nineteenth-century euphemism for a brothel.

specifically for former Virginia City clientele (another indication of the interconnectivity between these two cities). In the advertisement, she elicits “the patronage of former friends [to] her newly and elegantly furnished rooms at 223 Ellis Street, near Taylor” (Nolte, 2012, n.p.). Miss Inez Leonard’s “lovely” establishment burned down in 1906, but she still managed to leave quite a mark on the culture of the area.

Prostitution, in various forms, in fact, would “plague” and “promote” both San Francisco and Virginia City well into the twentieth century. Just as Virginia City’s Barbary Coast was moved and renovated in Virginia City after 1877, so San Francisco’s Barbary Coast met a similar fate in the early twentieth century after hard-hitting newspaper exposés, general public outrage, and laws such as the Red-Light Abatement Act (1914) forced local police officers to take action against “disorderly houses.” Without prostitution, the Barbary Coast quickly faded by the 1920s.

Dismantled and destroyed, the Barbary Coast would be divided into the smaller neighborhoods that tourists to San Francisco are so familiar with today, including North Beach and Chinatown. In the twentieth century, the area would attract jazz performers and Bohemians who quickly took over North Beach, in particular. Later, the Beatniks would establish coffee shops and bookstores, and the revitalized Barbary Coast would give birth to new forms of vice, chiefly the use of various illicit drugs, the “corruption of youth,” and the establishment of the Underground café culture.

The jazz café scene, in turn, spawned the development of the Counterculture in San Francisco. Out of North Beach and nearby Pine Street would come individuals such as Ellen Harmon, Bill Ham, George Hunter, Dan Hicks, and Chan Laughlin — clandestine members of what would become the Red Dog scene. They would retrace Miss Inez

Leonard's footsteps back over the Sierra to the Comstock of old where they, in turn, established a neo-Edwardian-style saloon complete with lavish furnishings, high end cuisine, and gorgeous dancing girls. The Spirit of '49 — a spirit that had long lingered after the last saloons were dismantled in San Francisco or left to rot in Virginia City — revived during the Red Dog days. The can-can, however, would be replaced by the go-go.

San Francisco's economy was vibrant enough to transform its disheveled historic streets into colorful, vibrant neighborhoods that still define the city today. Such a feat was not possible on the Comstock, however, which barely limped along on narrowly prescribed mining endeavors and prostitution. During World War II, several acts by the Federal Government nearly insured its ultimate demise. First, in 1942, acting on behalf of the White House, the War Production Board rated the extraction of gold and silver "non-preferred activities." Following this, the Limitation Order L-208 of October 8, 1942, gave gold mines exactly seven days to stop all operations. Finally, the War Department irrevocably damaged Virginia City's economy by targeting the oldest business in the world.

A final blow to Comstock society came when the War Department pressured Storey County to close its Virginia City brothels and cribs. The federal government maintained that prostitution represented a health risk and with so many soldiers traveling back and forth across the nation, Virginia City's businesses might spread disease and hamper the war effort. Lest Hitler's victory be hung around Virginia City's neck, its houses of ill repute closed. Stripped of its mines and of its prostitutes, the Comstock ended what seemed to be its final chapter. (James, 1998, pp. 256-257)

Ultimately, it was Hollywood that stepped in and saved Virginia City. But in the process, it so irrevocably altered the city's public image that its original roles as the nineteenth-century industrial titan and exurb of San Francisco were largely forgotten.

While the Comstock always dealt with myth-making and fabulous legends, the

television western *Bonanza* incited a process of community revision still remarkably evident today. “For decades, historians and writers had tinkered with the image of the Comstock, inventing a myth to capture a place more the way it should have been than the way it actually was. Television continued the tradition while redefining its direction, and Virginia City was never the same” (James, 1998, p. 263). Locals refer to this process as “Bonanza-fication.”

### *Re-establishing a Connection in 1965: Virginia City’s “Summer of Love”*

During the mid-1960s, a group of long-haired Californians wishing to flee the cookie-cutter conformity of American culture, reawakened San Francisco’s former Silver Queen — its fantastical former playground — by re-establishing some of their oldest community bonds through the transport of luxury goods and amateur and professional performers to the area. When Mark Unobsky’s parents purchased a mid-nineteenth century saloon known as the Comstock House to support their son’s unlikely, albeit very welcome, step toward entrepreneurship, and he along with Chan Laughlin and Don Works commenced its renovation as the Red Dog Saloon, these so-called “Red Doggers” consciously revitalized the city’s musical and cultural landscapes. In return, Virginia City infused the Red Dog Saloon’s participants with an organic, contagious energy that would very quickly take hold in the City. Instead of “Gold Fever,” a new generation of Californians caught “Dance Fever.” Or, as Chan Laughlin later put it, “Nevada taught America how to dance again” (Laughlin, 1995, p. 82).

Despite the groundbreaking innovations that occurred at the Red Dog Saloon, which would entirely revolutionize the San Francisco scene in the mid- to late 1960s, this

history is obscure to many today. “Less well known... is the role Virginia City played in the musical explosion that became San Francisco Rock and Roll in the late '60s. If San Francisco was the birthplace of '60s rock, Virginia City was the site of the seduction, and the act itself was consummated at the Red Dog Saloon” (Laughlin, 1995, p. 80). These so-called “Red Doggers” re-established traditional community linkages between the Bay Area and the Comstock. While these ties were never completely severed — due in large part to Hollywood’s obsession with the Western and a smoldering interest in the community inspired by Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg’s revitalized *Territorial Enterprise* beginning in 1952<sup>127</sup> — the Red Doggers re-trod the well-worn trail that first brought Victorian entertainers to the vicinity starting in 1860. “During the nineteenth century, there had been constant communication between Virginia City and San Francisco, and this relationship found its echo a hundred years later. The Bay area rock movement discovered that the Comstock was a refreshing retreat where anything was possible and experimentation could occur in a secluded environment” (James, 1998, p. 263). While Virginia City’s geographical proximity to San Francisco allowed for ease of accessibility, its relative isolation (especially from the norms of society) provided a perfect playground for the City’s twentieth-century youth just as it had for the prospectors, bankers, industrialists, and financiers of the previous one.

The colorful myths of the area’s past were particularly appealing to Red Doggers, the vast majority of whom were white, middle class males. They came from a truly “privileged” generation where consumerism and materialism were touted as symbols of free-

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<sup>127</sup> See Chapter Five for a detailed description of Beebe and Clegg’s impact on Virginia City during the twentieth century.

dom and antidotes to communism. They were heavily influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis, especially as envisioned by a generation of Hollywood producers and directors. While there are a variety of ways that the popularity of the American Western, especially during the twentieth century, can be accounted for, perhaps, the most straightforward possibility with regard to the Red Doggers comes from Robert Murray Davis' *Playing Cowboys*: "The West, as defined by popular culture, offers imaginative escape from contemporary social and economic constraints into a simpler and more individualistic time." This was certainly the case for a generation of Americans who matured under the constant threat of an incessant and ostentatious military arms race, the Draft, and communist takeover, a generation uneasy with the parental yoke that declared Elvis's pelvic arch immoral and instructed its youth that the preposterous measures of "drop, cover, and hold" might actually afford them a chance of survival during a looming nuclear geocide. The Atomic Age and the Cold War produced the Age of Anxiety. Confronted with panoply dangers unthinkable prior to the twentieth century, many looked nostalgically to a simpler time and place. The American frontier of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, especially as configured by Hollywood, offered a ripe venue for escapism.

Moreover, as the Baby Boomer generation came to more and more openly reject the paradigm of 1950s American consumerism and plastic culture, they began to connect in increasingly deep ways with Wild West figures such as the iconic, lone gunfighter (Allan Ladd's Shane or Gary Cooper's Will Kane) who stood apart from a misguided, corrupted, and conforming American society encapsulated in the impotent portrayal of Western townspeople. These men represented a new kind of manliness based on individual moral conviction and reflection rather than service to any larger social construct. "The

question of how to act like a man and indeed of figuring out what a man is supposed to be and do is central to the Western, which has offered to men roughly of my generation a pattern of manhood — and beyond that, of humanity — more comprehensible and certainly more attractive than those offered by church, schools, parents, or even war movies” (Davis, 1991, pp. xx, xxiii).

Some baby boomers mistrusted many adults, including their own parents. Some grew up in households with war damaged fathers and utterly repressed mothers, whose Rosie the Riveter days were poorly replaced by pie plates and dish tubs, Tupperware, and Valium. For many, keeping up appearances trumped actual discourse, and a poignant desperation and fear lurked just beneath the surface of American popular culture and its byproduct, the Suburbs. For the first time in history, the sharp edges of the generation gap

grew benchmarked and distinctly articulated. As a result, white, middle class, male Baby Boomers, more than ever, looked to new models of manliness, and the American Western happily filled the void. For the Red Doggers, Virginia City represented the perfect playground for



Figure 4.10 The Charlatans in full Wild West regalia seated at the Red Dog Saloon in Virginia City, Nevada, during the summer of 1965. Image courtesy of: <http://3.bp.blogspot.com/VPhxyRkIcgc/UAGvtgqtagI/AAAAAAAE3U/oHmxNAPd7Ag/s1600/the-charlatans-2.jpg>.

experimentation with a radical ethos of individualism defined by the most fantastical aspects of the Turnerian concept of the rugged frontiersman coupled with Hollywood imagery of the Western genre. Virginia City represented a performance venue where the Red Doggers could act out myth thereby embodying a hybridized twentieth-century reality for a very brief time.

Escaping into the American West via the real-life soundstage of the mid-1960s Comstock permitted members of the Red Dog scene to shrink great global problems into meaningful, surmountable scenarios. It was an Alice in Wonderland visit to the land of make-believe. Just as the Cold War was reduced from a conflict of international proportions into a Mexican standoff between a formulaic good guy in a white cowboy hat and a bad guy wearing black, so playing cowboy in Virginia City allowed the Red Doggers to distance themselves from the great problems plaguing modern American society and the global community. With a spinning up of the Vietnam War and anti-war ferment; the Civil Rights movement; the Cold War and Communist threat; even a switchover from folk music to the backbeat of rock 'n' roll, the world had never felt so mutable, big, or dangerous. Localization marked a psychological coping mechanism. By focusing on the local and immediate while observing large-scale problems from a great temporal and spatial distance, these problems, of course, literally had the appearance of being minimized.

While it is impossible to ascertain how consciously Red Doggers used the Virginia City scene to escape into simpler times, redefine a new ethos of manliness, and place distance between themselves and fears associated with the Age of Anxiety at the time, today, they certainly look back on it within that psychological framework. According to Chan Laughlin:

Basically, I was scared shitless by the Cuban Missile Crisis.... Kennedy and the Russians faced down over Cuba, and I found myself with thousands of other kids my age... standing around in the street saying, ‘What the fuck do I do now?’ And, large numbers of us put together what little we had and decided we were gonna try and get into a car and go out into the country because if I wanted to die in an atomic flash, I’d just as soon be under an apple tree. (Works, 1996, 01:24:00-01:24:28)

Their renovation and conversion of the Comstock House into the Red Dog scene painstakingly recreated a nineteenth-century saloon and followed very formulaic conventions associated with the Hollywood Western and local folkloric constructs. They actively sought to recreate an iconic boomtown saloon with all of the charms and fixings of the Victorian age. They fashioned it a grand redux of Miss Kitty’s Long Branch Saloon from *Gunsmoke* while adding extravagant touches befitting the unique character of the Comstock. In so doing, the Comstock House transformed into the luxurious Red Dog, an establishment quite similar to some of the self-indulgent fables about Julia Bulette’s famed French mansion and brothel.

According to legend, Julia Bulette was the first white woman on the Comstock. Quickly realizing there was a unique niche she could fill, she turned prostitute charging \$1,000 a night for her discreet affections. With these earnings, she later opened Julia’s Palace, an entertainment house and brothel purportedly of the highest order. Featuring rococo decorations, Bulette stocked her highly popular bordello with the finest girls from San Francisco (decked out in the latest Parisian fashions) and served gourmet French cuisine and wines. Loved by the miners, one reportedly argued that she “caressed Sun Mountain with a gentle touch of splendor” (Brown, 1974, p. 65; McDonald, 1982, pp. 74-75; Williams III, 1984, pp. 35-47).

According to historical reality, Bulette was neither a French madam nor owner of a palatial entertainment establishment serving gourmet French cuisine. Yet, her legend grew exponentially after her horrific, and much sensationalized, murder by strangulation and blunt-force bludgeoning at the hands of French immigrant, baker, and vagrant, John Millian. On the morning of January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1867, her body was discovered by her next door neighbor at her one bedroom crib on D Street in the Virginia City red-light district. Many of her possessions were missing. Because of the dubious oral histories collected by Duncan Emrich<sup>128</sup> at the Delta Saloon in the mid-1940s and the rush to attract tourists in the 1950s, the Bulette legend achieved near mythic proportion very rapidly.

The extravagance of her legend is an outgrowth of the tourist boom which descended upon Virginia City in the early 1950's. The fence around her grave was moved to make it visible from C Street saloons, deeds of her selfless sacrifices for the miners were invented, an attractive but fictitious painting purported to be her was placed on display, totally erroneous books of her life story were published, a highly fictionalized episode about her was televised on "Bonanza," and even a local saloon was named in her honor. (McDonald, 1982, p. 75)

Certainly, some of the Red Dog's renovations and offered amenities (e.g. finely dressed hostesses, rich furnishings, and gourmet French cuisine) were inspired by the fictitious Julia's Palace. The striking similarities represent a fascinating nod to this mythologized, romanticized past.

Like their nineteenth-century counterparts, Red Doggers relied on San Francisco to provide everything from fine velvet curtains, the best china, and Victorian costuming to marijuana and LSD. From the city by the bay came the first self-operating light show by Bill Ham and Bob Cohen, and professional performers such as the eclectic Charlatans and psychedelic Big Brother and the Holding Company. Bill Ham's light show and the

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<sup>128</sup> See Chapter Five for more information on Duncan Emrich.

latter two musical groups would quickly rise to national and even international prominence following their time as honored headliners on the Comstock. The Red Dog scene attracted both locals and “pilgrims” from the Bay Area; Portland, Oregon; Seattle Washington; and, much farther in some cases (e.g. famed Chicago bluesman and guitarist Nick Gravenites and John Cipollina who later created the Quicksilver Messenger Service as a quasi-Western memorial to the Comstock).

Enamored by the freedom and tolerance generally enjoyed on the Comstock, the Red Doggers liberally indulged their chief fantasies. “Much of the feeling of freedom that had been part of the Comstock remained, and the environment proved ideal for the counterculture movement. Virginia City’s Red Dog Saloon became a well-known hangout, featuring entertainment by Janis Joplin and Big Brother and the Holding Company. Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters came through the Comstock before Tom Wolfe wrote of their exploits in his *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*” (James, 1998, p. 263). The cultural innovations that audience members such as Gravenites and Cipollina witnessed at the Red Dog as well as their embrace of the potentialities of Virginia City’s liminality, inspired them to later incorporate elements of the Comstock into their own style, attitudes, and music. They drew on the city’s rich admixture of historical fact and fable for artistic inspiration thereby creating an amalgam of “western saloon and San Francisco nightclub” (James, 1998, p. 263). In so doing, they repeated a longstanding pattern of reciprocity between these two western urban centers.

***Chapter Five: Past and Present Reflections upon the Richest Spot on the Earth***

***Only a Miner Killed***

Only a miner killed;  
 Oh! is that all?  
 One of the timbers caved;  
 Great was the fall,  
 Crushing another one  
 Shaped like his God.  
 Only a miner lad —  
 under the sod.

Only a miner killed,  
 Just one more dead.  
 Who will provide for them —  
 Who earn their bread? —  
 Wife and little ones,  
 Pity them, God,  
 Their earthly father  
 Is under the sod.

Only a miner killed,  
 Dead on the spot,  
 Poor hearts are breaking  
 In yon little cot.

He died at his post,  
 A hero as brave  
 As any who sleep  
 In a marble-top grave.

Only a miner killed!  
 God, if thou wilt,  
 Just introduce him  
 To old Vanderbilt,  
 Who, with his millions,  
 If he is there,  
 Can't buy one interest —  
 Even one share.

Only a miner killed!  
 Bury him quick,  
 Just write his name on  
 A piece of a stick.  
 No matter how humble  
 Or plain be the grave,  
 Beyond, all are equal —  
 The master and slave.

(Crawford, 1879, pp. 63-64)

*Comstock Realities, Wild West Fantasies*

From time immemorial, residents of the Comstock relied on extravagantly constructed place myths to bolster their city's reputation, maintain stock holders' interests in their mines, and rapidly construct a civic history for a rootless town of transients. Whether it be strange stories of the city's founders and namesakes or grandiose exaggerations about crib prostitutes with hearts of gold, place myth served many purposes. During the twentieth century, however, the force of place myth was imbued with a dramatic new force as the city came to rely more and more heavily on tourism. As a result, many local business owners became convinced that the residents and historical landscapes of the city needed to conform to the cookie cutter mold of the great American Hollywood Western. Soon it became just as much about what to conceal as it was about what to create. An experience that the vaunted "Poet Scout of the Black Hills" John "Captain Jack" Crawford Wallace witnessed in 1877 perfectly illustrates this point.

Captain Jack had seen many a conflict in his day from the Civil War to the Indian Wars, so he counted himself not much affected by dramatic scenes of violence or gore. He felt fully capable of navigating the Comstock, despite its tall tales of gunslingers and random violence, and he felt soundly able to protect himself despite threats of Mexican standoffs and random stabbings so shamelessly contrived by newspaper editors and their hungry journalistic teams. Surveying C Street as he prepared to cross to the opposite wood-planked boardwalk where a street musician pumping a hurdy-gurdy caught his attention, Jack heard the painful creaking of a wagon headed in his direction. Furtively, he glimpsed its contents: a bloodied, soiled canvas tarp draped unceremoniously over a motionless lump. At nearly the same moment, Jack overheard a couple of gawking curbstone

brokers exclaim, “Oh, it’s only a miner killed” before they returned to whatever business they had at hand.

Captain Jack was struck to his core by the labored progress of the wagon and its callous dismissal by the brokers. Two years later, still ruminating over the dismissive cruelty of that moment in Virginia City, he would publish the verses to “Only a Miner.” These, in turn, would inspire a whole family of mining songs in the twentieth century based on the refrain “Only a Miner Killed.” These include John Greenway’s and Aunt Molly Jackson’s recording of the “Poor Miner’s Farewell” featured in 1961 on *The Songs and Stories of Aunt Molly Jackson* (Jackson, 1961).<sup>129</sup> Bob Dylan would translate this material into “Only a Hobo,” which he performed April 12, 1963 (Dylan, 1997).<sup>130</sup>

With clear vestiges of the folk music element — a sign of solidarity with workers and unions — the piece is generally accompanied by light guitar strumming, and the anguish of its lyrics is heightened by the wailing strains of its performers and the overall simplicity of the refrain and instrumental accompaniment. The song is a simple lament for a worker whose daily toil and hardship has failed to earn him even the fleeting respect of a bowed head or a moment of silence.

That afternoon of January 4<sup>th</sup>, 1877, would linger with Captain Jack long after he moved on to other cities.<sup>131</sup> Human life seemingly had devolved to mean little on the Comstock. Having immigrated to the United States from Scotland, Captain Jack spent his

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<sup>129</sup> For more information, please see: <http://www.folkways.si.edu/TrackDetails.aspx?itemid=17092>.

<sup>130</sup> For more information, please see: <http://www.bobdylan.com/us/songs/only-hobo>.

<sup>131</sup> Captain Jack was in Virginia City, Nevada, to perform with Buffalo Bill. Their partnership, however, came to a rather abrupt end during the summer of 1877 when during one of their Comstock shows, the staging of a combat scene on horseback went amiss. Captain Jack was accidentally shot in the groin and attributed the mistake to Buffalo Bill’s intoxication. (Captain Jack was a self-proclaimed and ardent teetotaler.) Sometime thereafter, Crawford settled in New Mexico where he dabbled in ranching and prospecting (Deadwood Magazine, 1998, n.p.).

childhood laboring in Pennsylvania coal mines, fought in the Civil War as a volunteer with the Pennsylvania “Miner’s Regiment,” served as a scout in the Black Hills during the Sioux Wars (hence the nickname “the Poet Scout of the Black Hills”), later worked in New Mexico and Arizona, and eventually tried his hand at gold prospecting in Alaska. Amid this colorful career, he did a short stint in Buffalo Bill Cody’s Wild West, which included performances in Virginia City. Hardly the portrait of a man faint of heart, Crawford was nonetheless horrified by passage of the miner’s tumbrel, a scene only too common on the Comstock. He introduced his poem with a trenchant comment: “Although everything that science, skill, and money can devise is done to avert accidents, the average of fatal ones in the Comstock is three a week. *Three men a week*” [my emphasis] (Crawford, 1879, p. 63).

Perhaps what troubled Crawford most was how a miner’s death was shrugged off by bystanders in his own community, and without a moment’s pause. Underscoring this cruelty even more deeply, Comstock papers and members of the community spent much of the same day obsessing over the death of far-removed Cornelius Vanderbilt, known by the sobriquet of Old Commodore Vanderbilt. A multi-millionaire out of New York, Vanderbilt rose to fame by amassing a family fortune through railroad enterprises and the shipping industry. Since Old Commodore just happened to die the same day as the miner fell, Vanderbilt (who had absolutely no relationship with the community of the fallen miner) was to be remembered, while the miner himself went virtually without coverage in local papers. As the brokers made clear, one miner’s death meant next to nothing. And so Crawford learned a vicious truth about the Comstock that day. Beneath the glittering façade of wealth, mirth, and leisure, industrial workers lived and died in terrible conditions,



Figure 5.1 Photographic portrait of John Wallace "Captain Jack" Crawford by Bennett & Brown photographers, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1881.

gnawed to bits by the industrial machines and contraptions dominating Virginia City's landscape. Apparently, the Silver Queen was carnivorous.

The "actual" history of the Comstock Lode as a manifestation of America's industrial revolution, its imperialistic expansion westward, and its consumptive dominance of the environment, Native Americans, and anyone or anything that might stand in its way, was generally hidden from the eyes of tourists and visitors beneath civilized-enough looking false fronts. But an uncaring and remote actuality did exist then, as it still does today, despite the careful way Comstock history continues to be pruned and presented. Frederick Jackson Turner's Frontier Thesis aside, the Comstock was fueled by wage-earners who risked their lives and limbs from day-to-day in almost unimaginable working circumstances. According to Carl Schwantes, this is largely because the concept of a wageworkers' frontier is philosophically antithetical to Turner's ever-popular "Thesis," which suggests that out West, the existence of non-class based opportunities and democratic potentialities were essential byproducts of the evolution of the "new" American. Yet, the fact remains that the vast majority of male workers on the frontier actively sought out and earned wages: "The rapid expansion of wage work in the United States and Canada and the most intensive phase of the exploitation and settlement of the western third of the continent were roughly contemporaneous processes that occurred during a seventy-year interval bracketed by the California gold rush and World War I" (Schwantes, January 1987, p. 40). Little wonder that western verses and songs, such as Crawford's, return time and again to the exploration of issues related to labor, violence, and danger. These were the pressing issues on the minds of westerners who daily risked

their lives and livelihoods, not in “romanticized” Mexican standoffs and blazing battles with Indians, but rather dangerous industrial exploits.<sup>132</sup>

In his exploration of wage-earning miners on the Comstock, Gunther Peck argues that the dangers Comstock miners faced on a daily basis (e.g. fire, poisonous gas, explosions, and cave-ins) represented a type of gamble waged, to varying degrees, by every member of Comstock society. Large mine owners and Eastern investors also took major risks on the Comstock. The difference lay in the depth of the wager and its potential benefits. “The experience of risk and the cost of failure depended a great deal on what was at stake in the gamble—a day’s wages, a person’s reputation, the well-being of one’s family, a percentage of company profits, an arm, or a life itself” (Peck, 1993, p. 701). As history attests, failure was a daily reality for Comstock miners. As previously mentioned, between 1863 and 1880, over 900 miners were injured, disfigured, and/or killed in Comstock industrial mining accidents. For the entire length of those seventeen years, the Comstock maintained the nasty reputation of having the worst industrial accident rate on the planet. Not surprisingly, themes of luck, risk-taking, labor accidents, and death were constant elements on the Comstock and across the West and inevitably found their way into local music and culture. Despite this reality, the Comstock of the twentieth century, as it came to rely more and more on tourism, transformed into a kind of neo-Deadwood playground. It marginalized and minimized its mining and industrial heritage in favor of images so iconic to the west that some, like the American cowboy, have nearly achieved

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<sup>132</sup> It is worth remembering that labor activists such as Big Bill Haywood and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were forthright in warning about the active risks of mining and the potential peril that laborers would face — if death was not imminent, in many nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century settings, violent injury or perishing at the workplace was ever-possible.

sainthood. Like the deceased miner covered haphazardly with a dirty canvas, the better part of the Comstock's history would be brushed under the gaudy patterns of the Wild West rug.

### *A Town of Exaggeration, Exoticism, & Tourism*

From Virginia's airy situation one could look over a vast, far-reaching panorama of mountain ranges and deserts; and whether the day was bright or overcast, whether the sun was rising or setting, or flaming in the zenith, or whether night and the moon held sway, the spectacle was always impressive and beautiful. Over your head Mount Davidson lifted its gray dome, and before and below you a rugged canyon clove the battlemented hills, making a somber gateway through which a soft-tinted desert was glimpsed, with the silver thread of a river winding through it, bordered with trees which many mile of distance diminished to a delicate fringe; and still further away the snowy mountains rose up and stretched their long barrier to the filmy horizon — far enough beyond a lake that burned in the desert like a fallen sun, though that, itself, lay fifty miles removed. . . . At rare intervals — but very rare — there were clouds in our skies, and then the setting sun would gild and flush and glorify this mighty expanse of scenery with a bewildering pomp of color that held the eye like a spell and moved the spirit like music. (Twain, p. 121)

Virginia City, Nevada, with its sweeping, pastel vistas; expansive, endless mountain ranges; and, cloudless, bright-lit firmament grabbed hold of its residents' and visitors' imaginations. The landscape inspired them to think larger, experiment more, and stake the higher ground, and these experiences forever transformed Comstockers, even when the gold and silver pouring from the mines did not. It is remarkable to compare the quotation above to Twain's early assessment of the northern Nevada desert from Chapter One. There is an interesting mechanism at work here, one that Yi-Fu Tuan points out in his monumental, geographical work *Topophilia*, "once a people have settled down and adapted somewhat to [a] new setting, it is difficult to know their environmental attitudes

for, having become native, they lose the urge to make comparisons and comment on their new home” (Tuan, 1974, p. 68). Clearly, too, the stately community clinging precariously to the side of Mount Davidson had forever transformed how Twain would view the world and his role in it. The Comstock clearly seduced him with its transparent landscapes, brilliant skies, and ebullient potential. After all, standing atop a vast gold and silver mountain high above the world could transfigure nearly anyone.

The landscape of Virginia City made its citizens desperately believe in the egalitarian Wild West of rugged individuals that Turner would articulate in 1893. And it’s hardly that Turner singlehandedly invented the concept of the frontier. Rather, he reoriented the history of the United States based on what he, and so many other westerners, wanted and needed to believe... that the pulse of the nation lay in its frontier and was defined by evolving settlement patterns that Turner detected in the Henry Gannett maps crafted from data in the 1890 United States Census. If such were true, reasoned Comstockers, then the heart from which that pulse beat must be Virginia City. A place richly burnished by the self-conscious and much-embellished imagery of the Wild West early on, its stark landscapes and imposing views *made* people believe in the pregnant potential of the rugged individual on the frontier despite intuitively knowing the feat of conquering the American West and securing some of its greatest ore deposits could not have merely been left to a Natty Bumppo or a Davey Crockett.

Places weather, even in remote western Nevada. With the passage of time, the landscapes and cityscapes of twentieth-century Virginia City played tricks on the eyes and the imagination. Years of communal rot rendered it intimate, rugged, and individualistic. Long gone were streams of miners hustling to and from work, clamoring industrial

sounds, and San Francisco stock brokers bustling in front of the five-story International Hotel or smoking in their dapper evening costumes at Piper's Old Corner Bar. In its stead, quaint, rundown buildings and the tourist's version of fool's gold — costume-clad desperados, sheriffs, and soiled doves — paraded about giving the tourist just what he/she wanted and expected to see. The contradictions between fantasy and reality could be easily minimized through the cultivation of a particular appearance. Where else but C Street would gunslingers race down the wooden boardwalk firing wildly and haphazardly, before ducking into saloons? Where else but D Street would famed prostitutes the likes of Julia Bulette assert feminine mastery over a community of rough-and-tumble males through sensuality, sex, and sophistication? Where else but B Street would lonely old prospectors with heavily-laden mules commiserate over what they'd lost and all they yet hoped to gain from fickle Mount Davidson while surveying Millionaires' Row? Ultimately, myth sells.

Located high in the Virginia Range running parallel to the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, with a forbidding high desert climate with scant water resources and challenging mountainous terrain, the Comstock presented the ultimate soundstage for the recreation of America's frontier heritage to suit the needs of a new generation of Americans who had no vast tracts of free land to tame. Rising 6,200 feet above sea level, a quarter-mile higher than Carson City, the city was thought to be sandwiched between the glittering veins of Eldorado below and the unobstructed glimpses of heaven above, where the viewer's eye could reach out and capture up to fifty or even one hundred miles of landscape. A wide open, lonely space highlighted by limitless silence, skies of flawless periwinkle, and boundless personal freedom, the twentieth-century Comstock was a place

that imbued visitors with a sense of America's greatness through the myths and legends that they sold of Wild West forefathers and mothers. Clustered like a broken strand of pearls, the remaining historic buildings offered quaint testimonies to a bygone age and a reflection of the area's most stubborn individuals, those who managed to construct a thriving urban center despite tremendous natural obstacles.

Gone were many of its chief industrial marvels and more permanent features of community. The deep-mine pumps, stamp mills, shafts and adits no longer rang, pounded, and clattered with "progress" while incessantly belching heavenward smoke, toxins, pulverized ore, and chaos. The V&T railroad no longer clanged, whistled, and steamed into the center of Virginia City, its original stopping point, by the abandoned railroad depot on D Street. Built in 1875, St. Mary's Hospital on R Street stood distinctly apart from the community clustered around C Street.

Its four-story, gabled, red-brick structure appeared stately and grand with its white Doric columns.<sup>133</sup> Its façade betrayed no traces of the suffering and sacrifice it once housed. No more was the hospital filled with the moaning of restless, injured miners and millers — victims of industrial hazards such as smoke or poisonous gas inhalation, heat exhaustion from working in sulfurously hot mine shafts, exposure to pockets of underground boiling water, and mishaps with flywheels, mill stamps, and various mechanized devices as eager to chew flesh as quartz ore. St. Mary's operating rooms stood empty, its embalming rooms unnecessary, and its morgue appeared to be an innocuous enough looking stone-walled room.

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<sup>133</sup> St. Mary's currently operates as an art and retreat center that hosts occasional ghost hunts in the wee hours of the night and morning.

The six-story International Hotel, an elegantly turned out brick building with access to C Street (main street after the 1875 fire) and the entrance to Piper's Opera House on D Street had long since vanished, and with it, the first public elevator in Nevada. Ironically, the very features of the community that made it a working industrial town of the nineteenth century (e.g. noise, pollution, industrial equipment, sewage, vast crowds) would have rendered it entirely unpalatable for twentieth century tourist consumption, and it was tourism to which the handful of denizens still inhabiting the twentieth-century Comstock looked.

Exploitation of the tourist's dollar overcame any sense of historical reticence or even propriety as the most salable images of the Hollywood frontier retooled Comstock historical realities into Wild West fantasies. These fables of the area's past inevitably said much more about the psychology of its twentieth-century entrepreneurial residents and visitors than that of its forbearers. Various representations promoted the rugged individuals of the Wild West including the reckless gunslinger, the soiled dove or prostitute, the avenging sheriff, and the solitary Native American brave. As Comstockers quickly found out, mediatized visions of the West sold, and Comstock storeowners were certainly more than willing to serve up the most salacious and narrow-minded of its iconographies.

### *Nineteenth-Century Industrial Tourism*

The American West has always been inextricably tied to tourism. The events that Easterners, Europeans, and various individuals from around the globe read about in newspapers, pamphlets, and books from the various regions of the Far West were simply too enticing not to draw crowds. On October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1879, for example, former president of the

United States, Ulysses S. Grant and his family, traveled to the Comstock where they passed three days showered with every gift, experience, and sight that the area had to offer. The Grants toured the mines of Virginia City, they were received by Adolph Sutro at his mansion in Sutro City, they traveled up the Sutro Tunnel back to Virginia City, and the city celebrated their every move with buildings decked out with all the pomp and pageantry usually reserved for the Fourth of July. About a year later, President Hayes, his wife, and an entourage of cabinet members including Major General William T. Sherman, his Secretary of War, took a similar tour as did many other famous individuals.

Besides flaunting its great industrial machines, the nineteenth-century community knew how to exploit the dangerous, exotic, racist, and terrifying to capture the imagination and part a man from his money. Unspeakable entertainments such as scalping, bare-knuckle boxing, and unmatched animal fights (e.g. a bear versus dogs) were interspersed with sensational news stories meant to sell papers and books, no matter the cost, and even pilgrimages to unholy relics such as those mentioned by Dan DeQuille in his 1876 masterpiece *The Big Bonanza*. Describing the ill-fated Donner-Reed Party and their misfortunes in the Sierra, DeQuille capitalized on the tragedy of the emigrants in order to sell books. His depiction, in particular, of Ludwig Keseberg was highly sensationalized and exaggerated. When discovered by the salvage party, DeQuille's Keseberg is a man entirely devoid of civilization and morality, a veritable Polyphemus.

Old Keseberg himself presented a most repulsive appearance — no ogre or ghoulish feasting in his den could have been more hideous. His beard was of great length, and spread in tangled strings over his breast, his hair a great, matted mop hung about his shoulders and stood out over his eyes, while the nails of his fingers had grown to such a length that they resembled the claws of a wild beast. He was ragged to an indecent degree, exceedingly filthy, and as ferocious as he was filthy. When confronted in his den and discovered in the very act of indulging in his

cannibal feast, he roused up and glared upon those who approached as though he were a hyena.<sup>134</sup> (DeQuille, 1974, p. 327)

DeQuille's version of the Donner-Reed Party history clearly exploits the misfortunes that they faced. Rather than recognizing, as Charles McGlashan their chief biographer did, that the Donner-Reed Party's circumstances were not precipitated by heroes and villains but rather good and poor decisions, DeQuille spins Keseberg into an arch-enemy of humanity — the rugged individual who embraces savagery so wholeheartedly that he negates his essential humanity.

Perhaps, DeQuille wished to spin a cautionary tale? Not so when placed in the context of the sentences that follow. "In some of the cabinets of the curious in Virginia City are bones collected at the old Donner Party camp about the sites of the decayed cabins, and some of these may even have been gnawed by old Keseberg" (DeQuille, 1974, p. 327). Indeed, the discussion of the Donner-Reed Party veers clearly away from any historical value to a mere plug for curiosity shops tourists might wish to visit in Virginia City!<sup>135</sup> And, all of this by 1879... The city was already ripe for its twentieth-century spiral into kitschy place myth and tourism. Television would render the transition nearly flawless.

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<sup>134</sup> The use of the word hyena, here, is quite interesting as it tempers the various villainies of Keseberg, to a degree, implying that he was merely a scavenger and not an outright murderer as members of the salvage party initially contended.

<sup>135</sup> This conclusion is further supported by the fact that Dan DeQuille was pressured into writing his history of the Comstock by the millionaires of the Lode, namely John Mackay, James Fair, and William Ralston, who wished to bring greater fame to the area and put the mining district on the map as a national destination. Once he finally agreed to undertake the task (despite being heavily burdened down with the job of editor of the *Territorial Express* besides) DeQuille envisioned the creation of a brief volume on the area of no more than one hundred pages that could be purchased, not unlike a tourist guidebook, at news-stands, railroad stations, and various other locations by those traveling to and/or interested in the area. Each year, he would revise the volume and print a new edition, thereby securing a steady income and eventually a novel-length work (Lewis, 1974, pp. xiv-xv).

With the celebration of its centennial in 1959, the Comstock benefited from the emergence of a new TV Western on American airwaves that same year. Boasting 440 episodes, *Bonanza* took the country by storm featuring beautiful color cinematography of Tahoe and its environs, including a manufactured set purported to represent Virginia City, Nevada. Soon, tourists flocked to the real-life Comstock to catch a glimpse of a fictionalized American West, and some locals transformed buildings in order to accommodate this interest. Changes included disguising finely constructed nineteenth-century brick buildings with unfinished cedar-board facades more closely resembling twentieth-century Hollywood sets. This bizarre architectural travesty is referred to locally (especially, by District Administrator of the Comstock History Center, Bert Bedeau) as “Bonanza-fication” and is still very visibly present on C Street (James, 1998). The extravagant influences of the tourist trade were amply visible by the mid-1960s. In this sense, Virginia City and its surrounding Comstock District represented a liminal space, an interface between the nineteenth-century past and twentieth-century present. To borrow a cliché, history literally came to life in this place. It was tangible, audible, visual, and even gustatory. The city seemingly thumbed its nose at the world and the changes wrought by time:

Times might change, but the Comstock does not have to acknowledge that fact. The district could and will live on with its own brand of western and mining ethic, blithely ignoring its own evolution and the world around it, continually insisting that it maintains a firm anchor in the nineteenth century. Some aspects of the Comstock today seem clearly to be holdovers from its past. The occasional and unexpected opening of a deep nineteenth-century shaft serves to remind everyone of why Virginia City was founded in the first place. Still, that is only one of the many echoes from its history. (James, 1998, p. 273)

The wood-lined boardwalks and haphazardly settled Victorian buildings lining C Street winked at twentieth-century tourists while modestly alluding to the glory this crown jewel of the San Francisco mining period once enjoyed. Such modesty, in many respects, preserved the town's existence and elevated it as one of the great tourist destinations of the American West, and the Virginia City National Historic District was designated as a National Landmark in 1961 by an act of the U.S. Congress. Those historic qualities involved 400 buildings and some 14,500 acres of land. But the imagery and the uses made of the site since are another matter altogether.

People flocked to gawk at cowboys and gunslingers and Victorian ladies of the night. They did not come to see the Liverpool of the West and marvel, wide-mouthed, at the impressive industrial achievements that the Comstock relied upon to access the rich ore deposits underneath its foundations (elsewise, Sutro, Nevada, would definitely have seen more foot traffic.) They did not come to watch stock speculators wear down the boardwalks of the city between banks and the telegraph office, frenetically attempting to surf momentary spikes and waves on the great tempestuous sea of the mining stock exchanges. They did not come to see miners maimed in accidents being carried down main street on stretchers or pulled in wagons, although that common occurrence is attested to by John Wallace (Captain Jack) Crawford's poem. They came to experience the exaggerated, fantastical Wild West of Buffalo Bill, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, and Jesse and Frank James.

### *Mining the Tourists*

My heart gave a skip of exaltation as first I saw [Virginia City] lying sprawled there in its canyons and along the scarred mountainside — the greatest mining camp ever in America! ...It was not long before I imbibed the [folklore] and history of the camp from hospitable old-timers. (Drury, 1948)

While Virginia City once captured the imagination of the entire world with its buried treasures and the industrial marvels invented and deployed to access its rich subterranean depths during the nineteenth century, by the middle of the twentieth century it was lost to time. Visitors in the 1950s reported the collapse of buildings and the loss of artifacts. Entire streets would collapse into mine shafts and adits that weren't maintained and sometimes not even mapped. The Silver Terrace Cemetery (actually thirteen of them, at the same general location) was pillaged, and the community dragged itself along on life support.

Because of its quickly garnered international reputation during the nineteenth century, Virginia City had been extensively mediatized and occupied a unique place in Western popular culture as the focus for many powerful place myths expressed in literature, cinema, personal accounts, and songs. But therein lay the disconnect. The residents of the Comstock did not know how to turn this powerful history of fable and lore into a marketable commodity. They did not know how to effectively mine tourists.

The city could draw on a century of myth-making, but that was not enough. They needed to *sell* their city. To do this, a number of locals decided that they should simplify their history, white wash it, romanticize it, and make it palatable for members of America's burgeoning 1950s middle class. Some shop owners began carefully crafting the

city's fabricated reputation as a lawless mining community. The local economy and folklore soon doted on area archetypes that applauded the gunslinger, the soiled dove, and the industrious prospector. Arguably, these titillating images provided the best material for advertisements promoting tourism, and tourism became the organic – rather than mineral – lifeblood of the Comstock. Virginia City's place-myth was both nationally and internationally recognized and hailed back to some of the earliest accounts of life on the Comstock made by men such as J. Ross Browne, William Wright (Dan DeQuille), and Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain). Much of the focus of these writers was on the most salacious and journalistically salable aspects of life in Washoe, and so Virginia City already enjoyed a reputation for wild lawlessness on a par with notorious places such as Deadwood, South Dakota, and Tombstone, Arizona.

But the imagery popularly associated with the Comstock (gunslingers, cowboys, prostitutes, and boot hill) while consciously selected, was largely erroneous and intended to attract tourists and meet preconceived expectations of a national and even global nature rather than impart any sense of historical truth: “Although later thought of as one of the cornerstones of the Wild West, Virginia City was actually one of the industrial giants of North America, far removed from the cliché of a mining camp” (James, 1998, p. 67).

But twentieth-century tourists<sup>136</sup> had little wish to catch a glimpse of a nineteenth-century industrial tour de force. Rather, they came for place myths associated with cowboys, outlaws, the Bucket of Blood saloon, and hitched-up skirt, exposed-ankle hints of Miss Kitty-style hospitality. They came to see *Gunsmoke* and, by 1959, *Bonanza*. To put

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<sup>136</sup> According to statistics from Virginia City's tourist bureau in 2013, one and a half million tourists flock to Virginia City each year.

it quite simply, the visual history that bombarded visitors to the Comstock — expressed through costumed actors, tourist pamphlets, and kitschy memorabilia — was fabricated to meet specific needs, and, ironically, these images tended to downplay the actual history of the area. In so doing, they also changed the flavor of the city and its sense of place.

Although eye-catching and promotable, such images presented a myopic view of the once-thriving urban industrial center. This was not particularly surprising, however, within the context of the American West's vastly reconfigured historiography. The history and images of Western America were and still are in a constant state of flux as research improves our understanding of the past. "The evolution of the American West is a continuous process, and the delimitation of the region and the understanding of the varied components of the process change over time" (Hausladen, 2003a, p. 7). When public consumption was thrown into the mix in the middle of the twentieth century, the possible variations became nearly exponential, and the civic leaders of the Comstock had to carefully sort through these to pick the most appealing and digestible. The result was a Comstock reborn, a history radically impoverished, and a sense of place that was clearly altered. The early promotion of such imagery had an incalculable impact on the nature of the Comstock's stubbornly persistent communities. "Promoting the Comstock as a tourist mecca did more to transform the district than the failure of the mines. For every person who came to experience the Wild West, the Comstock became even farther removed from its nineteenth-century roots. It mattered little, however, to these latter-day



Figure 5.2 Map of the iconic Bonanza according to the television series that debuted in 1859. The series and this map would have an incalculable impact not only on how the general public perceived the Comstock but how the twentieth century community of Virginia City would refashion itself to suit tourists' expectations. Image courtesy of: [http://www.ebay.com/itm/BONANZA-T-V-SHOW-REPLICA-PONDEROSA-MAP-POSTER-/171321641614?pt=LH\\_DefaultDomain\\_0&hash=item27e390ca8e](http://www.ebay.com/itm/BONANZA-T-V-SHOW-REPLICA-PONDEROSA-MAP-POSTER-/171321641614?pt=LH_DefaultDomain_0&hash=item27e390ca8e).

westerners; they apparently felt that to watch the last grains of sand slip through their fingers was better than not to have seen them at all” (James, 1998, p. 258).

As UNLV historian Hal Rothman argues in *Devil's Bargains: Tourism in the Twentieth-Century American West*, the way that Americans and people around the world perceived the American West was largely influenced by Frederick Jackson Turner's reading of the American West, with its strong reliance on individualism and environmental determinism. According to Turner, the Frontier had the potential to transform any Tom, Dick, or Harry into a regular Leatherstocking, in the supposed person of Natty Bumppo. Turner later argued that, “Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time” (F. J. Turner, 1891), (Billington, 1961, p. 17). This was as true in 1950s America as in 1890s America. The Frontier Thesis made American males heroes and permitted them to reduce the overwhelming and very real threats of Cold War and nuclear annihilation to a scale that was surmountable — simply good guys and bad guys steeped in authentic lifeways.

Post-World War II America, marked by the Atomic Age, needed its fictions, too. The egalitarian west of rugged individuals was an idea that sold. It reinforced a sense of virile manliness that thrived on the battlefields of WWII but found few outlets in 1950s suburbia. In the pioneer woman, 1950s housewives could re-connect with the sense of independence, adventure, and hardiness that they felt during the war years when they had had to rise *en masse* to power the war effort. Children found comfort in the simplicity of a world where good guys always wore white and bad guys always wore black. Finally, the Turnerian narrative provided Americans with yet another means of contrasting “the

virtues of American capitalism” with “the depravity of the Communist threat.” Within this context, the nation’s desire to highlight individualism and progress over and above actual demonstrations from the documentary record of what communities were able to achieve in synch, is clearly discernible.

The final settling of the West was both a joyous and melancholy closure to many Americans accustomed to believing in the limitless possibilities teeming somewhere just beyond the reaches of the most recent national settlement. Americans of successive generations bought into the nostalgia Hollywood expressed in portrayals of the West thereby endowing the average American with a sense of having missed out on something truly great. “The business of occupying this continent was one of the great adventures of modern times, but it was over much sooner than many expected” (Carstensen, January 1982 p. 6). The aftertaste of this surprisingly ephemeral exploit left a sour flavor in the mouths of many Americans who then looked to some larger, organizing scheme for psychological orientation.

Turner’s thesis provided one such answer as did the dramatized western myth presented in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West, Theodore Roosevelt’s racialist theory of history embodied in the *Winning of the West*, the western visions perpetuated early on in the film industry (*The Great Train Robbery*, *The Santa Fe Trail*), and the folk music immortalized by scholars such as John Lomax. As the American public’s taste for big screen Westerns grew, enterprising individuals in Virginia City sought to quench the public’s thirst. In so doing, they reinvented their community. It is a curious tale how that came to include the revitalization of the Red Dog Saloon as an early mecca of the 1960s psychedelic scene, a

narrative that through the 1990s was greatly marginalized if not entirely ignored, but rose to significance through film, music, and energetic re-telling.

### *Reimagining the Comstock*

As the American West became the psychic location of the national creation myth, Americans understood their experience and identity as a people as being formed anew and refashioned. First the geography of the West and later, after the end of the Indian Wars and the creation of the reservation system, its ethnography became the subject of a romantic yet simultaneously utilitarian national lore. The artists and writers of the era fashioned the mythic American West that Frederick Jackson Turner later epitomized with the articulation of his frontier thesis. Conceptually the images and the words matched, fitting together to affirm the direction of industrial America, the value and nationalism inherent in its conquest of the continent, the empiricism enunciated in its description of science, and the supposed mystery that enveloped romantic depictions of its territory. Americans came to fathom what they perceived as their unique relationship to the natural world, a firm bond between this visually exceptional region and the people who believed they had mastered it. They learned to revere the physical features that served as the backdrop for their national myths as much as if they had been castles in Europe or the battlefields of the eastern seaboard. (Rothman, 1998, pp. 41-42)

Virginia City was particularly accustomed to tourism due to its international reputation, national prestige as the salvation of the Union, and feats of industrial engineering.

“[They] came to see the mighty Comstock, home of the big bonanza.... Virginia City was a must-see stop on any excursion through the region” (James, 1998, p. 238). Tourists trekked to the area to ride the V & T railroad, too, which offered long vistas and a hair raising journey across the Crown Point Trestle, “one of the engineering wonders of the West” (Beebe, 1949, pp. 54-55; James, 1998, p. 82; Territorial Enterprise, 1869). A structure spanning five hundred feet across the Crown Point Ravine and elevated eighty-five feet off the ground, its image became so iconic to Nevada history that Comstockers

claimed that the trestle featured on Nevada's state seal was, in fact, their impressive Gold Hill jewel.<sup>137</sup> Like the Donner-Reed Party relics, the facts about the Crown Point Trestle actually mattered very little. Some savvy speculators were starting to glimpse the potential of tourism in the vicinity.

As Rothman points out, tourism brings with it certain tensions, particularly between the development of a residential sense of place and the needs of the tourist industry. In the case of Silverland, however, any type of residential sense of place was more or less in tatters by the early twentieth century, and so many members of the community felt they had nothing to lose. During the Depression, Comstockers had taken to cannibalizing their own town, which had a massive psychological and visual impact on the cityscape. To weather tough times, residents started buying dilapidated neighboring houses for back taxes. During long and cold winters, the lumber salvaged from these abandoned residences proved mighty useful. About the time spring arrived, residents had larger yards, too. "The original builders of Virginia City had placed many houses side by side, as they are yet today in the older parts of San Francisco. The Depression-era strategy of house demolition gave homeowners more space and was consistent with the changing ideas of domestic land use in the twentieth century" (James, 1998, p. 252). The result in the twentieth century were Virginian houses sitting rather lopsided on expanded lots, and the loss of architectural features essential to the city's sense of place. In fact, Depression-era cannibalization of parts of the city was so successful that the few houses that remain side-by-side (as they were originally built) appear to be out of place. In order to account for

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<sup>137</sup> As James sardonically observes, "This assertion stood in the face of the facts: the seal's trestle was stone in contrast to Crown Point's wood, and the seal dates to 1866, three years before the construction of the Virginia and Truckee. These details mattered, little, however; the facts be damned!" (James, 1998, p. 83).

this peculiarity, Comstock prospectors of the tourist variety invented one of their more brilliant legends, the tale of the “spite houses.” According to the “spite house” folklorism, two neighbors in a dispute over land built their houses so close together that they appear to be kissing — in spite of themselves. An oral tradition sprang up to replace actual memories of the original city’s construction in just over 100 years.

Despite the cost of the devil’s bargain that Virginians were making, they had precious few options. The town was faint to the point of death. “Regions, communities, and locales welcome tourism as an economic boom, only to find that it irrevocably changes them in unanticipated and uncontrollable ways” (Rothman, 1998, p. 17). For Virginia City, much of this change came in the form of rewritten histories of the city more closely adhering to images of the Wild West associated with Hollywood portrayals of the frontier. Before tourism, this process had begun with the arrival of a handful of well-intentioned, albeit sentimental, Bohemians and intellectuals in the early twentieth century who actively sought any remnants of the Wild West on the Comstock thereby directly (and sometimes indirectly) refashioning Virginia City to meet their preconceived expectations. Some like Beebe and Clegg, emphasized authenticity. Others, like Duncan Emrich, spun a web of fakelore that still buttressed the town.

### *From Bohemians to Hipsters*

“Beginning as early as the 1930s a strange transformation occurred on the Comstock. What had been a dormant, even dying, mining district slowly blossomed into a magnet for artists, literati, and others who wished to experience something of the fast-disappearing Wild West. They were attracted to Virginia City because they believed that

the place had not changed. Of course it had,” Ron James would write (James, 1998, pp. 258-259). The well-educated, cosmopolitan scholar Duncan Emrich arrived with prestigious degrees from Brown, Columbia, and the University of Madrid. Before his fortieth birthday, Emrich had attained the prestigious position of founding director of the Folklore Section of the Library of Congress,<sup>138</sup> and he came to rely on Virginia City old-timers to plump up and color his oral histories of the Wild West. Through dubious interviews at the Delta Saloon, Emrich single-handedly promoted the Comstock legend of Julia Bulette — a small-time, crib prostitute murdered in 1867 — into the Comstock’s most celebrated madam. Emrich remastered her as a woman of such singular taste and sophistication that she could charm the rings off a raccoon’s tail, a blighted heroine surpassing the loveliest “whore with a heart of gold” that Hollywood might throw her direction. Emrich helped along many other Virginian legends thereby melding the fakelore with the folklore (Dorson, 1977, p. 4). Moreover, just when the last nails were being tapped into the Silver Queen’s coffin, two New York dandies of impeccable style and wit, the high society columnist, Lucius Beebe, and the professional photographer, Charles Clegg, rode into town to save the day.

Avid train aficionados, Clegg and Beebe moved from New York’s café society to Virginia City’s sleepy community in 1950, breathing new life into the *Territorial Enterprise*. An incredibly prolific author, Lucius Beebe made such a mark in the train world that he is still considered to be among the greatest and most prolific writers on railroading that the United States has ever produced. In fact, he is attributed by many with being the father of the genre. According to Tony Reevy and Dan Cupper, writers for *Railroad His-*

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<sup>138</sup> Today, it is known as the American Folklife Center.

*tory*, the literature of the railroad buff was initiated by one man, and that man was Beebe (Reevy, 2005, p. 29). In fact, the formula that he and Clegg pioneered to showcase trains is still used today by the one hundred or more pictorial books on railroading published each year. Relying on large-format photographs spaced one to a page with substantial descriptions appearing in related captions, Beebe and Clegg pioneered a medium just as popular today as when they launched it from the Comstock.

Charles Clegg was his lifelong partner and a professional photographer who brought trains to life for Americans across the nation. They collaborated on an impressive list of titles about the American West and its railroads, placing the international spotlight on the Virginia and Truckee railroad during a particularly bleak period in its history (James, 1998, pp. 258-259).<sup>139</sup> “Luscious”<sup>140</sup> Lucius Beebe cut a remarkably fine line with suits custom tailored for him from Savile Row and only the finest accessories (gold watches and chains, derby hats, gloves, cigars, a cane with a gold top, a monocle, and insuperable attitude). Quite a gourmand, Beebe brought fine dining and luxurious style to the Comstock through the renovation of private dining cars in an exuberant, excessive Venetian-Renaissance-Baroque Style complete with a Turkish bath. When not working frantically on their next book, publishing the latest issue of the *Territorial Enterprise*, or finding a few moments to luxuriate on one of their private cars, the duo could be found at their Italianate mansion on B Street, John Piper’s renovated mansion, erected in 1876 by pioneer architect-builder, A. F. Mackay.

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<sup>139</sup> The V & T was retired in 1950, and Beebe and Clegg lamented its passing while metal scrappers dismantled its rails and cars.

<sup>140</sup> This was a sobriquet bestowed upon Lucius Beebe by the famed columnist and radio broadcaster Walter Winchell, both as a tribute to his impeccable style and wardrobes and, perhaps, his openly expressed homosexuality. When confronted about his private life, Beebe’s general response was, “Go to hell!”

Beebe and Clegg were absolutely pivotal to bringing the Comstock back into the national spotlight, and they did so in appropriate style. Within two years of purchasing the *Territorial Express* in 1952, Beebe and Clegg had reestablished its status as a highly popular newspaper on the West Coast, and the rich literary tradition that the Comstock enjoyed during the nineteenth century would be reborn through their efforts just as their predecessors Goodman, DeQuille, and Twain had managed the first great literary boom. Under Beebe's guidance, the *Territorial Enterprise* was characterized as, "pro-prostitution, pro-alcohol, pro-private-railroad cars-for-the-few and fearlessly anti-poor folks, anti-progress, anti-religion, anti-union, anti-diet, anti-vivisection and anti-prepared breakfast food" (Gertz, 2010, n.p.). Beebe's libertarian *je-ne-sais-quoi* perfectly suited the views of area residents who, instead of adhering to the golden rule preferred the silver one: "live and let live." When a conflict arose in the 1950s about the proximity of a brothel to a local school, Beebe famously proclaimed in the *Territorial Enterprise*, "Don't move the girls, move the school" (Gertz, 2010, n.p.). Beebe and Clegg added an extraordinary level of opulence to the area while enriching its literature and sophisticating its image.

Besides Emrich, Beebe and Clegg, and hit-and-miss appearances by one of Nevada's most distinguished literary figures, Walter Van Tilburg Clark, who was teaching at the University of Montana in Missoula during the 1950s but would return to northern Nevada in 1962, numerous outcast elites and soon-to-be divorcés colored the Comstock's socio-cultural landscape while claiming it as a temporary but necessary home during the



Figure 5.3 Charles Clegg (left) and Lucius Beebe at the office of the *Territorial Enterprise* in Virginia City, Nevada. Publicity photograph from their book *Steamcars to the Comstock*.

waiting period for their divorce. According to Andria Daley-Taylor, noted Nevada scholar and one-time inhabitant of Beebe's former Virginia City residence, "[The two men] met kindred spirits on their strolls around Virginia City. There were the remittance kids, children of the rich who were paid to stay away. A Delaware du Pont was tending bar at the Sky Deck Saloon. An Eastern socialite was running a hotel. A chef from Maxim's was cooking at the Bonanza Inn. Numerous members of Café Society were on hand, waiting out their six-week residencies at divorce ranches near Reno.... Soon pals and colleagues from back East were migrating to Virginia City, and townsfolk took it in good stride while hobnobbing with Cole Porter and other celebrities" (Daley-Taylor, 1992, p. 22). This group of nationally and internationally recognized figures were attracted to the Comstock for markedly different reasons than their nineteenth century predecessors, but they contributed to a sophisticated, creative, eclectic community isolated in the mountains above Reno.

Apart from residents brought to the Comstock through exile from wealthy families and/or the seven year itch, some self-fashioned Bohemians and intellectuals made Virginia City their haven and retreat. The Comstock became an end in itself, a destination for the jaundiced or bored. In the city's relative isolation and timelessness, they indulged their deepest need for escapism. They escaped from Cold War politics, an incredibly impressive culture of fear and conformity, and what was fast morphing into a superficial, "plastic" American culture. Artists, authors, and intellectuals found respite from a world that seemed to have gone nearly mad with America's rise to world dominance at the end of World War II. "Many came to the Comstock to sink into the luxurious morass, a thief

of time and ambition that served as refuge for internationally prominent ne'er-do-wells fleeing a high-pressure world" (James, 1998, p. 260).

Placing the Comstock back under the spotlight, however, would come at a great cost for Beebe and Clegg would eventually grow weary of the dramatic rise of tourism to the city, to some degree a direct consequence of reawakening the *Territorial Enterprise* and the V & T. Things would spiral seriously out of control in 1959 with the premier of *Bonanza* on American television sets. Beebe and Clegg were disheartened by the loss of sense of place that they witnessed with the adjustment of their beloved city into a twentieth-century tourist trap. In some cases, business owners went so far as to modify their lovely Victorian brick buildings with false pine fronts evocative of Deadwood, South Dakota, and Tombstone, Arizona thereby participating in what contemporary locals refer to as "Bonanza-fication." Moreover, rubbing elbows with middle-class tourists from suburbia was not a leisure activity of Beebe or Clegg. They simply could not stomach the transformation, and so they retired, by the 1960s, to San Francisco, which marked perhaps *the* culmination of their Comstock adventure. As in the nineteenth century, all good Comstockers eventually fled to San Francisco, finance permitting.

A generation later, a similar group of intellectuals, vagabonds, proto-hippies, and Beatniks would "escape" to Virginia City. Some, like Mark Unobsky, were products of wealthy families who ended up in the area searching for life's meaning while trying to half-heartedly appease their parents' more practical ambitions. Others, such as Don Works, were the children of Bay Area Bohemians who found the area a natural extension of their upbringings and shared belief system. Some, like Chan Laughlin, wished to evade the horrors of modernity (nuclear annihilation, industrialization, environmental devasta-

tion, consumerism, materialism, and California splitting off into the ocean during an earthquake) by escaping to a rural, time-forgotten locale.

All of them — whether Bohemians of the 1940s and '50s or Beatniks and Hipsters of the 1960s — found an appeal in the area's remoteness and its general lack of law enforcement. Coupled with the generous tolerance afforded by locals and the general predisposition to stay out of each other's business, twentieth-century Virginia City became a land of misfits and non-conformists, and area residents did not appear to mind one bit. (If they did, they certainly did not complain much.) According to longtime resident Mary Andreasen, "Virginia City was such a tolerant town then. There were many of those who espoused the bohemian lifestyle, writers and artists, and that's the way it was" (Daley-Taylor, 1992, p. 35). The development of the 1960s Red Dog community that would, in turn, give birth to the psychedelic esthetic and so-called "San Francisco Sound," began with a transformative peyote-eating ritual during the spring of 1963. Relying on Great Basin Native American traditions, which since the time of Wovoka, had turned more and more toward a synthesis of Judeo-Christianity with Native American beliefs and Peyotism, this group of wayward California youth sought a deeper understanding of the world and their place in it and wished to dress the scars of the area's industrial age, re-establishing a healing connection with the Earth all but destroyed during the frenetic days of gold and silver mining.

Like Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, they would leave the safety and security of the San Francisco coffee shop scene behind for the meditative silence of the High Sierra — or, in the case of the Red Doggers, the Virginia Range of the extreme Eastern Sierra (Kerouac, 1976). What they would experience on the Comstock was the heady intoxica-

tion of living far above and away from urbanity and society. At 6,000 plus feet, cities were reduced to anthills, and High Society lost its hypnotic pull, and became something much more like another kind of “high” society.

Quite like Jack Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* protagonist, Ray Smith, who marveled from his perch in the High Sierra at “a sea of marshmallow clouds flat as a roof and extending miles and miles in every direction, creaming all the valleys, what they call low-level clouds, on my 6600-foot pinnacle... all far below me,” the Red Doggers would pause, awestruck by the vistas of the Comstock, its expansive skies, its unequivocal silences. In this place, they could seek real solitude, real space to explore inner lives that were only beginning to mature, inner lives that society generally exhorted them to mistrust and deny. Like Ray Smith, they would come to terms with who they were in the high desert landscape of northern Nevada. “And suddenly I realized I was truly alone and had nothing to do but feed myself and rest and amuse myself, and nobody could criticize. The little flowers grew everywhere around the rocks, and no one had asked them to grow, or me to grow” (Kerouac, 1976, p. 235). They came to the godforsaken place of the pioneers, ironically enough, to find God in the mountains near Silver City, just down Gold Canyon from Virginia City. Moreover, they sought all of the twentieth century amenities (or lack thereof) that set the community distinctly apart from its nineteenth-century shade: silence, isolation, and emptiness. Many of the original participants of the Red Dog scene would credit a Native American church ceremony for first drawing them into the Comstock and then persuading them to stay.

### *The Peyote Way*

The Peyote cult is a syncretic religion that combines native Indian beliefs and practices with Christian symbolism. The cult had its origin in Mexico and by the eighteenth century had crossed the Rio Grande. It has passed from tribe to tribe and has become an intertribal religion. (Rhodes, 1954, p. 12)

Easter 1963.<sup>141</sup> The crowd of about fifty city-dwellers huddled together for warmth and mutual assurance as a characteristically brisk Nevada night settled over the ritual site. The cold contrasted sharply with the sweat lodge ceremony conducted earlier that day where participants descended into a shallow subterranean hut heated by water steamed over fire. Completely devoid of light, the sweat lodge could be a dizzying, confining experience without a deep focus on ritualized singing. A sacred ceremony passed from generation to generation, it came replete with vivid reenactments and imagery. For example, crawling backward into the sweat lodge symbolized a return to the womb of Mother Earth and aided participants in the corporeal preparation necessary for the peyote-eating ritual scheduled for that night.

As the sun's last rays peeked behind the low lying desert mountains, white patches of stars bloomed slowly across the ever-darkening sky, and a lone killdeer screeched out its high-pitched cry. They watched with curiosity as a sand crescent altar measuring about four inches tall by four feet long was molded just west of their meeting place, a large canvas corral. East of the sand crescent altar, a fire appeared in a carefully con-

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<sup>141</sup> The description of a Peyote ritual included in this dissertation is a fictionalized account drawing heavily from the following sources: 1) *Peyote to LSD: A Psychedelic Odyssey*. Films Media Group, 2007; 2) "The History of Peyotism in Nevada" by Omer C. Stewart from *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 25 No 3, 1982; 3) Mary Woks-Covington's *The Life and Times of the Red Dog Saloon* (1995); and, 4) various oral histories that I gathered from original participants.

structed fire circle while the jittery participants continued to herd closer, growing ever more skeptical and restless as temperatures dove and the spicy, sage-tinged air grew breathtakingly cold. It was shockingly opaque, silent (apart from nervous whispers), and wild — especially for metropolitan people of the San Francisco scene.

Silver City residents and fellow Bohemians, Don Works and Doyle Nance, reminded their guests that this would be a profoundly transformative experience. Milan Melvin — a wiry, dark-haired youth — was not too sure about this whole idea. A warm bed, and a good night's sleep was looking mighty attractive at the moment, and Milan wasn't the only person thinking this way. As the last rays of light fell furtively behind the navy blue ranges to the West, Don and Doyle directed the gathering of close friends and family toward the east entrance of the canvas structure where the roadman — the principle officiator of the ritual — lifted his voice heavenward. Launching into a solemn convocation to Jesus, God, Mary, and Peyote, and appealing for guidance and enlightenment throughout the ritual, the roadman's voice filled the air. This reminded the less religious members of the group that, indeed, Peyotism marked a sacred rite, a revered initiation neither to be taken lightly nor ingested for recreational purposes.

According to the officiating Natives, it was sacred. It brought knowledge to the living. It cured diseases. It united various religious systems. It was a messenger to supernatural powers, hence the invocation of Jesus and God during the ritual. Finally, they claimed that it wove healing ties between the people and the land — a particularly appealing and timely concept in the post-WWII nuclear age.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> *Peyote to LSD: A Psychedelic Odyssey*. Films Media Group, 2007. *Films On Demand*. Web. 28 August 2013. < <http://0-digital.films.com.innopac.library.unr.edu/PortalPlaylists.aspx?aid=11123&xtid=45410> >.

How Peyotism ultimately came to Nevada is a mystery although anthropologist Omer Stewart made a hearty attempt at tracing its origins during his career (O. C. Stewart, 1982). The Peyote ritual in the New World can be traced back to Texas and northern Mexico by Uto-Aztecan peoples who lived along the Rio Grande and consumed *Lophophora williamsii* during purification ceremonies. Stewart knew of its introduction to tribes in Nevada by two members of the Washoe tribe, Ben Lancaster and Sam Dick, in October of 1936. Lancaster and Dick, in turn, were introduced to Peyotism by residents of the Uintah and Ouray Ute reservations located in Randlett, Utah. Yet, Peyotism was clearly a concern of Nevada reservation officials as far back as 1917, when Special Agent Dorrington cleared Wovoka (a.k.a. Jack Wilson) of any involvement in the use of this drug.

*Use of peyote and mescal.* There is absolutely no evidence indicating that either peyote or mescal is used on the reservations or that the Indians know anything about it. ... Jack Wilson resides in Mason Valley... He is the 'Messiah' and the originator of the 'Ghost Dance.' He appears to attract but little attention from Indians in this locality but apparently has considerable influence among distant tribes and he seemingly keeps in close touch with them; that he is corresponding with certain individuals in Montana, South Dakota, Wyoming and Oklahoma... It is further learned that even delegations have paid him a visit... He is also known as a 'medicine man' and practices some among his people, but most of his time is believed to be spent visiting the distant and more prosperous tribes and individuals from whom he procures large sums of money... Jack Wilson is a very dignified and striking Indian... From all accounts he has always been friendly with whites.. . A recent picture of Jack, taken by myself, is attached. It cost me the sum of one dollar, that is Jack made a 'touch' for that amount after the picture had been taken... After careful inquiry I am satisfied that Jack Wilson does not use peyote or mescal, nor has he encouraged its use by others... he is very temperate in his habits... he is constantly advising the Indians to abstain from the use of all drugs and intoxicants. (O. C. Stewart, 1982, n.p.)

Clearly, some reservation officials were worried that a rise in Peyote use among Native Americans could spark the same kind of tragedy that the Ghost Dance and Ghost Shirts

were purported to have brought about at Wounded Knee. They wanted to blame somebody, and Wovoka was the first to come to mind. By most accounts, however, the Native American Church and its practice of Peyotism originated in Oklahoma with Chief Quannah Parker.

### *Following the Road Man*

Drums, Native Americans believe, carry the heartbeat of Mother Earth, calling the nations and spirits together. (Ungless, 2013, p. 80)

The road man called down blessings for health and longevity. Upon entering the canvas corral, participants walked clockwise to their seats and were instructed to follow this clockwise path when entering and leaving the structure throughout the night. Arranging themselves on blankets oriented west of the altar, three of the four ceremonial officials — the road man, the cedar man, and the chief drummer — commenced purifying the equipment to be used during the ceremony with cedar smoke. Cedar smoke is believed to assist the flight of prayers upward. The fourth official, known as the fireman or doorman, positioned himself just inside the entrance to the makeshift structure. Some of the participants in the evening's Native American Church relaxed, entranced by the odd array of ritual items being doused with smoke — a water drum, some gourd rattles, a staff, some bird-tail feather fans, dried Peyote, Bull Durham tobacco, and a large-sized Peyote button to be placed on the altar.

As the room filled with Bull Durham tobacco smoke, participants were gently commanded to pray. Then, the road man passed the sack of Peyote buttons clockwise around the room. As the Peyote sack made its way past each devotee, they drew out four

buttons — a sacred number — that looked like dried peaches, tasted bitter, and were consumed in solemn prayer. Kneeling, the road man grabbed a three-foot staff and a fan, which he held in his left hand, while shaking the rattle and singing four hymns four times apiece accompanied by the chief drummer. Then, each male participant in the Peyote ritual imitated the road man's example — holding the same items — while accompanied on the drum by his neighbor to the right. Singing was an essential part of the all-night ritual with one midnight break to drink water.

Peyote songs were always sung in this way by individuals rather than as a chorus, and the mild vocal style employed is one of the main characteristics distinguishing peyote songs from other Native American vocal music. The ritual singing, drumming, and praying continued until dawn with four stated intervals during the ceremony when the leader sang special songs: "Opening Song," "Night Water Song," "Morning Sunrise Song," and "Closing Song." Since the Native American church was an intertribal organization where the songs were passed along through careful oral modelling, the style of peyote songs remained relatively consistent from tribe to tribe and included the following sonic elements and rhythmic characteristics: (1) a fast tempo; (2) accompaniment in eighth-note units that maintained a sense of speed; (3) consistent use of eighth and quarter-note values throughout; and, (4) a return to the tonic at the ends of phrases. In terms of lyrical patterns, they used many paired phrases and included markedly long and flat codas with the standard repetition of the phrase, "*he ne ne yo wa*" at the end of each song. This phrase is akin to the "Amen" that one hears at the end of some sacred Christian music.

When dawn broke, the road man completed the ceremony by symbolically brushing sorrow and pain from initiates using a sacred eagle fan (Rhodes, 1954).<sup>143</sup>

Having passed through the first two stages of ritual liminality — separation and crossing the limen — consumption of a communal meal represented steps in the process toward reaggregating ritual initiands (Lape, 1998, pp. 259-260; V. Turner, 1969). A ceremonial meal of sanctified water, fruit, meat, and maize was passed clockwise to be shared among the attendees. Each participant in the all-night Peyote ritual consumed four spoonfuls of the food and four sips of the water, potent symbols of the sacred number. Following this ceremonial meal, the liquid contents of the disassembled water drum were poured over the sand altar. About noon, female members of the church offered a banquet to church participants, and, then, they returned home, utterly transformed (O. C. Stewart, 1982, n.p.).

A ritual cleansing of body and soul, the event permitted participants to reach beyond otherwise selfish existences — to melt into the land, to integrate into the universe, and to embrace the brotherhood of humanity — in essence, they experiences *communitas*. The fifty initiates who emerged from the ceremony were converted to a new way of thinking, living, and acting, and they would never see the world in quite the same way again. The majority of those who participated came from the Bay Area, and, going into the ceremony, they had had no clue how superficial or urbane their existences were until the mirror was held up that night. For some, it came close to being *the* only authentic ex-

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<sup>143</sup> *Peyote to LSD: A Psychedelic Odyssey*. Films Media Group, 2007. *Films On Demand*. Web. 28 August 2013. < <http://0-digital.films.com.innopac.library.unr.edu/PortalPlaylists.aspx?aid=11123&xtid=45410> >.

perience they had ever known. The ritual left participants hungry, ravenous for authentic, tangible connections — connections American pop culture and consumerism could not provide. They bonded with the earth and one another and emerged a combination of what Milan Melvin called, “cowboy and Indian” (Works, 1996). Inevitably, they wanted more.

Many of those newly hungered participants in the Native American Peyote-eating ritual of Easter 1963 became Red Doggers two years later when a bizarre new Counter-culture of sorts began manifesting in San Francisco, California, and Virginia City, Nevada. The ancient communal sparks between these two cities would beautifully and wildly rekindle when the nomadic youth of the former re-staked the bay area’s hedonistic claim on the latter, retooling the exurb to meet the needs and desires of a new generation.

The Comstock had three main selling points. First and foremost, it had all of the trappings of an amenity community where the attraction was the minimum, rather than the maximum. Rent was cheap; the town was drowsy to the point of death; and, police officers were neither proactive nor generally present. Second, the community was tolerant and accommodating. Alcohol was readily available and generously dispensed to young and legal alike; hot springs nearly encircled the vicinity; and, the major drug dispensaries of the West Coast were simply a hop, skip, and a jump away. Third, the community provided unrivaled opportunities to budding professional musicians blazing a new path. The Red Dog Saloon offered the best (and only) paying gig for a proto-rock acid band on the West Coast; it was conveniently close enough to San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle to make travel by fans and interested parties possible; and, it was far enough away to discourage parents and authority figures from surprise visits.

A “Mother Lode” of adolescent opportunity, Virginia City permitted Red Doggers to develop a unique communal identity while exploring uncharted means of satisfying the hungers exacerbated by urbanity, consumerism, and superficiality. In keeping with Turner’s claim that, “each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time,” it is crucial to digress ever so slightly into an exploration of the mid-1960s culture that confronted the group who would coalesce to become the Red Doggers (Billington, 1961, p. 17; F. J. Turner, 1891).

### *The 1960s Folk Music Revival*

Woodie Guthrie once said the following about where his musical inspiration originated:

I get my words and tunes from the hungry folks and they get the credit for all I pause to scribble down...music is some kind of electricity that makes a radio out of a man and the dial is in his head and he just sings according to how he’s feeling. The best stuff you can sing about is what you saw and if you look hard enough you can see plenty to sing about. (as cited in Klein, 1980, p. 173)

Middle class life in 1960s San Francisco was neither one of famine nor poverty. San Francisco highways were not lined with the haunting faces of famished Okies fleeing the Dustbowl, and bread lines did not snake circuitously down Market Street — or, the Haight-Ashbury, yet, for that matter. Psychologically, emotionally, culturally, and spiritually, however, many would argue that America had never produced so underfed or malnourished a generation. The malaise of bourgeois affluence — when married to plastic consumerism, atomic anxieties, an increasing sterile secularism, and Red Scare hysteria — culminated in an arid lack of community and a hollow popular culture landscape

cloaked in utter superficiality. All the shiny household conveniences and automobiles in the world could not begin to fill the deep, glaring vacancies experienced by 1950s American youth, many removed from extended families to suburban retreats.

But, of course, how one viewed the 1950s depended, ultimately, on one's perspective, and one's perspective mattered on where one was located. So, again, place mattered as it always, inevitably, does. Americans had never enjoyed such affluence. They could buy cars, televisions, washing machines, and a wide variety of conveniences for the first time. They would have babies, lots of them, and then raise them together with the neighbors' children in neat, symmetrical suburbs. Barbeques and parties marked attempts to forget about the hardships of the Great Depression and war years. Jazz was hot. Bebop was even hotter, and Rock 'n' Roll was seducing the nation's youth. The Beatniks moped around doing their Counterculture thing, but they were generally fairly easy to ignore as their numbers were small, and they tended to exist in a semi-nomadic state. The generation that survived two world wars and a depression wanted to give their children everything that they never got, or even dreamed of getting. Perhaps, some of them got too much...

Who would have guessed that a number of blazes burning early in the next era — Vietnam, the Civil Rights Movement, the Draft — would set the Counterculture world afire? Joan Didion would write, "We were seeing the desperate attempt of a handful of pathetically unequipped children to create a community in a social vacuum" (Didion, 1968, p. 94). In the Haight-Ashbury of 1968 — an overburdened neighborhood mired in poverty, rampant drug abuse, gang rape, violence, and death — these attempts did, indeed, look desperate and bleak.

Prior to 1968, alternative communities faced and conquered some of these same challenges by recognizing the power of liminal space — both temporal and geographic— and creating it through music and communal rituals, thereby, establishing small tribes unified by elements of *communitas* (e.g. social equality, solidarity, and togetherness) rather than traditional societal constructs such as class, gender, religion, race, and/or ethnicity. The production of place through music and ritual was not something new to the Comstock. Entertainment and music, in particular, had served as twin nuclei to an otherwise wildly disjointed grouping of peoples in the 1800s. In the twentieth century, and particularly the 1960s, all Americans stood at the limen between the ways that their predecessors had previously structured thought, identity, and community and how they would need to do so thereafter.

A pivotal decade in the history of the United States, the 1960s was, in and of itself, a liminal experience, and those who passed through this time would never be the same. Within the 1960s, too, there were many layers of liminal experience with a variety of outcomes: Draft dodgers who fled to Canada, Vietnam Vets, those who participated in the Civil Rights Movement, New Left, and/or Counterculture. The bonds that they forged with fellow initiands surpassed all social stratification, custom, or ethnicity. Rather, an overwhelming sense of shared humanity drew them together.

During the 1960s, members of many budding Counterculture communities relied upon shared psychedelic drug experiences to access a de-structured state of liminality, foster *communitas*, and create distinctions between their small configurations and society at large. “The world is sheerly divided into those who have had *the experience* and those who have not — those who have been through that door... this amazing experiment in

consciousness was going on, out on a frontier neither they nor anybody else ever heard of before” (Wolfe, 1968, p. 53). In its simplest form, *communitas* was established through experimentation with drugs, and, more specifically, psychedelics, in self-made communities such as the Merry Pranksters and the Pine Streeters where all members shared a certain level of equality separate from their past, lineage, and affluence. As Dr. Timothy Leary, Owsley Stanley III, and Ken Kesey all worked independently to democratize the use of hallucinogens, the question in San Francisco soon became, “Can you pass the acid test?” — “happenings” became liminal spaces wherein Bay Area youth explored consciousness and alternate realities while building small communities of like-minded individuals. These represented fairly tight-knit collections of people who related to each other as members of a family or tribe. They were the pioneers of a new “frontier” (note Wolfe’s use of the term in the quotation above), a frontier of the mind accessed through psychedelics and hallucinogens. Their group identity was defined through liminality, *communitas*, and the esoteric knowledge acquired through such shared, ritualized experiences. Guitarist for Quicksilver Messenger Service, Gary Duncan described the early San Francisco scene as a “secret society”:

You’d go to say, 1090 Page Street, open up the door, and there’d be a fourteen-bedroom Victorian house with something different going on in every room: painters in one room talking to each other, musicians in another room. It was really cool, and to all outward appearances, there was nothing happening. It was like a secret society. Things like that have to exist secretly. That’s why when they brought it into the public eye, it sort of went away. ... That early side of San Francisco was never really publicized. There was a while when the place was just totally free. You could go anywhere, do anything you wanted, and nobody hassled you. The spotlight wasn’t on everybody. (C. Perry, 1984, p. 25)

On the Comstock, the experience of liminality — vis-à-vis experimentation with psychedelics, especially in the early 1960s — tended to be highly structured by the time-honored traditions of the Native American church's Peyote-eating rituals, which some Native American church officials argue stretched back about 5,500 years. Later, with the establishment of the Red Dog Saloon, a safe haven of personal expression, experimentation, and self-realization birthed the psychedelic aesthetic. Those who became known as Red Doggers were assembled — many even handpicked by Chan Laughlin — to create their own tribe, their own family, and they relied on the sacred practices of the Native American Church to structure and provide meaning for this alternate vision and deconstructed community.

What is, perhaps, most interesting in all of this is *how* the Red Dog's alternate community would be reconfigured. Its participants looked back nostalgically to the recent past, the past of Turner's Frontier Thesis where pioneers carved their very identities as Americans from the rough-hewn landscapes of the American wilderness. Moreover, Red Doggers enthusiastically embraced notions of Montesquieu's cultural relativity and Rousseau's "noble savage" readily manifested in their costumes of choice, generally a blending of Native American and American frontier elements with long hair, turquoise, leather, beads, and firearms. The community, and its individuals, were attempting to re-make themselves and using time-honored traditions such as ritual, music, and drugs to aid them.

The Native American Church and Peyotism, in general, had a dramatic effect on the community's development. When Chan Laughlin originally travelled to Stinson Beach, California to recruit Jenna Worden to cook at the Red Dog, she remembers him

using language evocative of the 1963 Peyote-eating ceremony to recruit her. “Chan was the road man. He was looking for the people” (Works, 1996). The road man, as discussed earlier in this chapter, provided a physical model for male participants in the ritual to emulate. Moreover, he represented a spiritual shepherd for those he guided through this transformative, liminal space.

But psychedelics and religion were not the only means that San Franciscans and Comstockers used to navigate the liminal and build a cohesive spirit of *communitas*. The act of musicking represented another means of creating and navigating a transformative liminal space, and the Red Dog Saloon, first and foremost, provided an excellent platform for the exploration of previously un-forged musical frontiers. According to June Boyce-Tillman, “the implications of the use of a liminal music space for cultural and personal transformation [include] its relationship between this space and the everyday world, the loss of boundaries, collective vulnerability, the opportunity to try out new personas, the handing over of responsibility to a higher power and the capacity for joyful play and the possibility of empowerment” (Boyce-Tillman, 2009, p. 184). Musicking — in combination with psychedelics and structured religious rituals — provided a powerful means of establishing a community of like-minded individuals whose shared experiences forged an incredibly strong bond of *communitas*.

### *Music, The Projection of American Interests, and Containment Policy*

The promoters, musicians, organizers, activists, and “happening” creators who went to the Comstock in the 1960s were hardly ingénues, but they came out of a confusing time in American society. While 1945 saw the end of World War II, and flung suburban com-

placency around the continent, it did little to pave over insecurity, paranoia, and fear of atomic obliteration and the Soviet Union. Quite the opposite: It sowed fertile seeds of mistrust, which emerged as film noir, urban unrest, and ultimately, an intergenerational gap between what news anchor Tom Brokaw dubbed “The Greatest Generation” and their offspring — the war-year children and the subsequent Baby Boomers. It was they who would explore life beyond the Beat Generation and go on to create the Red Dog experience. It was an uneven road, and the underlayment merits mention.

The Baby Boomer generation grew up subconsciously sensing that something was terribly wrong. They felt their parents’ anxieties and growing dissatisfaction, but they did not know how to express these subconscious empathies. Moreover, they were not allowed to do so. “With a strong economy in the 1950s and more disposable income than previous generations, boomer parents who had long delayed gratification could finally afford the American dream: marriage, children, automobiles, televisions, and homes in the suburbs” (McWilliams, 2000, p. 11). Baby Boomer parents wanted their children to be well-educated, to go to college, to pursue excellence and continue to improve their family’s status. Combined with the stressors of life during the Atomic Age, the Baby Boomers faced pressures to conform to a very narrow definition of what it meant to be a successful American. Instinctively, some argued that they were being set up for failure and trapped by conformity.

They were a generation who cut their teeth on unprecedented technologies and the freedoms that came with them — radios, automobiles, televisions, mass communications, and pop culture. Yet, just beneath the surface of the plastic paradigm, there seethed a multitude of subversive, non-conformist strains of intellect struggling to burst free. Ironi-

cally, in their attempt to adhere to their parents' prescribed goals for them, the Baby Boomers ended up — in unprecedented numbers — flocking to institutions of higher education where they would soon be exposed to some of these underground ideas, many revolutionary. Baby Boomers had already been subtly introduced to some of these concepts through covertly packaged mainstream media in the form of movies and music during the 1950s. So, hearing these same ideas overtly articulated by university intellectuals had a deep psychological impact. It was like a “double whammy” of déjà vu, and the “double whammy” was recognition of the “why” behind the subconscious dissatisfaction they had long perceived in their parents, their communities, and their own lives.

This was not a traditional generational rebellion. At some point between 1945 and 1967 we had somehow neglected to tell these children the rules of the game we happened to be playing. Maybe we had stopped believing in the rules ourselves, maybe we were having a failure of nerve about the game. Maybe there were just too few people around to do the telling. These were children who grew up cut loose from the web of cousins and great-aunts and family doctors and lifelong neighbors who had traditionally suggested and enforced the society's values. There are children here who have moved around a lot, *San Jose, Chula Vista, here*. They are less in rebellion against the society than ignorant of it, able only to feed back certain of its most publicized self-doubts, *Vietnam, Saran-Wrap, diet pills, the Bomb*. (Didion, 1968, p. 123)

But, perhaps, the 1956 B-rated Science Fiction film *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* epitomizes the type of veiled message hanging in the air of mid-twentieth century America best. In his article on the roots of folk music, Ray Pratt argues that nothing captured the mixed anxiety Americans felt about choosing to conform or face assimilation quite like it. Audiences could not help but relate to the palpable fear of hapless victims facing zombie-like existences interminably manipulated by the foreign beings populating their bodies. Going to college would allow them to recognize, articulate, and act upon these subconscious fears for the first time. “Popular films have always to some

degree been significant sources of data on popular perceptions, both as reflective of astute market sensibilities of the film industry (reinforced in later years by sophisticated audience preference and market research) and as exercising an influence on consciousness by providing substitute imagery reinforcing images and stereotypes. Before television became universal films were widely viewed; they thus constitute indicators of images widely held by the public” (Pratt, 1990, p. 133).

There were a handful of Beatniks, however, who did take the plunge, and the sum result of the media blitz would be obscenity trial centered around “Howl” and self-imposed exile for Ginsberg to Paris. Over time, the Beatniks, however, had attracted a small following of Baby Boomers to their circle who they somewhat derisively referred to as Hipsters. Like their Beat “parents,” Hipsters dabbled in drugs as a venue for escapism. They found escape through fantasy, art, and music, too.

### *The American Dream and Other Fictions*

Creating this new community through ritual, spiritual, and musical transformation allowed members of the early Red Dog community to reject the superficial atomic-plastic-nightmare that emerged following WWII when the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) reigned with terror, frustrated housewives across America popped Thorazine, and children, confused and scared, crouched under school desks during bomb drills. Conformity, conformity, conformity: “The incredible postwar American electro-pastel surge into the suburbs! — it was sweeping the Valley, with superhighways, dreamboat cars, shopping centers, soaring thirty-foot Federal Sign & Signal Company electric super-sculptures — Eight New Plexiglas Display Features! — a surge of freedom and mo-

bility, of cars and the money to pay for them and the time to enjoy them and a home where you can laze in a rich pool of pale wall-to-wall or roar through the technological wonderworld in motor launches and... private planes” (Wolfe, 1968, p. 37). Looking in every direction, intellectuals, artists, and free thinkers found themselves increasingly culturally alienated and disenfranchised by post-WWII America. The 1940s was when some, like Emrich, Beebe, and Clegg, started fleeing to Virginia City; they were the vanguard in a migration that would be rounded out by musicians who followed along, making the same journey in the mid- to late-1960s.

By March 25, 1957, American ears rang with a flood of smut they could not forget, gushing from a San Francisco courtroom. In particular, they argued over the obscenity of the phrase, “who let themselves be f--ked in the a-- by saintly motorcyclists and screamed with joy,” as their rejected national poet, Allen Ginsberg, stood trial (Ginsberg, 1959, p. 13). Many wondered, in hushed tones, how such obscenity could have been borne upon the wings of American eagles; smaller groups wondered how American free speech would be secured or preserved through such a “dog and pony show.” Although Judge Clayton W. Horn ruled that the poem was not obscene on October 3, 1957, the Beatnik community of San Francisco’s North Beach, which initially came together so haphazardly in 1954 to launch what would become a San Francisco Renaissance,<sup>144</sup> had already lost polarity, with a center that would not hold (Davidson, 1991). Jack Kerouac was beginning a steep descent into alcoholism in small-town Florida, and Alan Ginsberg would shock the world when he and his lifelong partner, Peter Orlovsky, abandoned San

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<sup>144</sup> The San Francisco Renaissance included such notables as Peter Orlovsky, Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch, Bob Kaufman, and A. D. Winans.

Francisco for Paris, France. Small bands of Hipsters left in the wake of their Beatnik forefathers wandered like forgotten orphans down Pine Street and the Haight-Ashbury looking for a new burst of cultural brilliance that they could get behind.

Despite an abundance of new luxury items from televisions to cars to refrigerators to washing machines, a general increase in affluence among the middle class, and a shift toward materialism and consumerism, not everyone was happy as the Hipsters and Beats of San Francisco so aptly demonstrated. Therein, perhaps, lay some of their appeal. The dangers of the world had increased exponentially, uncontrollably, and irrevocably with the introduction of nuclear technology. Tensions were further exacerbated by the polarization of the globe into two distinctly opposed ideological camps, the United States of America and the Soviet Union. Communism had to be contained internationally just as Countercultural dissent needed to be contained domestically.

### *Dumping the American Dream and Other Heresies*

Despite a general disenchantment with America's empty popular mainstream among members of a growing Counterculture, they could not avoid its influences entirely — they didn't even try. By the early 1960s, movies irrevocably changed the way that young Americans saw the world and their own lives. Spoon-fed Hollywood fare, American youth could never go back. They wanted to make their own movies, and they wanted to star in them. Some did. There was a lot of make-believe.

Up in Virginia City, the Red Doggers played out their wildest frontier fantasies — pulp fiction and film-western ethos — flavored with a dash of psychedelics. Chan Laughlin, a kind of consigliere of the Red Dog Saloon, described the scene: "We were the char-

acters that sat around in the saloon down the street waiting for the boss to come and tell us to rustle the little girl's cattle so that she couldn't make the mortgage payment, you know. Everybody walked into the place and knew exactly where they were right away. Lynn Hughes' role was Miss Kitty in this thing. We were all doing all of the amalgamated Westerns that we'd grown up with in style including sitting in front of the place cleaning our guns at dawn" (Works, 1996, 0:52:12).

Picking up threads from the Beats — notably Neal Cassady — but whisking in a dose of Stanford University literary society, Ken Kesey and *The Merry Pranksters of La Honda* did much the same thing, only they took their movie on the road. "The fact that they were all high on speed or grass, or so many combinations thereof that they couldn't keep track, made it seem like a great secret life. It was a great secret life. The befuddled citizens could only see the outward manifestations of the incredible stuff going on inside their skulls. They were all now characters in their own movies or the Big Movie. They took on new names and used them," Tom Wolfe would write (Wolfe, 1968, p. 77). The bottom line was escapism: Escape from the vacuous, hollow-eyed Age of Anxiety so expertly foreshadowed in Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. Escape from the constant progress of industrialization with its disenfranchisement of the people from their land, their traditions, their families. Escape from what seemed more and more a meaningless Cold War sprawled out in unknown Southeast Asia where American youth went and came home dead. Tensions, pressures, stresses, and a cultural vacuum rendered escape necessary for many, in order to sustain any reasonable level of sanity. Returning to the land, connecting with a simpler time, and ignoring the world around appealed to Red Doggers.

Burning their candles at either end in the Bacchanal haze surrounding Ken Kesey and his acid-craving Maenads, the Merry Pranksters preferred to ride madcap, drug-induced waves of societal slippage — not quite to the point of depravity. Both were movies with larger-than-life actors and extravagant sound stages. Both the Red Dog and the Prankster community were responses to an empty, glib world — disconnected from the land, society, family, spirituality, meaning, purpose — staples of human existence since time immemorial. If the world wasn't ending, it certainly felt like it might. The retreat into fantasy and play represented a means of psychologically dealing with the possibility of annihilation and impotence when faced with a government and Establishment bent on projecting force and war.

Not only was the Baby Boom generation a disenchanted one, it was massive in numbers and restless in expectation, an explosive generation about to come into a fuller realization of its power and ability for self-determination. Yet, there was merely a breath of promise of these coming events in San Francisco in early 1965. Yes, the Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, but it appeared distant and disconnected from the lives of many young, affluent bourgeois American youth. Perhaps, the student radicalism hitting campuses across the nation had a greater impact on them, and, of course, Lyndon B. Johnson's decision to bomb North Vietnam and then dive headlong into a ground conflict by spring of the same year left greater shock waves still. But many coming of age Americans were more concerned with the Beatles, mod fashion, and a rising contemporary art movement than anything bordering on a Counterculture, let alone open revolution: "The pop/camp art movement had spawned a national fad for corny old Batman movies, and there was a whole new wave of rock and roll coming from England, of all unexpected

places, led by the wistful-irreverent Beatles and accompanied by a raft of silly, energetic-looking Mod fashions” (C. Perry, 1984, p. 4). Life was surprisingly unexamined by many youth up to this point.

### *In 1965 ...*

A sense of purpose — in public policy and in popular culture — is consistent with the rather comfortable way that 1965 commenced. On January 4<sup>th</sup> of that year, President Lyndon B. Johnson delivered an impressive — especially in its ambitious scope — State of the Union address in which he outlined his vision for a new “Great Society” where millions of Americans would be rescued from poverty and unemployment through a variety of expansive government programs. In order to achieve these utopian goals, Johnson outlined a budget calling for the greatest increase in domestic welfare programs since Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s iconic New Deal. Johnson first spoke of his ambitious domestic plan on May 7, 1964 at Ohio University in Athens, where he stated, “And with your courage and with your compassion and your desire, we will build the Great Society. It is a Society where no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled.” In another speech at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, on May 22, 1964, he stated, “We are going to assemble the best thought and broadest knowledge from all over the world to find these answers. I intend to establish working groups to prepare a series of conferences and meetings — on the cities, on natural beauty, on the quality of education, and on other emerging challenges. From these studies, we will begin to set our course toward the Great Society” (L. B. Johnson, 1964). It all sounded *really* good.

The final eradication of poverty was to be Johnson's greatest contribution to the history of the United States, and it was desperately needed in what sociologist Michael Harrington has aptly termed the "Other America." While White middle class youth languished in the *ennui* of suburban life, another America of ravaged communities and spirit-breaking poverty existed, tucked away from the public eye. According to Harrington, this "new segregation of poverty [was] populated by failures, by those driven from the land and bewildered by the city, by old people suddenly confronted with the torments of loneliness and by minorities facing a wall of prejudice" (Harrington, 1962, p. 4). What's more, Harrington feared that "the middle class no longer [understood] that poverty exists" (Harrington, 1962, p. 10). As many as 40 to 50 million impoverished Americans suffered from inadequate housing, malnutrition, and insufficient medical care. They desperately clung to the promises that Johnson made. Yet, just over a month later, on February 7<sup>th</sup>, the President ordered the first air strikes against North Vietnam in retaliation for the deaths of thirty-two Americans at the hands of the Vietcong during an attack on the U.S. military barracks at Pleiku. Very quickly, the United States marched into the mire of a Southeast Asian war in order to contain the Communist threat of global domination; the effort to eradicate poverty in the United States was utterly lost in the ensuing drama. In a satirical nod to what would become Johnson's failed war on poverty, six performers — Grace Slick, Jerry Slick, Darby Slick, David Miner, Brad DuPont, and Peter van Gelder — soon founded the Bay Area proto-acid rock band, the Great Society.

Just two weeks after ordering the first air strikes against North Vietnam, President Johnson dispatched American planes to begin coating Vietnam's lush jungles with an incendiary chemical known as Napalm. By March 8<sup>th</sup>, he sent the first American combat

troops to South Vietnam raising the total troop count to about 27,000 pairs of boots. By April 1<sup>st</sup>, about a week after the first antiwar “teach-in” at the University of Michigan, the number of American troops in Vietnam increased by 20,000. The inward focus of Johnson’s “Great Society” quickly turned outward, dematerializing into a cumbersome, spastic war effort impeded by an administration that neither conceded failure nor was willing to take the type of decisive action necessary to win. America found itself ebbing into the Southeast Asian quick sand of Vietnam.

By May 4<sup>th</sup>, Congress approved Johnson’s request for an additional \$700 million to fund the war effort, an effort already sucking an estimated \$1.5 billion in annual costs out of the nation. Instead of leading impoverished Americans to a promised land of opportunity and affluence for all, Johnson became the pied piper of America’s youth coercing them into a Communist conflict in far distant Vietnam.<sup>145</sup> Armed Forces Day — May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1965 — was marked not only by flags and fanfare but antiwar protests. Still, the administration remained undeterred, raising military personnel commitments from 75,000 to 125,000 by July 28<sup>th</sup> and doubling the monthly draft quota. It was estimated that 503 Americans had already been killed in the conflict.

Had Dan Hicks, the drummer for the Charlatans and soon-to-be Red Dogger, *not* managed to flunk the intelligence portion of his draft induction test the same week he graduated from college (go figure!), he most certainly would have had a different summer of 1965. The truth is, while the Red Doggers started to coalesce on the Comstock where

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<sup>145</sup> In the oldest versions of the Pied Piper of Hamelin tale dating from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Piper used the sweet melodies of his pipe to lure the children of the town to a cave in the woods where they were never seen again.

they would explore new music, community, and drugs, some young Americans prepared for combat, heading through a very different rite of passage.

While the Draft hung over the heads of male youth during the 1960s, it actually affected a relatively small percentage of individuals. “Between August 1964, when Congress ratified the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, to the withdrawal of the last U.S. forces from Vietnam in March 1973, 27,000,000 American men were of draft age. Of this number, 8,600,000 served in the military, and 2,150,000 of those were assigned to a tour of duty in Vietnam” (McWilliams, 2000, p. 13). The numbers boiled down to about thirty-two percent of all eligible men actually serving in the military and, of that number, only about eight percent doing a tour in Vietnam. Of these figures, however, a disproportionate number of African Americans and impoverished whites served in the military and Vietnam, in particular. On the other hand, draft deferments were often more readily accessible to members of the white middle and upper classes, and famously, the sons of several Congressmen.

Such statistics elicit a common pattern of the 1960s in terms of participation, and this is a reality that the media sometimes consciously avoided in its reportage of contemporary events, preferring instead to focus on the salacious, outlandish behavior of a thin slice of American youth. The Baby Boomer generation was not a gigantic monolith of hippies looming over the American landscape, proclaiming one ideology and sharing in one massive war experience. Statistics about active anti-war protests on campuses perfectly illustrate this point. For example, in 1968, 101 college campuses saw 221 major antiwar protests involving approximately 39,000 students, which represents about one percent of the college population at the time. “Between 1965 and 1968, when the war in

Vietnam escalated and White House war planners dramatically increased the monthly draft quotas, no more than 3 percent of college students considered themselves activists” (McWilliams, 2000, p. 12). In the wake of the Kent State shooting, only about one quarter of the estimated 7.9 million students enrolled in American colleges demonstrated. “Most boomers were part of a silent majority who neither participated in demonstrations against the war in Vietnam nor fought in it” (McWilliams, 2000, p. 13).

Still, there were a variety of dissenting groups among the boomers — with various levels of flexibility in terms of membership and community identity — who actively sought media recognition in order to bring the causes that they espoused to the attention of the mainstream such as the New Left and the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). The Counterculture tended to opt out of politics altogether, but still tended to receive a disproportionately high level of treatment in the media because their actions, costumes, and lifeways appeared so incredibly outlandish to outsiders. Generally, however, the Red Doggers fell into none of these groups. Instead, they chose to withdraw from politics and to escape into experimental communities bonded by shared liminal experiences through ritual (such as Peyotism and the use of hallucinogens) and music.

### *‘Musicking,’ Liminal Space, and Performing the Comstock*

The act of making music or ‘musicking’ in a liminal space, a space that is timeless, free of boundaries and societal strictures, contained the potential for both cultural and personal transformation. Always supremely important to the experience of living on the Comstock, music produced a liminal space during live performances at the Red Dog Saloon, which inspired audiences to explore the limen between reality and fantasy, break down

the boundaries between performers and their audiences, experience collective vulnerability, and play with a variety of persona and identities. Empowered by their musical environment, Red Dog audience members experimented with new concepts of performance, audience participation, and interactive entertainment thus interfacing with their musical environment and one another in deeply significant, transformative ways.

Meanwhile musicians such as the Charlatans and Big Brother and the Holding Company performed songs whose lyrics and music were endowed with multiple layers of meaning, showcasing a variety of perspectives, and creating new postmodern, psychedelic musical landscapes before postmodernism and psychedelia were even popular. One of the Charlatans' most powerful and prescient songs would be the aptly titled, "We're Not on the Same Trip." While the song appears, on the surface, to be a cheeky pop tune about individuals out of synch with one another, its lyrics are incredibly relevant within the context of the mediatization of San Francisco and the Counterculture that literally sounded its death during the late 1960s. In fact, "We're Not on the Same Trip's" message would culminate in the guerilla theater group, the Diggers iconic "death of hippie" parade in October 1967 when media-labeled Hippies created a visual stir with their protest against what broadcasts and newspapers were doing to slight their movement for change and portray that instead as youthful self-indulgence.

The shared experience of the ludic and liminoid within these musical spaces inspired profound, lifelong transformation and cemented camaraderie and a strong, persistent sense of *communitas* that still lingers among the original Red Doggers. The liminal space produced through 'musicking' as the Red Dog provided an integral inspiration and accompaniment to this experimentation, play, and creative innovation while echoing the

activities of their nineteenth-century counterparts. Native American insights of the sacred earth gained through the rituals and ceremonies of the Native American Church further transfixed the way that they viewed the landscape, even Nevada's rather stark one, and so they redefined, on the local level, their relationships and responsibilities to the planet and one another. At the heart of all of this simplicity was not only the furtive beginnings of a movement to go back to the earth, but an intense longing to escape from a world of atomic bombs, communist plots, military draft, and disengaged communities. Taking on nineteenth-century personas and "performing the Comstock" were essential features of their ultimate goal of finding something beyond what American mainstream culture wished to prescribe to them.

Through the Red Dog Experience they came to understand the "importance of setting down deep roots wherever [they] lived and forming a real relationship to the land itself." Moreover, they sought "to 'find the holy places' where [they] live[d] — the spring or grove or crest of a hill where [they] kn[e]w that others... lingered before [them] and steeped themselves, like [they], in its special stillness. Perhaps, though, the real point is not so much to *find* the holy places as to *make* them" (Robertson, 1986, p. 30). In this way, they reordered the bleak landscapes of the Comstock a type of holy place wherein they could unabashedly explore identity, meaning, and purpose. Virginia City and its environs, they felt, could transform, and today the original participants claim that this was, indeed, the case.

This phenomenon requires a rereading of essentialist conceptions of place to account for the fluidity of "multiple networked mobilities of capital, persons, objects, signs and information" (Light, 2009, p. 241; Sheller, 2004, p. 6). Places are not simply fixed or

bounded. They are not stable entities, but rather, perform their own kinds of transformations over time, and this, again, marked some of the brilliance of the twentieth-century Red Dog community, who with not even one-tenth of the amenities and potentialities of the nineteenth-century, produced a Countercultural phenomenon still challenging the ways that we view the world, the environment, and our place therein today. “In this context, tourism is one form of contemporary practice through which places and spaces are made and remade. Tourists do not simply encounter places, they also perform them: what a place is ‘like’ depends, in part, on the nature of the embodied practices — enacted by both tourists and local people — that take place there” (Light, 2009, p. 241).

Essentially, then, the images with which the Red Doggers were bombarded via Hollywood soundstages, television series, cowboy songs (e.g. Gene Autry), and tourist-minded business owners in Virginia City influenced how they “performed” their version of the area. These actions, in turn, reinforced the construction of sense of place by locals bent on appealing to the wants and demands of fans of *Bonanza*, *Gunsmoke*, and John Wayne. These are what Bærenholdt et al. refer to as “circuits of anticipation, performance and remembrance,” and they were largely configured by the place myths that have long swirled around the Comstock Lode and its colorful communities (Bærenholdt, 2004; Light, 2009, p. 241). These place myths were the products of a rich and varied Comstock experience, and they remain incredibly powerful despite oversimplification, inaccuracies, and only presenting a very small slice of what the history of Washoe really encompassed.

No matter their ultimate reason for coming, many of the new twentieth-century residents of the Comstock brought with them very specific expectations, and they actively attempted to fulfill these through fantasy, play, and performance. This phenomenon

continues to this day. Virginia City's residents, especially those inhabiting and/or working on C Street, are well aware of the responsibilities and expectations of being a resident, and so they accept living in the "fish bowl"<sup>146</sup> and generally play their unique parts with enthusiasm. These responsibilities range from donning costumes and role playing to inculcating tourists with the lore and fables of the Comstock. Through this process, history is rewritten and acted out every day on the Comstock. The performativity of this "touristing" experience continues to profoundly impact the city's place-myth by underscoring and emphasizing carefully chosen elements while downplaying others.

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<sup>146</sup> This is how longtime Virginia City resident and musician Barbara "Squeek" Lavake described life on C Street during our interview during the fall of 2010 (Barnett, 2010).

## ***Chapter Six: Musical Aspirations Run Fast & Run Amok?***

### *1965: The Red Dog Experience as Psychedelic Phenomenon*

Haphazard, disorderly, thrilling.... Many an adjective collided during the summer of 1965, and the result was staggering — a mystical, psychedelic explosion swirling, blazing, churning with infinite potential, whipped together with confusion. The world of music — and perhaps even perception — could never be the same. Later, participants who'd unwittingly found themselves part of the “Red Dog Experience” tended to describe it in the same way — “serendipity.” Serendipity had to be the last word on Mark Unobsky's tongue that first day in 1965 as before his eyes unraveled a gathering infused with eccentric, LSD-induced antics. And front-and-center on stage was Exhibit One, the foppish, disaffected folk-singing Charlatans, staggering around a stage in Virginia City, Nevada, dosed out of their minds. Dosed — unbeknownst to them — by Mark, himself, in a move he took straight from the Merry Pranksters' playbook. The Counterculture, after all, thrived on the unpredictable experiment, although experimentation generally came unsolicited and absent written consent, and so many in the audience were sharing in the experience that no one there could later claim to be an unbent clinical observer.<sup>147</sup>

On the other hand, the Charlatans had hardly come all the way from San Francisco to Virginia City to be hallucinogenic guinea pigs. In fact, before their arrival on the Comstock, the group's lead singer and band founder, George Hunter, obsessed over the

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<sup>147</sup> For example, in February of 1965, George Harrison and John Lennon of the Beatles unknowingly consumed LSD in their coffee during a dinner party. The culprit in this “accidental” dosing was their dentist in common! (C. Perry, Barry Miles, 1997, p. 13) .

band concept, the appropriate image, the nuances of their music. Hunter envisioned them as America's response to the British Invasion.

One bad LSD trip and an even worse audition did not mesh one bit with Hunter's fantastic vision of the Charlatans' meteoric rise to pop stardom. "Of course, the performance was a shambles. Arrangements were forgotten. Keys were diverse. The musicians were overcome with mirth. The piano kept moving just out of the reach of Ferguson's rubbery fingers. Band members traded instruments. At one point, [Mike] Wilhelm simply sat down on stage and watched as the room pulsed with colored vibrations. The performance didn't stop so much as disintegrate and Hunter stumbled offstage, chagrined, to face Unobski"<sup>148</sup> (Selvin, 1994, p. 7). He could not have foreseen, however, the alluring ways in which Virginia City — a community historically defined by high level risk, seductive glimmers of wealth, every kind of excess, and exotic debauchery — would radically loosen their inhibitions and licentiously redefine their notions of life, liberty, and lyric.

Wild West motifs floated around George Hunter's head. The Red Dog's eclectic blending of elements from *Gunsmoke* and San Francisco's North Beach, the Beat's landing strip in the late 1950s, overwhelmed Hunter's senses, and he had trouble stringing two words together. Yet, it all made sense. Right there, it coalesced. Just as Hunter had carefully cradled and then tried to deliver the concept of the Charlatans during the spring and summer of 1965, so would Chandler Laughlin III cultivate a fevered and fervent dream of a Wild West saloon awash in folk and rock music, LSD, and vibrant communal

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<sup>148</sup> "Unobski" is preserved in spelling in quotations from Selvin's book, but the proper spelling is actually Unobsky.

excess. Like a mad Wild West prescient, Chan Laughlin tirelessly traveled the West Coast proselytizing a strange frontier faith—its holiest site, the Red Dog Saloon—and winning many converts. The full revelation of his forethought bloomed when these two ideas—the Red Dog and the Charlatans—fused in a smoldering blaze, and LSD provided the spark.

Cracking up at the ridiculous, outlandish nature of the scene onstage, Mark watched the Charlatans attempt to perform their old-timey mix of folk, rock, and the blues while the hallucinogens worked their “magic”— trading instruments, sitting, falling, speaking to nonexistent objects in mid-air, riding a wave of psychedelic madness that had very little to do with music making. There was nothing for Hunter to explain when he finally managed to stumble over to Mark. What was going on was fairly obvious, although Dr. Timothy Leary might have argued that they were in the midst of a “transcendent experience.”

Leary, however, would have definitely advocated for a far more controlled “set and setting”<sup>149</sup> for said LSD experience — one free from the hyper-stimulus of musical performance and Virginia City, for that matter. “[Dr.] Timothy Leary, a Harvard University psychology professor, was [LSD’s] self-appointed promoter, even establishing a religion, the League of Spiritual Discovery” (McWilliams, 2000, p. 67). In fact, Leary and

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<sup>149</sup> With regard to “set and setting,” Leary argued, “Of course, the drug dose does not produce the transcendent experience. It merely acts as a chemical key — it opens the mind, frees the nervous system of its ordinary patterns and structures. The nature of the experience depends almost entirely on set and setting. Set denotes the preparation of the individual, including his personality structure and his mood at the time. Setting is physical — the weather, the room’s atmosphere; social — feelings of persons present towards one another; and cultural — prevailing views as to what is real. It is for this reason that manuals or guide-books are necessary. Their purpose is to enable a person to understand the new realities of the expanded consciousness, to serve as road maps for new interior territories which modern science has made accessible” (Leary, 2000).

his followers asserted that LSD was “one of the best and healthiest tools available for the examination of the consciousness” (Stevens, 1987, p. 300). But this was no Leary religious retreat in Millbrook, New York, and that was okay. After all, during his visit to Leary’s sprawling headquarters with the Merry Pranksters, Ken Kesey described Millbrook as, “one big piece of uptight constipation” (Wolfe, 1968, p. 107). Rather, this was akin to one of Ken Kesey’s irreverent pranks in the name of “Faith!” and “Further!” — a peculiar hallucinogenic experiment gone very wrong, or, perhaps, very right, depending on the vantage point.<sup>150</sup> When later asked about the famous incident at the 1991 reunion,<sup>151</sup> Mark blithely described his logic, at the time. “Well, we’ll dose all these fuckers and see what they can really do!” (Works, 1996, 0:30:35).

In retrospect, the Charlatans might have shown greater discernment before consuming the acid that Unobsky passed their way just prior to taking the stage. But the devil-may-care persona the band so carefully cultivated triumphed, and they gobbled away — an excess of enthusiasm, evading care. This freewheeling energy, this uncalculated experimentation defined the Red Dog community during the summer of 1965 inspiring many of its groundbreaking, psychedelic innovations. It merged seamlessly into the raucous, tolerant, risk-taking swirl of energy still surrounding Virginia City, San Francisco’s former playground and mining superstar.

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<sup>150</sup> It is worth noting that when the Merry Pranksters arrived at the Red Dog Saloon at the end of 1965, they came into conflict with the Red Doggers, many of whom found their crazy antics to fall well outside the dictates of decency. While the Red Doggers freely explored consciousness through hallucinogens, one of their major preoccupations was the cultivation of an intimate sense of community among participants, and so psychedelics tended to serve as a conduit for community-building. As a result, they preferred the structure of Native American church ceremonies and/or LSD experiences that were nurturing rather than peppered with pranks, madcap experiments, and irreverent humor.

<sup>151</sup> Throughout this chapter, I refer to Mary Works’ *The Life and Times of the Red Dog Saloon* (1996) and the subsequent abridged re-release *Rockin’ at the Red Dog: The Dawn of Psychedelic Rock* (2005).

As the fine, scarlet-and-sapphire Victorian curtains melted, dripped, and splashed like warm blueberry chocolate into the dark-hued mahogany waves of former saloon tables, a cornucopia of explosive, neon-tinged musical pitches swirled and twirled through the air. The glittering crystal chandeliers peeled into lovely, luscious drops of champagne lemonade, and the Charlatans made candy-coated, electric history. From the audience, Mark Unobsky thought the Charlatans' "trip" was the funniest thing he'd ever seen, "and everything just seemed to turn to jelly, but it was, like, kind of a groovy form of jelly, so I thought, 'Yeah, I'm entertained'" (Works, 1996, 0:30:40).

Lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD) produces an eight to twelve hour "trip" that acutely transforms how the user experiences thought, mood, and perception. Ironically, LSD experimentation started in government laboratories where men such as Augustus Stanley Owsley III and Ken Kesey were actually paid to imbibe the strange pills. Once Owsley and Kesey had "seen the White Elephant,"<sup>152</sup> there was no turning back. Both became devoted proponents of the democratization of psychedelics, and Owsley undertook practical means of achieving this end. By April and May of 1965, a new brand of LSD — product of Augustus Owsley Stanley III's<sup>153</sup> infamous Berkeley residence-turned-laboratory — was snaking its way through the San Francisco subculture.

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<sup>152</sup> "Seeing the Elephant" was a nineteenth century expression used most predominantly by pioneers and frontier explorers to describe the fantastic, unimaginable myth of the American West, especially in stark contrast to its often harsh realities. Having seen the "White elephant," in particular, was an expression associated with having beheld the marvelous, the unimaginable, and the fantastic.

<sup>153</sup> Grandson of a celebrated Kentucky governor, Stanley was an early sound man for the Grateful Dead and did recordings for Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix. His nickname was "Bear," and he is immortalized by the Grateful Dead's iconic psychedelic dancing bear and their song "Alice D. Millionaire" inspired by a newspaper headline about Stanley "LSD Millionaire." For further information on Stanley's eclectic life, check out: (Daily Telegraph, 2011; S. Miller, 2011).

As Owsley's name became synonymous with this product, a good portion started heading over the Sierra to Virginia City where a small community of second-generation Bohemians, psychedelic users, and peyote-eaters — including Don Works, Chan Laughlin, and Mark Unobsky — had long resided and were in the process of establishing their headquarters at the Red Dog Saloon.

It was the Wild West all over again with one additional element. LSD. That was the brain food fueling all these fantasies, a cerebral prod to the Gary Cooper movie these longhairs had substituted for their beatnik ways. Acid had been blazing through subterranean bohemian circles that year and many of the misbegotten malcontents who labored on Unobski's edifice had been sampling its deranging delights all through the Nevada spring. The drug mixed irony into the delicious disorientation, a secret smile on the faces of these freaks disguised as cowboys. (Selvin, 1994, p. 5)

Owsley's "brand" of LSD was particularly potent, as first attested by his Berkeley neighbors, and it quickly transformed the Virginia City scene into one of psychedelia. "The LSD 'trip' was an experience that heightened sensations so that the user could 'feel' colors, soul-search, hallucinate, and perhaps see God, but not without potentially adverse effects, including prolonged anxiety, impaired memory, and emotional breakdown" (McWilliams, 2000, p. 67). While the Charlatans did not meet God that day, they *did* start down an extraordinary road of self-exploration, unfettered musical creativity, and zany, psychedelic community-building that would stamp an indelible mark, first, on the Comstock, then, on San Francisco, and finally, on the nation at large.

The Charlatans made a general buffoonery of their first audition, and Mark was hooked. He'd never seen anything like it. Not in Memphis or Nashville or San Francisco, and he knew with 100% certainty that none of those cities — not even New York, for that matter — was ready for this little experiment. Nope, not by a long shot! After all, *The*

*Electric Kool-Aid Acid Trip* wouldn't hit bookshelves until 1967, and little Janis Joplin was still a rather prim looking rural Texan — albeit with a mighty fine voice! After a brief encounter with the junkie lifestyle in San Francisco, she fled back home in 1963 and tried to play it straight. Chet Helms would disabuse her of those intentions in 1966, while persuading her to become the new lead singer of a local Bay Area band known as Big Brother and the Holding Company. But in 1965, the Charlatans were *the* sole proprietors of a new way of dressing, making music, and living. The straight world was definitely not prepared for them.

On the other hand, a nineteenth-century saloon renovated to resemble Kitty's fabled Long Branch Saloon from *Gunsmoke* in an isolated corner of northern Nevada might just fit the bill... Well, why not? The place was already a mix of the exotic and irrational. A folk-rock band channeling the Decadent dandyism of the late nineteenth-century fit tighter than a good kidskin glove, and so the “Red Dog Experience” officially launched. Curiously, the Charlatans, Mark Unobsky, Don Works, and Chan Laughlin had done it. They'd stumbled upon “the blissful counter-stroke...” which the Merry Pranksters would chase frenetically, obsessively across the United States, as chronicled by Tom Wolfe, in their “Further” bus beginning in 1965.

“BEAUTIFUL! ... THE CURRENT FANTASY ...BUT HOW TO TELL them? — about such arcane little matters as Captain marvel and THE FLASH ... and *The Life* — and the very *Superkids* —

“a considerable new message...the blissful counter-stroke...”  
(Wolfe, 1968, p. 36)

Not surprisingly, Virginia City, Nevada's Red Dog Saloon was one of the Pranksters' stops in August of 1965. But that is getting ahead of the story. ...

### *Conceiving of the Blissful Counter-Stroke*

The building that would house the Red Dog Saloon and its members was acquired and renovated by Mark Unobsky, an extremely talented Blues guitarist from Tennessee. With a chubby, baby face offset by a thick moustache, a perennially enthusiastic smile, and a charming Southern twang warming the ends of an otherwise slightly pinched voice, Unobsky was a tireless optimist — the Candide of the Comstock. Unobsky grew up in East Memphis — where he was a playmate as a child and later band mates as an adolescent — with Knox and Jerry Phillips. Their father, Sam Phillips, was the famed entrepreneur of Sun Records where Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash famously made their recording debuts. According to Unobsky's close friend, Pete Sears,<sup>154</sup> Unobsky made quite an indelible impression on the Phillips brothers as a free, independent spirit. In a series of remembrances of Unobsky, written after Moonalice first performed at the Red Dog Saloon during the August 2012 Hipsters of the High West event weekend, Sears recalled how the Phillips brothers described Mark and his largely overlooked musical talent.

He was a cutting-edge guy all the way,” recalled Jerry Phillips. “He showed me the first switchblade that I ever saw in my life. And he's the reason I got a tattoo.” Mark was also considered to be a pre-eminent blues guitarist. His eclectic tastes ran from John Lee Hooker to Bahamian guitarist Joseph Spence to Brazilian bossa nova composer Antonio Carlos Jobim. ‘He would teach me how to play guitar while Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis and people like that were driving up late at night to see Sam,’ recalls Knox Phillips.

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<sup>154</sup> Pete Sears has been a lead guitarist, keyboardist, and vocalist since the 1960s for performers such as the Sam Gopal Dream, Rod Stewart, Jefferson Starship, Jerry Garcia, Hot Tuna, John Lee Hooker, the David Nelson Band, Phil Lesh & Friends, and, currently tours with Moonalice.

Sears recalled how Memphis musician and producer Jim Dickinson remembered Unobsky. “From years of working with Ry Cooder, I’ve seen a lot of white-boy guitar, but Unobsky was the most unique” (Sears, 2012).

Unfortunately, Mark rarely entered the recording studio, and so his effusive talent today remains largely unrecognized.<sup>155</sup> But Unobsky would go on to play *the* key role in the transformation of the Comstock House from a shuttered and dilapidated Victorian relic into a psychedelic hot spot. Moreover, he would demonstrate a keen, forward-looking vision by selecting some of the most transformative musical groups to premier at this venue including the Charlatans in 1965 and Big Brother and the Holding Company in 1966, thereby earning Virginia City a place on the fabled psychedelic walk of fame. But Unobsky did not achieve all of this singlehandedly. He received conceptual support and physical assistance from two members of the neighboring Silver City community: the professional painter and owner of the Zen Mine, Don Works, and the long-haired talent scout/drug aficionado, Chan Laughlin. In fact, as Chan Laughlin, Don Works, and Mark Unobsky would later reminisce in *The Life and Times of the Red Dog Saloon*, the idea of a folk-style café in Virginia City was the brainchild of all three during the winter of 1964.

According to Chan, “We had originally conceived of this notion in the middle of a snowstorm down at Don Works’ Zen Mine one night when it occurred to us that there was just too much action in the front room of a two-room cabin, and we needed some place else for all the people to meet.... It was like six hours into a *Risk* game that featured LSD and treaties — both of which turned out to be a mistake” (Works, 1996, 0:08:25).

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<sup>155</sup> In her documentary, *Rockin’ at the Red Dog: The Dawn of Psychedelic Rock*, Mary Works includes rare 1991 footage of Mark Unobsky playing blues guitar with various onstage configurations of members from the Charlatans and Big Brother and the Holding Company.

Fortunately, the idea for the Red Dog was sheer, Bohemian brilliance! It would even foreshadow elements of the postmodern in its hodge-podge collages of “realities.” But around the *Risk* table during the winter of ’64, Laughlin, Works, and Unobsky could not yet fully appreciate its full implications. While Don Works and his Zen Mine continued to attract bizarre combinations of artists, Beatniks, poets, all around students-of-life, and Marin County plumbers and carpenters (who would prove useful in the renovation of a Victorian saloon), Mark Unobsky approached his father seeking investment capital.

Meanwhile, Laughlin developed a crystal-clear vision of the place and soon embarked on a pilgrimage to cull its principle players from Beatnik and Hipster communities across California, Oregon, and Washington. While Laughlin collected wares, drugs, and “players” for the Red Dog, four hours away in San Francisco, a university student with a gorgeous face, missing front tooth, and long, blond Dutch-boy haircut assembled the musical concept that would crown Laughlin’s “Silver Queen” dream.

### *Hipster Saints, Sinners, & Folkniks*

Named an honorary “Hipster Saint” in Gene Sculatti’s iconic *The Catalog of Cool*, George Hunter was the ultimate hipster rocker. More than anything else, Hunter had an unequalled foresight, a brilliant ability to conceptualize what did not yet exist and then work it into being. This talent would be instrumental in defining what the Charlatans could and should represent. Gifted beyond his years, Hunter went so far as to prophesize and define what the 1960s should be, and he — through the vehicle of the Charlatans — was among the first and most refined in defining this age.

George Hunter took paisley, Victoriana, Maxfield Parrish, Marvel Comics, the Wild West, and rock and roll and synthesized something so unique, so patently new and wonderfully appropriate that it overnight became the de riger [sic] aesthetic of San Francisco's flowering Golden Age. What he created — a gaslight aura lighting the mysterious, the marvelous, the magnificent corners of his fecund imagination — may, in this benighted age, seem hopelessly anachronistic and square — those bell bottoms and Western vests, the blue of a Parrish sky, and the tongue-twisting oaths of Dr. Strange. Yet the originality of the vision endures, regardless of what cretinous entrepreneurs were later to make of it. Even today, when every fern-decked, stain-glassed, and natural-wooded emporium of the Me Decade stands as a shameless denuding of the spirit of Hunter. George Hunter's world was simply fantastic, with its progenitor a rare original in the classic mold of the Dandy. (Seay, 1982, p. 42)

Hunter brought a keen sense of style and sophistication to the Baby Boomer generation during a time when the Beatniks that they admired all tended to look rather shabby and sad in their staid black ensembles, sandals, stringy beards, and longish hair. Coloring in an otherwise bleak scene, Hunter gave members of his generation something beautiful and unique to admire and assimilate. He created a Bohemian, Hippie baroque esthetic of incomparable luscious, elegance while cultivating a blasé air of indifference as if his style had simply crashed together, unbeknownst to him, in the closet. Ultimately, it would be this jaded edge that would make the moniker of "charlatan" so perfect for he and his bandmates. This sense of experimentation and inspiration was not something that he had stumbled across haphazardly. Rather, it was a process that began in the early 1960s, would culminate during his stint in Virginia City, Nevada, and then be transported back to San Francisco where it would flourish.

In hot pursuit of a gorgeous dancer named Lucy Lewis, Hunter made his way north to San Francisco from Los Angeles in 1964. He soon became acquainted with Lucy's classmate at San Francisco State University, a music major and clarinet player



Figure 6.1 Photograph of George Hunter, 1965. Image courtesy of George Hunter.

named Richard Olsen. Fast friends, soon they were throwing around ideas for a rock band. Hunter experimented heavily in electronica, “musique concrète,” and the avant-garde at the San Francisco Tape Music Center<sup>156</sup> where Bill Ham was involved in supplying visual imagery for some of the Center’s compositions. So, Hunter’s initial vision for a rock band was quite literally worlds away from the concept of the old-timey Charlatans. “At first, Hunter envisioned the band as a unisex futuristic outfit called the Androids, but gave that up for a dark and druggy William Burroughs-inspired theme, the Mainliners” (Selvin, 1994).

Practicality would intervene when they realized that the electrical set-up needed to create the Androids far exceeded their current budgetary allowances. Moreover, the addition of Hunter’s former school friend from Southern California — the gifted folk and blues guitar player with a booming voice, Mike Wilhelm — steered the trio toward the dark, folk-rock sound of the “Mainliners.” With the addition of piano player, Mike Ferguson, who introduced the Victorian element to the group and then the replacement of their first drummer, Sam Linde, with the offbeat, sardonic, self-deprecating Santa Rosa “folknik,” Dan Hicks, the lineup was complete.

In particular, George Hunter and Mike Ferguson cultivated personal styles that were both impeccable and singular. Both men grew their hair long, which set them apart from the mainstream, but this was not entirely unheard of at the time. Beatniks grew out

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<sup>156</sup> Founded in 1962, the San Francisco Tape Music Center was the brainchild of composers Morton Subotnick and Ramon Sender and would later add William Maginnis, Tony Martin, Pauline Oliveros, Steve Reich, and Terry Riley to their ranks. Maginnis would later describe it as a "nonprofit cultural and educational corporation, the aim of which was to present concerts and offer a place to learn about work within the tape music medium" ([http://o-art.org/history/50s%26\\_60s/TapeCenter/SFTMC.html](http://o-art.org/history/50s%26_60s/TapeCenter/SFTMC.html)).

their hair, too. The difference was in each man's carefully constructed and polished image. According to Luria Castell:<sup>157</sup>

[There] used to be lots of Beatniks with long hair and beards and sandals and stuff, but George Hunter, *by far*, was *the* first hippie I ever saw in San Francisco. He had trimmed hair and Beatle boots and a style about him and a thing and the same with Ferguson. You know, you'd go to visit his house and I mean everything down to the silverware was 1910 vintage. There was this great attention to detail. They were my introduction to psychedelia. I always thought that art nouveau and all that cut crystal and lace and stuff and velvet was what psychedelic was about. (Works, 1996, 0:25:05)

Maintaining this sense of style quickly came to influence the Charlatans' overall "look." Moreover, changes in band composition challenged Hunter's original stream of conceptualization because each new member brought his own energy and bravura to the group. Each member contributed his own tunes, too, so Hunter had to embrace the organic transformation that these additions produced while anticipating and capitalizing upon any unifying characteristics that were presented. A profoundly gifted architect and former Beatnik, Hunter approached the fashioning of his rock 'n' roll band with engineering precision and a minute attention to detail. Mike Wilhelm remembers, "George had a pretty difficult task. He had the concept, but he had to keep modifying it to fit what he actually had. He had to defer to us because we were writing all the tunes.... The image was just the way things went down. We'd be looking for clothes and getting this turn of the century stuff, living in San Francisco with all the Victorian houses, and so that style became appropriate. Going to Virginia City just kind of clinched it" (Palao, 1996, p. 11). The Red Dog experience was seminal — not only to the coalescing of the various elements of this

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<sup>157</sup> Luria Castell would go on with Ellen Harmon, Alton Kelly, and Jack Tolle to found Family Dog in the autumn of 1965.

vision — but to sharpening the clarity and precision of it, and Hunter remains, to this day, a devotee of the Wild West and its many rustic caricatures.<sup>158</sup>

As Hunter's ideas about the band changed, he developed an overriding narrative to accompany their eclectic compilation of Victorian costuming, the western esthetic, and folk-rock blues. Above all else, Hunter always envisioned a band that would provide *the* definitive response to the British Invasion by presenting what he felt were “authentic Americans” celebrating “various facets of Americana.” Charlatans, however, are not known for their authenticity, and, in this case, the former category won out over the latter. Nonetheless, the concept was both unique and intriguing. Heavily influenced by the Beats, he wanted the group to wail against the vacuous constructs of consumerism and materialism plaguing modernity, and he wanted to make money and market his band while doing so. “Hunter saw the band as a reaction to an increasingly plastic society, a harkening back to more genuine American values. The clothes, the style, the lettering, the songs all were supposed to recall an imaginary era that spanned the Wild West to the First World War — horses and airplanes” (Selvin, 1994, p. 21). Quickly, the Charlatans assembled a mishmash of repertoire drawn from the best of America's music tradition including: Jelly Roll Morton's “Alabama Bound,” New Lost City Ramblers' “East Virginia,” and Roy Acuff's “Wabash Cannonball” (Palao, 1996, p. 6).

George had an additional challenge to surmount, and this was, by far, the most significant — he knew next to nothing about music making and could not play any instruments. Still, Hunter liked a good challenge, and this handicap, ironically enough, pro-

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<sup>158</sup> Today, he owns a dovetail cabinetmaking shop in Sonoma, CA, which relies heavily on the Old West esthetic in their catalogs and costumes when *en route* promoting their wares.

vided inspiration for the band's ultimate name. One day, prior to heading up to the Red Dog, prolific folk and blues guitarist, Mike Wilhelm called Hunter out on his lack of musical competency as a "Charlatan!" George loved it. It perfectly suited the eclectic bunch of slightly jaded Beatnik- Folkies, especially George, "because, see, the thing is I couldn't play anything. But you know, I liked the idea of being in the music business" (Works, 1996, 0:21:56). George did provide vocals, and he eventually learned how to play a mean tambourine and electric autoharp. But he still faced much criticism with regard to his lack of general musicianship. Yet, for George, it was all about the concept, and he still enthusiastically admits, "I was *the* true Charlatan!" (Barnett, 2012d).

As a result, however, part of the Charlatans' legend now encompasses unfounded rumors that *none* of its members knew how to play music. This is an ugly misnomer that follows the former Charlatans everywhere. Irresponsibly written time and again into the annals of Rock history, it could not be further from the truth. After all, Richard Olsen was a music major at San Francisco State, Dan Hicks gigged all over the Bay Area, Mike Ferguson played a mean ragtime piano, and Mike Wilhelm — former disciple of the legendary Blues guitarist Brownie McGee — supported himself as a folkie in the Berkeley scene before joining the group. In fact, the group initially brought more to the table instrumentally than many early members of contemporaneously formed psychedelic groups. Yet, the name stuck and so did the reputation. They were branded musical charlatans just as much as they boldly proclaimed themselves to be conceptual ones. Perhaps, too, the nonchalant, jaded, self-deprecating rocker attitude that they so carefully constructed backfired. Or, perhaps, people were simply too busy staring — the Charlatans were a sight to behold! "Hours spent in costume, as the members develop[ed] personas

united [them] in image yet adroitly [preserved each] individual: Ferguson as Mississippi gambler, Hunter as Edwardian fop, Wilhelm as a rock 'n' roll Wyatt Earp, and so on” (Palao, 1996, p. 7).

The Charlatans and George Hunter, in particular, understood the importance of branding this unique image, and they conscientiously promoted it. In so doing, they came to define a new lifestyle. In describing this image, their former manager, Phil Hammond, stated, “So, with the Charlatans — it wasn’t just the music although the music [was] certainly very important. But they radiated a sense of style and a lifestyle that infected everybody else that came to see them, and it wasn’t just about the music. And, in that sense they really were one of the great progenitors of all the great bands that came out of San Francisco” (Works, 1996, 0:31:20). They were entrepreneurs; it is clear that their sights were set on pop stardom. They wanted to be the next “big thing,” a group whose meteoric rise would be so spectacular as to, perhaps, offset the genius of the Beatles. They saw themselves as the American answer to the British Invasion. Virginia City, Nevada, however, would provide them with a much more profound sense of identity and community as they navigated the sensuous production of place in this remote locale.

While Hunter enjoyed dressing in vintage wares, and these were fairly easy to purchase in 1960s San Francisco, their decision to dress in Decadent, turn-of-the-century attire was perpetuated largely by Byron “Mike” Ferguson, the group’s piano player. The eclectic, sticky-fingered owner of *the* first head shop in San Francisco — the Magic Theater for Madmen Only — Ferguson specialized in legally (and, sometimes, illegally) ob-

tained vintage and antique pieces as well as high quality reefer. Herb Greene<sup>159</sup> remembers, “Ferguson was my best friend. He was pretty complex, very stylish, very talented, and a bit of a felon. He and someone else, whose name I won’t mention, were always breaking into houses and stuff. I’m sure that’s how he stocked the Magic Theater! He also sold drugs, I think he sold drugs to Dylan that time he was in town (November 1965)” (Palao, 1996, p. 16).

Ferguson had refined taste and filled his fin-de-siècle-inspired shop (as well as his own apartment) with an intriguing collection of Victorian and Edwardian trappings. If Jean Des Esseintes, the reclusive scoundrel and aesthete of Joris-Karl Huysmans’ late nineteenth-century Decadent novel *À Rebours (Against the Grain)* had owned a head shop, it would, most definitely, have been Ferguson’s. In fact, with his bowler hat, celluloid collar, vintage waistcoat, shoulder-length hair, round-rimmed, darkly tinted Victorian spectacles, and intense gaze, Ferguson easily resembled a dark, Romantic, anti-hero. In the context of more recent twentieth-century culture, Ferguson’s photos prefigure the handsome, charismatic, yet menacing reinvention of Count Dracula (played by Gary Oldman) in Francis Ford Coppola’s 1992 remake. Add rock star to that bill, and it is safe to say that in 1965, Ferguson was truly striking!

Dan Hicks made quite an impression, too, and this was largely because he stuck out like a sore thumb. Although the rest of the group self-styled as Victorian cowboys,

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<sup>159</sup> Herb Greene is, perhaps, *the* definitive photographer of the acid rock scene. His portraits are captivating not only because of the performers he captured (from their earliest days and throughout their careers) — including the Jefferson Airplane, the Warlocks/the Grateful Dead, Janis Joplin, Big Brother and the Holding Company, The Charlatans, and Carlos Santana — but because of the close personal ties that he fostered with these performers. As a result, his photos have an immediacy and intimacy more akin to shots from a family scrapbook than professional rock portraits. Besides the aforementioned performers, he has captured Jeff Beck, the Pointer Sisters, Led Zeppelin, Sly Stone, and Rod Stewart, among others.

Hicks sported 1920s golf clothes, marching band uniforms, and berets. While his bandmates snatched up celluloid collars and waistcoats from Bay Area thrift shops, he sported knee breeches. The result was the overwhelming impression of an overgrown pre-WWI adolescent. Of course, the look contrasted wildly with his full moustache and sardonic expression. “The whole band looked great. Dan Hicks was so — Dan Hicks was really different. Now, everybody’d come dressed Western, and he’d come in a — like a 1920s golfer’s outfit with a megaphone on his sweater with a big “C” on it and stuff and wear a golfer’s hat and things. So, everybody else was all dressed like cowboys. So, it was real fun” (Works, 1996, 0:18:40). That’s not to say that he didn’t cultivate the Wild West aesthetic as well, and it is particularly visible in photos from the period at the Red Dog Saloon, including some of the more iconic ones by Herb Greene. In fact, he made a great cowboy! Nonetheless, it is important to note that even at this early stage as the Charlatans’ drummer, he was actively searching for a unique performance image, one leading into his own stellar career with Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks.

Remarking on the ease with which they were able to locate vintage Victorian and Edwardian clothing in San Francisco, George Hunter stated, “It was relatively easy to go out and find a lot of clothing from the turn of the century in thrift shops and antique stores. It was a fairly conscious effort we were making” (C. Perry, Barry Miles, 1997, p. 14). As the group’s visionary, Hunter carefully polished and cultivated their well-preened image, and, sometimes, he went overboard. His focus on the non-musical elements of the band verged in intensity on a full-blown obsession, and it was difficult for his fellow band mates — who wanted, first and foremost, to rehearse and tighten their sound — to entertain a seemingly infinite stream of extra-musical considerations. Moreover, the

Charlatans contained five over-the-top personalities, each of whom had his own very distinct musical ideas. Individuality simultaneously represented both a strength and a liability for the group. As Dan Hicks put it:

The band got at its best when we played the Roaring '20s. We were playing there like five nights a week or something, and the band got—one thing about, you know, I've said to people my thought... The band wasn't that consistent as far as being good, or, you know. Could be good. It could be good, pretty good, and danceable. And, that was the idea. You know, I can just remember everybody dancing to it, you know. It was pretty good, but it wasn't—you know, internally, it was a weird thing, too, in that it was always kind of a little bit of a mind game being in the Charlatans.... It was sort of a little bit dysfunctional, a little bit unhealthy in the Charlatans because sometimes the focus, you know, wasn't—it just wasn't on the music. It wasn't like guys talking about music and what are we going to do. There was other stuff, it seemed. And it was like keeping up with George's personality and everything. George could piss you off, and it was like—the personalities and Ferguson, you know, unpredictable. And, me kind of in there, too. (Barnett, 2012a, p. 43)

Development of the Charlatans' unique style *and* lifestyle was anything but accidental. With it came a steep cost, over time, as the group's unity of purpose and vision grew more and more strained.

Unlike more conventional groups, the Charlatans never had one designated lead singer, and the repertoire was conspicuously varied. According to Herb Greene:

The fact that everyone got up and did a few songs made for a real interesting show musically. You'd have Wilhelm doing the slide stuff, great blues guitar—once I asked [Jerry] Garcia who his favorite player on the scene was, and straight off he said Mike Wilhelm—then you had Hicks get up and do his stuff, which was as good as you could get. Then you had Ferguson get up and do the Mose Allison stuff. And then you had George's old-timesy, English stuff, 'I Saw Her' and the like. It was really diverse. (Charlatans, 1996; Palao, 1996, p. 13)

While this made for a unique show, it increased the push-and-pull intensity of the band to head in several directions at the same time. Over time, this contributed to disjointed,



Figure 6.2 Photograph of the Charlatans in full costume bellied up to the bar of the Red Dog Saloon in Virginia City, Nevada, 1965. Image courtesy of Mike Wilhelm ([http://flyingsnail.com/Scrapbook/Mike\\_Wilhelm-The\\_Charlatans.html](http://flyingsnail.com/Scrapbook/Mike_Wilhelm-The_Charlatans.html).)

unproductive rehearsals with no clear musical leader and, as a result, increasing frustration among the band's members. Because they all filled the role of lead singer and brought their own repertoire to different portions of the set, the dependency and cohesiveness that band mates usually develop failed to emerge at a very integral level. Ironically, one could argue that this made the "concept of the Charlatans" even more important because it was one of the few elements that truly united an otherwise very individualized grouping of performers. Perhaps, intuitively, George understood this, and so as frustrations and tensions in the band increased, he worked even more feverishly on their image thereby exacerbating an already deteriorating situation.

For now, it suffices to say that despite tensions and difficulties that lay ahead, Hunter carefully constructed an appealing persona for his rock band experiment, while his fellow band mates put their energy into fleshing out a musical repertoire. Unbeknownst to them all, they were fashioning *the* perfect ensemble, in their eclectic admixture of rugged individuals, to premier in Virginia City where Chan Laughlin, Don Works, and Mark Unobsky were lovingly laboring away on the Red Dog. Hunter would sum up the Charlatans' overall esthetic — an expert pairing with the reviving Red Dog — this way:

With our look, we placed ourselves at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. We thought about it, and the idea was that if you were experimenting in the time frame of the 1910s, you've got everything from horses to airplanes to deal with. If you're making a movie or whatever, you would have all those elements to work with.

The other part of it was not wanting to be associated with the British Invasion. Everybody and their brother was doing that. It was that peculiar point in time when there were these groups like the Knickerbockers. Even the Byrds, when they started, were affecting that English look, and

the Monkees as well. Nobody seemed to have their own identity. Everyone was sort of mimicking the Beatles and the Stones really, at that point. So we were looking for some strong American identity. That's what we were about. (C. Perry, Barry Miles, 1997, p. 14)

In his description of the Charlatans' late nineteenth-century style and nod to the industrial era — the period epitomized by Virginia City's own twenty-year boom — he clearly presaged a number of counterculture movements. In fact, Hunter's obsessive evocation of the pre-World War I period — at the juncture of steam power and industrialization — prefigure today's Steam Punk movement. So, his artistic choice would not only set off shockwaves during the mid- to late-1960s with the construction of the hippie “look” but develop along a much purer vein in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The relentlessly anti-authoritarian, madcap attitude of the Charlatans' band members foreshadowed — to varying degrees — the aggressive, chaotic energy that would give birth to the punk movement of the 1970s, too. Yet, despite all this, the Charlatans ultimately remained entrepreneurs. They cultivated their image in order to sell it, and an enterprising attitude colored the majority of their decisions.

Phil Hammond, their manager, was deeply intrigued by the Charlatan's conscientious construction of a coherent, sellable image during their pre-Red Dog days in San Francisco:

Even though they weren't successful yet, and they had never worked a job, they acted like they were successful. They did everything that people would do in a rock 'n' roll band. They went out and talked to publicity people. They went out and took photos. They had regular band rehearsals. They worked at it. They had band meetings, and they talked about image. Oh, I remember being very surprised at learning that George read *Vogue* magazine. There was a lot of talk about image in those days. (Works, 1996)

### *Creating Psychedelic Legend at a Frontier Outpost*

No expense was spared in the renovation of the former Comstock House located on C Street, thanks almost entirely to Mark Unobsky's affluent parents who — by all accounts — were happy to foot the bill, so great was their relief that Mark finally expressed an occupation-related interest. According to Chan, in *The Life and Times of the Red Dog Saloon*:

I was holed up in Inverness one winter, hiding out from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's political police with a 15-year old runaway when the door was kicked in, and Mark Unobsky and Don Works told me they'd sold Mark's old man a saloon on the Comstock. I was supposed to come up and run it because I used to run coffee houses and folk music scenes and things like that, and it seemed like a better idea than continuing to molder away in Inverness. So, I went up to Seattle and recruited Lynn to be sort of the Miss Kitty of this neo-Long-Branch-esque saloon that we were gonna build. (Works, 1996, 00:09:48)

Mark Unobsky relied on Chan Laughlin's impeccable taste and sent him on regular trips to and from the Bay Area, trafficking, by his own admission, not only in the finest weed and LSD but authentic Victorian velvet draperies, fine china, period silverware, and delicate lace. Acquiring luxury items of a vintage nature was greatly assisted by the near-simultaneous closing of the nineteenth-century Fox Theater in Oakland and two costume stores in San Francisco from which locals — including Red Doggers — plundered a wide cache of luxurious laces, brocades, velvets, and disguises. Soon, individuals in dramatic regalia roamed the City's streets, and some of the costumes, brocades, and velvets found their way out to the Comstock. "They had put in crystal chandeliers, an antique mirror-backed bar, thousands of dollars' worth of red-and-turquoise velvet drapes" (C. Perry, Barry Miles, 1997, p. 14). The Comstock House underwent the transformation

from abandoned pup to a well-coifed “best of show,” and it needed a name to go along with this makeover. That’s where a little thievery came in handy.

It took some time for Mark, Don, and Chan to come up with a catchy name for their revamped saloon. They kicked around a number of ideas, and eventually turned to Mark’s gorgeous malamute for a little canine inspiration. They toyed around with the idea of the Malamute Saloon, yet it just didn’t quite fit. That’s when they decided to co-opt another frontier saloon’s name. Or, as Mark put it, “We stole one —” (Works, 1996, 0:10:30). Located in Juneau, Alaska, the Red Dog Saloon boasts a fabled longevity as the oldest entertainment attraction in the area. A standing testament to Juneau’s mining heyday, the Red Dog started out as a tent pitched on the beach specializing in the sale of alcoholic beverages and the dispensation of varied entertainment. Since its humble origins, the saloon has relocated several times and remains a popular staple of the community. During its earliest days, saloon owners Earl and Thelma (Pederson) Forsythe welcomed weary miners, and “Ragtime Hattie” entertained crowds with her wild piano playing and costumes. Apparently, she made her mark by playing in a silver dollar halter top and long white gloves. By the 1940s, subsequent owner Gordie Kanouse turned his gaze toward tourists by meeting in-coming boats with his mule. The mule carried a sign commanding tourists to, “Follow my ass to the Red Dog Saloon.”<sup>160</sup> Among its varied attractions, the Red Dog boasts a gun — checked but never claimed — by Wyatt Earp on June 27, 1900 before departing for Nome, a bizarre array of hunter’s trophy mounts, walls plastered with inestimable numbers of bills of currency signed by miners passing through, and cu-

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<sup>160</sup> For additional information on the Red Dog Saloon in Juneau, Alaska, please visit the following hyper-link: <http://www.reddogsaloon.com/index.php/about-us>.

riosity such as the grandiose bone from a walrus's penis. After Alaska became a state on January 3, 1959, the Red Dog Saloon received national recognition when it was featured on an episode of the Ed Sullivan show. It represented just the kind of rough-and-tumble frontier reputation that Mark, Don, and Chan wanted to evoke on the Comstock, and so the Comstock House transformed into the refurbished, revitalized Red Dog Saloon; a new Comstock legend was born.

Besides driving the vision behind the Kitty Long Branch-style Red Dog, Chan — dressed in gorgeous Native American and cowboy regalia with long flowing dark hair — hit the road to recruit a mad capped crew of like-minded artists, Beats, Hipsters, and musicians during the spring of 1965. He made an imposing Western figure, roving San Francisco's Pine Street — an inevitable stop as it provided cheap rent for a broad swath of intellectuals, visionaries, and freaks tied to San Francisco State University, the Tape Music Center, and the North Beach coffee house Beat scene.

Among the earliest Pine Streeters were the pioneering liquid lightshow artists Bill Ham and Bob Cohen who lived at 2111, located alongside a vacant lot. Bill was the quasi-house manager and became acquainted with fellow resident, Phil Hammond, the newly appointed manager of the Charlatans. Chan came to 2111 Pine Street to extend an invitation to Bill Ham and Bob Cohen to the Red Dog where they would propose plans and an estimate for some type of newfangled light show machine. The machine was intended to sit behind future bands performing at the Red Dog and douse the audience with kaleidoscopic color splashes. While Bill, Bob, and Chan discussed light shows, Phil Hammond listened intently and, at the first lull in the conversation, brought up the Charlatans. He enthusiastically described their image, dress, and music declaring that they'd be the per-

fect house band for the new saloon. Chan listened and asked for a demo tape. Phil had nothing to offer but agreed to make a pilgrimage to the Red Dog to deliver one as soon as possible.

In North Beach that evening, Chan caught first sight of the Charlatans when he spotted two of the band's members — George Olsen and Mike Wilhelm — and he walked up to introduce himself. Their eclectic, Victorian-inspired attire and long hair easily gave them away. Distinguished from San Francisco's clean cut, mainstream populace, the Charlatans presented a unique visual impression. According to Ellen Harmon (who would go on to form Family Dog with Alton Kelley, Luria Castell, and Jack Tolle in the autumn of 1965), "the Charlatans weren't like anything else before them. I mean, they were the first band that looked funny in San Francisco — that played an alternate kind of rock 'n' roll" (Works, 1996, 0:18:12). Their music represented an eclectic blending of plugged-in folk and blues with clear rock 'n' roll overtones and old-timey undertones. That said, the Charlatans weren't actively lining up jobs in San Francisco. Their music and appearance were simply too strange. The Red Dog job represented the only paying gig anywhere near the Bay Area for a folkie/proto-acid rock group, and, as it was presented to them, the Charlatans were intrigued by Chan's offer. They were, however, reluctant to send a demo tape, but Phil finally talked them into it.

With a tape secured and the reluctant blessing of the Charlatans, Phil hit up Bill Ham and Bob Cohen for a ride out to the Comstock where they would pitch their light box to Mark Unobsky. Ironically, after talking it out, Phil ended up driving Bill and Bob. While they put significant time into fixing up and maintaining a VW bus — prominently featured later in this tale — Bill "didn't have anything as far as a car... so, we went in

[Phil's] car, and we thought it might be more comfortable than the bus, but he is the slowest driver in the world.... And, I had a girlfriend, and a German Shepard, so it was kind of a car-full" (Barnett, 2012c, p. 8). Later that day, while Bill and Bob drew up specs for the light show machine at the abandoned train station just down the hill from the Red Dog and provided an estimate of \$1,500, Phil played Mark the demo tape and secured the Charlatans a \$35 advance. Though mere pocket change today, \$35 covered their rehearsal hall expenses, travel costs, and trailer rental to transport equipment to the Comstock for an audition.

While Phil, Bill, Bob, and Mark sorted out particulars regarding Red Dog entertainment, still more recruiting had to be done, and so Chan hit the road. He reasoned that a nineteenth-century Wild West dance hall wasn't worth its salt without a Madame and at least a couple of show girls. As mentioned previously, when Chan was persuaded by Don and Mark to abandon the hideout at Inverness, he headed up to Seattle to recruit the brunette beauty, Lynn Hughes, as their "Miss Kitty." An effervescent personality, she was a natural performer with an amazing voice that inhabited the lush spaces between the blues, folk, and rock. Soon, she went from greeting customers in stunning scarlet velvet dresses with décolletage-revealing details, to strumming guitar with the Charlatans and singing lead on tunes such as "Sidetrack," "Come on in my Kitchen," and "Devil Got My Man." She introduced the group to a traditional English madrigal entitled, "I Saw Her," which would be the inspiration for one of their all-time best tracks.

With Miss Kitty secured, Chan turned to the hunt for some nineteenth-century-inspired “hurdy-gurdy girls”<sup>161</sup> — Comstock entertainment always called for a nice show by the fairer sex. Saloon girls were not an option. They were a staple of nineteenth-century entertainment, and the Red Dog would not do without. Fortunately, twentieth-century “go-go dancers” fit the bill rather nicely. Luria Castell later recalled the first time she met Chan. “I was at this — what they would call a “happening” then — and my girlfriend and I were dancing around like wood nymphs for this little event. And, this guy came walking in the place looking like something from — some gent from the Wild West and proceeded to come up to us and say that he wanted the two of us to come dance as go-go dancers in a bar in some town called Virginia City, Nevada, and we were like, ‘Who is this dude?’” (Works, 1996, 0:18:12). Despite some initial hesitancy, Luria, the long-haired, bespectacled redhead with surprisingly strong-willed resolve and forward-thinking vision, signed up and became a stalwart member of the Red Dog community later translating her experience in Virginia City into the spirit of Family Dog with Ellen Harmon, Alton Kelley, and Jack Tolle in San Francisco. While promoting Family Dog after her return from the Red Dog, she made such an impression on Ralph Gleason that he immortalized her and the other members of Family Dog in his book *The Jefferson Airplane and the San Francisco Sound*. “Luria was wearing Benjamin Franklin wire-rimmed glasses, superlong [*sic*] hair and a long dress of the kind we knew at the time as “granny dresses”.... [She argued,] “rock ’n’ roll is the new form of communication for our generation” (Gleason, 1969, pp. 1-2).

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<sup>161</sup> “Hurdy-gurdy girls” is a nineteenth-century term used to refer to Western dancehall or saloon girls who, presumably, danced along to the accompaniment of an accordion-like, stringed instrument of the same name. The instrument sounds reminiscent of bagpipes and is sometimes employed in Celtic music today.

Family Dog represented one of the most tangible, transformative developments to come out of the “Red Dog Experience,” and it would take San Francisco by storm while attempting to transplant some of the energy, music, and dancehall experiences from Virginia City. Its members were all driven by their love for good music and the tight sense of community that developed on the Comstock. Unlike the Charlatans, they weren’t in it for the fortune or fame. Rather, they wanted to change the world — and their generation — through music. Gleason recalled his interview with Family Dog, and, in particular, the words and enthusiasm of Luria Castell in this way:

Basically we want to meet people and have a good time and not be dishonest and have a profitable thing going on. I think that rock ’n’ roll people are just starting to know how to use their instruments. They’re doing new things in electronics, the generation brought up in the insanity... young people today are torn between the insanity and the advances of the electronic age.” A large, almost motherly young woman with pale skin, Miss Castell became very animated as she spoke and her cheeks flushed with the intensity of her vision. “Music is the most beautiful way to communicate, it’s the way we’re going to change things. Half the population is teen-aged now, you know,” she added ominously. “Dancing is the thing. When I heard the Lovin’ Spoonful in Hollywood, I couldn’t stop. It was such an enveloping sound. (Gleason, 1969, p. 3)

Besides Luria appearing on the scene as a go-go dancer, Ellen Harmon showed up in Reno looking for a job. After a call to Chan up at the Red Dog, she was picked up by Washoe Mike and transported to the Comstock where she worked a variety of positions from dishwasher to waitress while enjoying the strange action. Alton Kelly was a San Francisco-based artist and good friend of members of the Charlatans, namely Mike Ferguson with whom he roomed for a time. Jack Tolle came from New England and joined the group after the Red Dog experience.

Back on the recruiting trail, Chan travelled to Stinson Beach ending up at a small corner grocery store. There, he inquired into the whereabouts of a cook, Jenna Worden. Fortunately, the sturdy blond beauty with pleasing, full features evocative of sixteenth-century Netherlandish peasant painting just happened to be standing nearby with her four kids, and so the grocer pointed her out. At the twenty-fifth reunion of the Red Dog, Jenna still vividly remembered her first encounter with Chan, proto-prophet of the closed frontier — striking admixture of the captivating, charismatic Buffalo Bill and the magnetic, enigmatic Wovoka. His proto-hippie style inspired an entire generation. “Believe me, I had never seen anything like it before or since — with his long flowing hair, and he wore black clothes and a black vest. And, he was the most elegant person I’d ever seen.” The fascination with Chan and the Red Dog magnified into allure when he sent her roundtrip tickets to see how she’d “respond to the place” (Works, 1996, 0:12:34). Quickly, she made the nineteenth-century saloon kitchen into an art studio for her culinary masterpieces, including seven course meals featuring a variety of high-end French fare.

Add to the mix a real life Miss Kitty (Lynn Hughes) greeting customers at the door, an eclectic bunch of youth in costumes ranging from Wild West gunslingers to 1920s band musicians, a massive Native American bouncer (Washoe Mike) brandishing a Rainbow Girls sash stretched to capacity, and the overall effect was truly off-the-wall. With a full staff of colorful, costumed characters, the Red Dog was ready for opening night. Now, they just needed to settle on a house band.

### *Serendipity & the Red Dog Saloon*

Back in San Francisco, the Charlatans had major trouble. Their drummer, Dan Hicks, refused to make the trip out to the Red Dog. More than his fellow band mates, Dan felt decidedly hesitant about a clandestine desert pilgrimage to a remote ghost town for an unspecified summer music gig of unknown duration and who-knows-what kind of pay. The job had “shady” written all over it, and it wasn’t like he didn’t have other options. Dan reminisced in 2012, “I think I had another offer to play that summer somewhere else, and maybe in Lake County with a small little band. More like a straight jazz band thing.... I was thinking ‘Do I want to be in this? Is it *happening* here?’ You know, I can go to this other thing. But I stayed.” The week of the audition was a particularly hectic one for Dan, which contributed to much of his initial hesitancy. “I graduated from college, I failed the draft test,<sup>162</sup> and I had taken off in a car with George and Lucy and my drum set and stuff and driven up to Virginia City” (Barnett, 2012a, p. 19). Nonetheless, with some vigorous persuasion from the other members of the band, Hicks made it to the Red Dog where the Charlatans entered a veritable Old West vision.

Richard Olsen remembers their first drive down C Street as if it was something straight out of the cinema:

It was dusk, and you could see the twinkling lights, and I was going to myself “Wow, this is like out of a movie.” It was really kind of magical, us driving into town, the credits roll down, and the movie begins. The owner Mark Unobsky was really into guns, and so they became part of the image. For some unknown reason, it all just clicked and everyone just fit in. There was a tiny stage, and one amplifier with a tapestry over it that we all plugged into! People used to dance like crazy, and on the weekends it’d get jammed. Every weekend we’d sit upstairs in the porch there and just

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<sup>162</sup> Ironically, Hicks avoided the draft by failing the intelligence portion of the exam the same week he graduated college, but the military never made this connection.

watch the cars roll in, coming from all over, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle (Palao, 1996, p. 13)

Upon their arrival on the Comstock during the early summer of 1965, the Charlatans were nervous to make a good first impression. They had prepared, rehearsed, and promoted their rock band around the Bay Area for months without actually securing any gigs. It wasn't for a lack of talent. Instead, there weren't any venues for such a group in the City, at that time. They were simply too cutting edge, too crazy. After all, rock DJ "Big Daddy" Tom Donahue's eclectic new nightclub, Mother's, did not open until July 4, 1965, and it attracted few people. Marty Balin's nightclub, the Matrix, did not open until August 13<sup>th</sup> of that year, and it featured his own folk-rock group, the Jefferson Airplane, as the house band. Finally, the four members of Family Dog — the first promoters of acid rock and the San Francisco dance scene — would not coalesce until the autumn following their "Red Dog experience." Because of the lack of venues in San Francisco, the Charlatans were ready to get the band on the road.

Spring of 1965 had been a time of preparation. On the Comstock, Don Works and Mark Unobsky worked feverishly to meet building inspector codes and renovate the Comstock House into a psychedelic pleasure palace. Across the West Coast, Chan Laughlin assembled a ragtag crew of performers, service workers, and audience members to populate said establishment, weaving the unique western fantasy that the Red Dog became. In San Francisco, an eclectic crew of five performers practiced, photographed, and promoted a budding rock group, and George Hunter refined and polished their corporate image as the Charlatans. When these two visionary concepts finally collided — the Red Dog Saloon and the Charlatans — psychedelia was born. One can only imagine the

overwhelming, euphoric experience of LSD within the confines of that decked-out, authentic Wild West saloon was staggering and deeply impacting. The Charlatans quickly merged — along with their music and the colors of the room — into a bizarre frontier concoction of dapper, rock 'n' roll gunslingers and the resulting unapologetic, peculiar aesthetic became their own. While others copied this style upon their return to San Francisco, none would bring the same authenticity to it as the Charlatans in *this* place. The Charlatans were made for Virginia City! “The Victoriana that the group plundered for their image, championed by George Hunter and Michael Ferguson, went on to constitute a major part of the whole look of the San Francisco of the late 1960s, but none of the groups or artists who affected its trappings had the purity of the Charlatans’ vision” (Palao, 1996, pp. 5-6). Soon, they would advertise as the “limit of the marvelous” in the place that, historically, symbolized *the* nineteenth-century “limit of the marvelous.” It was, in a word, serendipity.

Serendipity was just one of many words that described the Red Dog’s gourmet fare. Jenna’s cooking helped convince even the most skeptical individuals to savor the Comstock. Her epicurean feasts became legendary, and they managed to captivate Dan Hicks, reluctant performer though he initially was. “I forget how long we played each night, but I know that we had a good — a big meal every night. Jenna, the cook, made these big meals like seven course meals or something.... It was great. You could go in the kitchen and get stuff if you wanted to, to eat. And just walk in there. And, you know, it was all pretty okay” (Barnett, 2012a, p. 22).

Following Dan’s lead, local skeptics would quickly transform into enthusiastic patrons. “The Red Dog scene flourished. Gourmet chef Jenna... attracted quite a follow-

ing for extravagant fare like suckling pig and the governor of the state made a few visits during the summer, even staging a kickoff luncheon for his reelection campaign at the Red Dog” (Selvin, 1994, p. 22). Jenna’s cooking and the amazing, no-expense-spared ambience of the place drew community crowds who willingly endorsed it.

### *Constructing the First Psychedelic Light Show*

The Red Dog’s painstaking renovations, sumptuous food, avant-garde music, and LSD-induced antics were further enhanced by Bill Ham and Bob Cohen’s “tripped-out” lightshow box. With this invention, Bill and Bob singlehandedly defined a major element of the psychedelic esthetic while creating a three dimensional art form firmly grounded in the temporality of performance art. But the actual construction of the machine did not go entirely as planned. In fact, there were two versions. The first machine was based on a color translator advertised in *Playboy* magazine for \$500. Bob managed to find a used version for \$350 in the City, and they started rewiring and changing bulbs. The result was a quasi-light show machine nowhere near the original design that they discussed with Mark Unobsky during their spring visit. While it did control light, the machine failed miserably in terms of incorporating moving parts. So, after further consultation with the Tennessee Blues guitarist turned saloon owner, Bill and Bob started over with what remaining money they had. The result was:

A cabinet that was five-feet by seven-feet and a foot-and-a-half deep and had a four-by-six foot... opaque Plexiglas sheet on the front. In the back of that, we had three mobiles that were motor driven, and we had 1250-watt dichromatic colored spots—red, blue, and green—that were mounted inside the cabinet, on the back wall, and wherever else we could arrange it,

that couldn't interfere with the moving mobiles. And those lights were controlled by the three-channel thing, light-sound thing. And, instead of hooking all the blues up to bass, say, and the reds to medium, and the greens to the high or something, we mixed them all up.

And so, Bob Cohen, the engineer, did the electric work. Mounting the bulbs in sockets that could be directed was, you know, pretty basic electric know-how. And, then, Bob found a channel... a circuit changer so we could actually hook up all twelve. They overloaded the 500-watt capacity of this thing. But we had it so that alternating combinations of these lights were being activated. And so, that way, it never repeated because the changing of the arrangement of the spotlights was controlled and was activated, and the mobiles were moving—the mathematical chances of having the same thing happen exactly [were very low.]

Anyway, that was the accomplishment of this light display—it was activated either by the band [so] that it could be plugged into the sound mix, or it could be used with recorded sound when the band wasn't playing. It just had to be musically activated.... The electric organ, I think it was called, was designed to respond to three frequencies—high, low, and medium.... Instead of having all of one color on one channel, we mixed it up. And, then, we had the channels being altered every so many minutes. And so, rather than just being something that was blinking red and blue and green or something, all of this time, these mobiles that the lights were coming through were creating these moving forms, so it was a kinetic thing. But by being plugged in with the band, if the band was playing something and certain things were, you know, the loud part of the music, then you would get brighter light. (Barnett, 2012c, pp. 10-12)

With all of its intricate moving parts, electronics, and mobiles, getting the light machine from San Francisco to Virginia City represented no easy proposition. In an ostentatious move, Bill and Bob eventually delivered the device—mere hours before opening night—following a nail-biting drive from San Francisco with the device haphazardly latched to the top of the aforementioned VW bus. Of course, the trip marked one episode in a string of challenges to deliver a light machine to the Red Dog. Heck, Bill was not even certain that he and Bob would be able to reassemble the technology once they arrived.

I can't imagine doing anything like this again.... But it was a VW bus that Bob Cohen had rebuilt the engine, with me as the assistant, in a vacant lot. And so many things happened in the vacant lot.<sup>163</sup>

And so Bob followed me in his VW van, and we made it all the way and we got there the day of the opening of the Red Dog Saloon. And the problem for me was that Bob had taken the mobiles apart because we couldn't leave them in the thing on top of the can because it was going to be, you know, flat instead of vertical.

And, he didn't understand how delicate the arrangements were so that they wouldn't bump into each other—and so forth and so on. So, it was rather intense trying to rearrange these while the Red Dog was in full swing, getting ready for opening night. But we managed to do it and the display functioned quite well for the opening night. (Barnett, 2012c, pp. 16-17)

Thankfully, Bill Ham—a thoughtful, mystical artist with an imposing double length of beard and intense, magnifying gaze—was, and perennially remains, equal parts inventor and painter. So, the light machine came together just in the nick of time. As the lights of the machine responded to the pitches and harmonies onstage, it projected a variety of colors onto the pulsating, dancing crowd—sundry hues splashed onto “human canvas” where they morphed into a living, breathing, interactive masterpiece existing entirely in the moment, a moment that could neither be captured nor recreated in the same way twice. It was the closest visual art had ever come to approximating the experience of a live musical performance. This was fleeting art—the machine was brilliant! Don Works described it this way:

The light machine was a really interesting thing. It was done with electricity, and lights, and color sensors. And, it was done on a rotisserie, like a

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<sup>163</sup> Ham is referring to the once abandoned lot located near 2111 Pine Street where the iconic Family Dog photo was captured by Herb Greene—featuring Bill Ham, Dan Hicks, Mike Wilhelm, Richard Olsen, Mike Ferguson, Janis Joplin, Sam Andrew, and Chet Helms (standing atop the psychedelically painted Family Dog van) along with many other familiar faces from the early psychedelic scene. The photo includes many of their kids and dogs, and it perfectly captures the tight-knit Family Dog community at its height.

barbecue rotisserie. These different things would come circling around, and when a low beat was heard, “Boom,” it would come out red. And, when it was medium it was yellow, a high note was blue. The different notes would mix, and you would get red, yellow, and blues, and then mixed and they would make orange, and purple, and violet. And, you know, it was a fantastic thing. (Engrid Barnett, 2011, p. 24)

Soon, Bill and Bob’s machine captured the attention of the Virginia City *Territorial Express* with headlines such as “Sound-Sight in Color Wows ‘Em at Red Dog!”

Opening night, June 29, 1965, at the Red Dog was a hoot and a blast! Moreover, it was advertised by one of the most iconic posters in twentieth century rock history, the first psychedelic rock poster—affectionately known as “The Seed.” “The Seed” was designed by Byron “Mike” Ferguson and George Hunter modeled after a fin-de-siècle circus poster from which they borrowed the phrase, “the limit of the Marvelous.” This phrase quickly became synonymous with the Charlatans and, perhaps, most aptly describes their unhinged showmanship. An eclectic admixture of various elements borrowed from the Victorian, Wild Western, and budding psychedelic aesthetics, the poster was achieved entirely in pen and ink. According to legendary psychedelic poster artist, Dennis Loren,<sup>164</sup> who studied the work extensively in order to produce an evocative updated version for Moonalice’s 2012 performance at the Red Dog:

At first, it looks very simple, but it’s actually quite complex, and it has a lot of, I’d say, design influences in it.... The parts... where the heads were drawn in the little oval frames, and... the word “Amazing” looks to me like an early ‘60s pre-psychedelic, beatniks-style coffee house, folk singer kind of thing....

George hand lettered ‘The Charlatans’ logo. And if you look at it, you’ll see – an A and R kind of about each other.... They kind of are drawn together and then he had some flourishes with the lettering. But Mike did

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<sup>164</sup> Dennis Loren is a well-recognized psychedelic poster artist who has worked for *Cream*, numerous rock groups, and written and/or contributed to numerous books and articles about psychedelic poster art.



Figure 6.3 Predictably enough, there is a story behind “The Seed” that includes a question of which is the original poster; when the concert was postponed, the artists re-drew it with a revised opening date of June 21. “Direct from San Francisco” is an amusing note, since they had never played a gig before the actual first performance in Virginia City. ([www.professorposter.com/seed.html](http://www.professorposter.com/seed.html); [www.classicposters.com/Charlatans/poster/Art\\_of\\_Rock/2.2.](http://www.classicposters.com/Charlatans/poster/Art_of_Rock/2.2.))

The type of photographic-inspired engravings that Dennis refers to in this passage were still very predominantly featured in Virginia City's main publication, *The Territorial Enterprise*, throughout the 1960s and so, no doubt, these influences along with the circus poster had a major impact on the development of "The Seed." Due to a conflict over the official opening date of the saloon (there were numerous inspections by local officials in an attempt by more conservative members of the community to deter or, at the very least, defer opening day of the Red Dog), two versions of the "Seed" poster were actually produced. The first version contained the opening dates of June 1<sup>st</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup>, 1965, and the second poster advertised the actual opening night of June 29, 1965.

Among those at the Red Dog on opening night was Don Works. Once billed as the fastest painter in Marin County, Works remains a complex, work-seasoned individual of the rugged, solitary Comstock variety. More prospector than peacenik, he has slightly disheveled white hair that starkly contrasts with his thick, leathery tan. He is an amazing storyteller once he gets warmed up, and he intersperses stories about guns and the Korean War with flirtatious winks and the time-tested charm of another era. It is safe to say that the Red Dog would have never happened without Don. In fact, Bohemians, Beatniks, and Hipsters (or, proto-hippies) flocked to his Zen Mine long before the Red Dog ever existed. He fed them, he gave them shelter, and he taught them how to shoot. Over time, as the numbers of those attracted to his mine grew, Works decided they needed another place to crash, thus, providing part of the impetus for what would become the Red Dog Saloon. Again, we will return to the Zen Mine hangout in our exploration of the origins of the Red Dog. But he must've felt fairly relieved that opening night, knowing he was no

longer solely responsible for feeding and housing the eclectic tribe of Bohemians, Beatniks, and Hipsters in attendance.

Don Works cannot be mentioned without a brief discussion of gunplay at the Red Dog. He, like Mark Unobsky, was a firearms aficionado, and so he brought a certain old-timey feel to the Red Dog Saloon by evoking the “shoot ’em up” element of the Wild West, literally. In fact, his reputation preceded him as related in Joel Selvin’s *Summer of Love*. “Bartender Don Works was known for firing off rounds at targets real or imagined as he grew increasingly drunk throughout the evenings and tired of acting the servile publican, filling the room with smoke from the black powder ammunition he always used” (Selvin, 1994, p. 20). While this statement contains some hyperbole, it presents a grain of truth. Don *was* personally involved in at least two of the most celebrated shooting tales from the Red Dog days. With regard to these episodes of gunplay—namely, checking the [deputy] sheriff’s gun and the rafter incident—they are sometimes interchangeably mixed depending on who is relaying the story. While these anecdotes—in a wide variety of configurations—grace the pages or documentary narratives of numerous psychedelic rock histories from Joel Selvin’s *Summer of Love* to Charles Perry’s *The Haight-Ashbury* to Mary Works-Covington’s documentaries *The Life and Times of the Red Dog Saloon* (1996) and *Rockin’ at the Red Dog: the Dawn of Psychedelic Rock* (2005), they are still best explained by Don himself.

What follows, according to Don, is *the* definitive, true story of the gun checking episode at the Red Dog, and he should know since it is really his alone to tell. Don was working the bar that night, and it wasn’t opening night as many have claimed (presumably, to heighten the drama of the storytelling). Rather, it was simply ‘a night’ if ever there

was such a thing at the Red Dog. Nonetheless, Don was working the bar when who should walk in but the sheriff's deputy. Enchanted by the stunning refurbishments, vintage costumes, and nineteenth century ambience, the deputy made a quick decision to honor the saloon by indulging in a time-honored, frontier tradition—checking his gun at the bar.

So, he comes in one night and like we are playing the Old West, you know... so, he comes in and says, "Check my gun." He hands me the gun. Not the sheriff, now, this is the deputy. This is the true story. So, he comes in, and he hands me the gun. He says, "Check my gun." So, I look at the gun and spin the cylinder and I go, "Pow, pow." [Makes a motion as if shooting down into the floor.] And, he goes, "Give me my gun back!" I've heard other people say I shot it in the ceiling. That's not true. (Engrid Barnett, 2011, pp. 20-21)

Of course, that's not to say that Don Works *never* shot into the ceiling, just not *that* time. The ceiling shooting, or, rather, "rafter incident," actually did occur on opening night, and it set the precedent for the following six weeks, an admixture of wide-eyed hilarity, rollicking music, and abject insanity. After asking Don about this incident, his clear blue eyes glimmered mischievously, and he told me the following with no small measure of glee:

A moth in the rafters, right? I think that was opening night. And, what happened was I'm tending bar, you know—I went from running the paint job and everything to getting to be a bartender. So, I'm there on opening night, and I'm tending bar and having a few beers. We are allowed three beers a night. But people would buy you drinks and stuff like that, you know. Anyway, I was getting pretty juiced, and I had my cap and ball beneath the bar, and I noticed this moth up in the rafter, and it got to bothering me. And, after a while, I pulled out my cap and ball revolver and "pow," [makes a shooting gesture upward] I shoot the moth off the rafter. And, a piece of wing falls down into this gal's martini. And, of course, there's a guy sitting in front of me when I fired the gun, and he's got his face all covered in smoke and black powder, and he says, "Get me a dou-

ble, quick. I've just been shot.” And, of course I saw the moth wing in the gal's martini, so I gave her another martini. (Engrid Barnett, 2011, p. 18)

Unfortunately, at least one moth *was* seriously injured in the making of this latter day Wild West legend. Nonetheless, while other communities, especially in and around San Francisco, would have arrested Don Works on the spot for such Wild West antics, these moments were celebrated in Virginia City. Always willing to acknowledge its notorious underbelly, Comstock newspapers enthusiastically blasted headlines such as, “Gunplay on C Street: A Hot Time at the Red Dog Saloon” (vol. 112, No. 30).

Comstockers had mixed impressions about the Red Dog Saloon and the denizens that it attracted. On one hand, the regalia, renovation, and attention to nineteenth century detail was welcomed. They—along with *Bonanza*—breathed second life into an otherwise diminishing community. Between the gun-toting antics and the costumes, it appeared to many in the Virginia City community that no matter how odd these long-haired, interminably euphoric youth might be, at least they had one thing right, the Old Timer spirit. Moreover, they were absolutely fascinating, which could, perhaps, be good for the tourist's dollar.<sup>165</sup> After all, it was extremely clear that they brought new life — and, a small clan of strangely dressed residents of San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle — with them to the area, and that was alright by many. They knew how to dress, and, by placing themselves within a late nineteenth century to early twentieth century context, won further respect from many locals.

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<sup>165</sup> By the 1950s and 1960s, Virginia City, Nevada was a community in steep decline, a veritable ghost town whose second chance at life involved “mining” the tourist's dollar. With the rise in the 1950s of popular Western TV shows such as *Gunsmoke* and, more specifically, *Bonanza*, the Comstock came to rely on the waves of tourists these shows attracted to the region.

On the other, the gunplay — dangerous but authentic<sup>166</sup> — and the strange, hyper-enthusiastic behavior sometimes had to be overlooked. That was not always easy to do. “Locals accepted the strange longhairs, although they never guessed at what true weirdness lay behind those sparkling eyes, and the summer passed with only minor episodes of tension, like the time some roughnecks left an old tombstone with the name “Charlatans” carved in it” (Selvin, 1994, p. 22). The tombstone never bothered Dan Hicks very much—it was the bug wrangler spraying DDT that got to him. “I remember one episode with the jug band.<sup>167</sup> We would play on that stage there on Saturday afternoon. Some guy—had one of those long tube DDT things [that] you could squirt, old-fashioned with a handle—and, he was squirting the stage as though this was a bunch of insects to get rid of or something. I remember this. I was like, ‘What the fuck?’” (Barnett, 2012a, p. 30). Besides this, Dan remembers some significant tensions with the “red-neck,” red-shirted Clampers—members of the E Clampus Vitus Chapter in Virginia City—who participated in local parades and partook in wild parties. (They still do!) During one such civic parade, Dan and other members of the Charlatans sat on the balcony of the Red Dog watching the events below, when he noticed the Clampers communicating a clear message to the Red Doggers. “I remember there was a big parade gonna happen. I think it was the Clampers, and they came marching by—it might have been other people, too. They came marching by, and they had like guns with blanks. ‘Bang, bang, bang,’ and they saw us up

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<sup>166</sup> While this dissertation tends to re-envision Virginia City, Nevada, as an industrial city where mining accidents were far more prevalent than gunplay in the streets, the area still had its share of rough-and-tumble entertainment venues including O’Brien and Costello’s Saloon and Shooting Gallery located along the southern end of C Street in the Barbary Coast (James, 1998, pp. 186-187). Mixing firearms and alcohol, while generally discouraged by the author of this work, was a common strain between nineteenth-century Comstockers and their Red Dog counterparts.

<sup>167</sup> Dan Hicks is referring to the P.H. Phactor Jug Band who made their way up to the Red Dog at some point during the summer of 1965. Soon, they were playing Saturday sets, and Dan was joining in on guitar.

there watching the parade, and, boy, I remember them definitely shooting our way” (Barnett, 2012a, pp. 30-31). Stories such as Dan’s suggest a certain level of community tension that existed between the Red Doggers and locals during that first summer. So do precautions taken by Red Doggers. For example, it is well-reported that Lynn Hughes wore a Victorian door knob in her garter belt in case the Red Dog crowd acted a little too rowdy. Carrying firearms represented a means of breaking up hostilities and fending off random redneck attacks. Johne Behner slept above the bar, and she often felt nervous about catching a stray bullet in the middle of the night. Since it was commonplace to dispatch a couple of bullets into the rafters above the bar to break up unruly customer disputes, she regularly jumped out of bed and hid down the hallway until noisy brawls died down.

Redneck onslaughts were handled with similar panache. Best known for his work as the founder and lead guitarist of Quicksilver Messenger Service, John Cipollina personally witnessed one such event while drawing musical inspiration from the Charlatans one summer afternoon at the Red Dog.

I got together with Quicksilver because they wouldn’t let me join the Charlatans. I’ll tell you, the first time I saw them they were at a friend’s of mine’s place, a guy named Mark Unobsky, who is clearly the starting of the San Francisco scene, and he had a place called the Red Dog Saloon. And, I walked in there very young, very impressionable, and I see this band with hair down to their backs, dressed authentically western. These guys styled. They were naughty guys, and there was something about their playing—now, this was right in the heart of folk music—when everyone’s going “Hang down your head, Tom Dooley” and [they’re] sitting there going “boom chocka locka locka, boom chocka locka locka,” and they’re going, “Wait, a second man, that’s not cool”. [There were] electric guitars, and it was very defiant, actually.

These rednecks walked in the bar with a rope—“Let’s get those faggots!”—and, I’m going “Uhhhhhhhhh...” The piano player reached [behind his] back and pulled out—I never will forget it—a little Beretta,

held it up, and fired three shots in the air. And, I thought this was part of the act, and, then, I'm watching pieces of wood fall down, and I thought, "I wanna join that band so bad." These guys were bad. I mean, these guys carried, which is another thing Quicksilver did have in common with the Charlatans. We all carried guns. (Works, 1996, 0:59:50)

Despite these stories, the Comstock proved far more tolerant of such craziness than any contemporary urban areas would have. Easy access to guns was ensured by Mark Unobsky's firearms obsession. In fact, he often paid Red Doggers in guns rather than currency. He made arrangements at Charlie Stone's gun shop for his employees—including the Charlatans—to pick out weapons credited against their pay for the week. Soon, this alternate form of payment developed into weekly gun trades. Red Doggers obsessed over finding *the* perfect handgun, pistol, rifle, or shotgun for their individual, frontier personae. Mark Fergusson, for example, insisted on arcane, French-engraved pieces whenever possible. Over time, this fascination with firearms started to receive negative attention in the community. These worries culminated one day during the summer of 1965 when, according to Chan, Mark headed back to the Red Dog from Charlie Stone's where he had signed and collected the newest weapons for his employees. He decided to carry them all back at once to the horror of many. "Here comes Mark down the street at ten o'clock in the morning. This sort of pudgy, little crazed proto-hippie with twenty-five or thirty long guns in his arms and pistols sticking out of every pocket" (Works, 1996, 0:53:22). Mark's appearance in the street, arms loaded down with guns, shocked many locals. After all, even Comstockers had limits. Many residents disapproved of the casual way that some Red Doggers handled guns. Even they'd known about the LSD, there

might've been a riot! While the young long-hairs' antics were reminiscent of the Wild West, no resident actually wanted to take a bullet for the sake of posterity.

Despite regular gunplay — and, in some case, because of it — the Red Dog continued to attract crowds by providing pleasing nineteenth century-inspired visuals, fine dining, excellent service, and cutting-edge music. Complimented by the luxurious ambience, the saloon rapidly attracted a variety of local notables who legitimized the place with their patronage. “Gourmet cook Jenna... worked the kitchen and her lunches already attracted everybody from the entire town constabulary to Lucius Beebe, the eccentric dandy and entrepreneur who lived in a private railroad car and spearheaded the rebirth of the old silver city” (Selvin, 1994, p. 4). Besides Lucius Beebe, the Red Dog attracted Joe Conforte, infamous owner of the Mustang Ranch, and future Storey County District Attorney and close friend of Conforte, Virgil Buchianerri. As a result, many of the Red Doggers' more egregious antics remained largely tolerated, although, certainly, some Comstock teeth gnashed.

Virginia City's Red Dog Saloon quickly earned an interstate reputation among the “in” crowd of San Francisco, Portland, and Seattle. Soon, Beatniks, Hipsters, and “Long Hairs” came from all over the Northwest and Bay Area to partake in the music, the drugs, and the general mayhem of the “Red Dog Experience.” For some of those departing the Bay Area, this meant toking up as soon as the car started the long ascent up the Sierra. According to Dan Hicks, “They would just come and dig the action and everything and then go back. People from Seattle, I think. Maybe Portland.... And the City, San Francisco, [they] would come up there and be there for a little bit then split, you know. Go back.

So, I think Ellen, Kelley, Luria,<sup>168</sup> and these guys were — they did that — then, I actually really met them when I got back... So, you know, unbeknownst to me, they were planning some gigs, you know. They were going to become the Family Dog” (Barnett, 2012a, p. 13).

After asking Dan Hicks about how news of the Red Dog spread — apart from the Territorial Enterprise’s weekly ads for the Red Dog and the occasional poster that managed to head back over the Sierra — Dan attributed much to word of mouth, stating, “I don't [know] exactly except just through acquaintances I think, you know... Like my friends came up there... So, I think it was just, you know, even toward the end of the summer, I missed it, I missed it, but I think like the “Further”—the bus, Ken Kesey and Neal Cassady and all those guys, I think, came through there” (Barnett, 2012a, p. 27). Don Works refers to this word of mouth phenomenon as the “Moccasin Telegraph” and attributes its origins back to the pre-Red Dog days when his Zen Mine was the main attraction. He recalled: “The Moccasin Telegraph was a group of people, you know, these are all young people moving around the country. I mean, we are talking New York, Chicago, we are talking Texas, we are talking Arizona, California, Oregon. They were coming through my place.... And so, when something happened in Oregon or San Francisco or, you know, Denver, or something like that, we knew about it. Because somebody was coming in through Denver, and we would get the whole story of what just happened last week in Denver, you know. So, we got to calling that the Moccasin Telegraph, you know” (Engrid Barnett, 2011, p. 12). The Moccasin Telegraph brought “happening” youth to and from the Red Dog including individuals such as John Cipollina whose future

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<sup>168</sup> Dan is referring to Family Dog co-founders Ellen Harmon, Luria Castell, and Alton Kelley.

band, the Quicksilver Messenger Service, took much of its Wild West inspiration from the Red Dog and the Charlatans. Nick Gravenites—famed Chicago blues, folk, and rock singer-songwriter for Janis Joplin, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and Mike Bloomfield — even checked out the place and swapped knife stories with Mark Unobsky.

Ken Kesey, Neal Cassady, Wavy Gravy, and the Merry Pranksters *did* come through Virginia City to visit the Red Dog Saloon on the “Furthur” bus at the end of the summer of 1965. The sight horrified old-time Comstockers. Heck, they ended up horrifying Red Doggers, too! “A school bus...glowing orange, green, magenta, lavender, chlorine blue, every fluorescent pastel imaginable in thousands of designs, both large and small, like a cross between Fernand Léger and Dr. Strange, roaring together and vibrating off each other as if somebody had given Hieronymus Bosch fifty bucks of Day-Glo paint and a 1939 International Harvester school bus and told him to go to it.” Of course, it is difficult to decide what was more shocking to locals, the massive, psychedelic neon bus plowing its way down C Street or the whacky crew that eventually piled out. Among the most iconic was Neal Cassady—model for Jack Kerouac’s larger-than-life fictional character, Dean Moriarty, in *On the Road*—who indulged in incessant, largely incomprehensible monologues while haphazardly tossing and catching a small sledgehammer through the air with one hand. Tom Wolfe would describe him in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Trip* as follows, “Off to one side is a guy about 40 with a lot of muscles, as you can see because he has no shirt on—just a pair of khakis and some red leather boots on and his hell of a build—and he seems to be in a kinetic trance, flipping a small sledge hammer up in the air over and over, always managing to catch the handle on the way down with his arms and legs kicking out the whole time and his shoulders rolling and his head bobbing,

all in a jerky beat as if somewhere Joe Cuba is playing ‘Bang Bang’” (Wolfe, 1968, p. 13).

As the story goes, the Merry Pranksters did not last particularly long on the Comstock. Depending upon who you talk to, they were kicked out within one hour to one day of their initial arrival at the Red Dog. In my interview with Mike Wilhelm, he claimed it took about an hour. In Charles Perry’s *The Haight-Ashbury*, he sums up the clandestine event rather succinctly while providing a slightly extended timeline. “Ken Kesey’s busload of Merry Pranksters showed up to check out the wild kicks said to be going on at the Red Dog. After a day and a night of psychedelic wildness, with electronic equipment set up on the antique floorboards and Neal Cassady flexing his sledgehammer, the owner [Mark Unobsky] padlocked the club until sanity returned” (C. Perry, 1984, p. 18).

But it wasn’t merely the insanity of the Merry Pranksters that prematurely brought the Red Dog summer of 1965 in Virginia City to a close. It took a drug bust. In fact, it took one of the most infamous drug busts in early rock history, a bust in the sleepy community of Rodeo, California where Chan Laughlin and Mike Wilhelm were passing through on the way to San Francisco from the Comstock. It’s actually a wonder that Chandler wasn’t caught much sooner. After all, he trafficked drugs back and forth between the Bay Area and Comstock for months if not years.

Part of what was going on in this whole scene was pot heads. We had collectively, individually—from college and from Marin County and from various sources—we’d all (as many people did in the ‘60s) pretty much given up on doing a lot of drinking and started smoking a lot of pot, and with 20 of us—roughly 15 to 20 of us up here on the hill—it required acquiring a fair amount of weed every week just to keep things running, and that was part of my position in the operation. And, I was down in San Francisco constantly buying weed, velvet draperies, china for the restaurant and all of the rest of the stuff that we couldn’t get in Reno. (Works, 1996)

But what began as a minor traffic violation in Rodeo turned nasty when the officer on the scene found pot on Chan. This would be their undoing as well as bring a swift end to the revelries of the Red Dog.

While Chan and Mike faced lock up in Rodeo, John Cipollina offered his unsolicited lead guitar services to the Charlatans. But it was too late. The Red Doggers were spooked, and so were locals once the arrest went out on the wire. The idea that citizens of Virginia City were nabbed in a drug bust didn't sit well with locals (Selvin, 1994). Storey County authorities turned very swiftly against the Red Doggers. Suddenly, apathetically tolerant Comstockers turned vindictive. No longer were the perennially euphoric, gun-toting San Franciscans patiently endured. Rumors about the Red Dog serving up poached meat swiftly led to health inspectors raiding the contents of the saloon's refrigerators and freezers. According to Dan Hicks:

So, word got back. This was toward the end of the summer kind of, yeah, that this arrest had happened in Rodeo, California. So, right then, all these—it seemed to me, all these food inspectors and kitchen inspectors and everybody showed up at the Red Dog. It was sort of like a red flag or something went out—on, and, all of a sudden, The Red Dog is like a target, you know, for some kind of an investigation because of this arrest. It was like, in my mind, it was like the town people kind of—their suspicions were confirmed, you know what I mean? That we were a bunch of dirty, dope-taking hippies, you know....

So, everybody started packing up, and there was no longer a—it may have been open, but there was no band. I don't know, no band and everybody started packing up and leaving. (Barnett, 2012a, pp. 33-34)

Overnight, the Heat and lots of unwanted attention descended on a group of people who originally traveled great lengths to avoid scrutiny and the law. It's no wonder that summer 1965 concluded very rapidly.

*Nostalgia & Performance on the Twentieth-Century Comstock*

Step out onto the Planet.  
 Draw a circle a hundred feet round.  
 Inside the circle are  
 300 things nobody understands, and, maybe  
 Nobody's ever really seen.  
 How many can you find? (Welch, 2012)

Despite the illicit use of drugs, despite the fantastic vintage costumes, despite the Red Dog's eclectic ambience, the Charlatans had big shoes to fill. After all, their historical counterparts certainly knew how to have a good time, and Virginia City was their sensual playground. Single young men with money to spare, mining anxieties to forget, and a general lack of societal strictures to observe, they sought out a remarkable variety of entertainments that fell well outside the norms of Victorian society. Comstock entertainment catered to a wide range of hedonistic desires from champagne and fresh New England oysters to burlesque melodeon shows, staged Indian attacks, and underage prostitutes (James, 1998, p. 178). Of the various types of entertainment available on the Comstock, music was consistently amongst the most popular, a testimony to its capacity to generate liminal space, evoke transformations, and embody places. Channeling the Bacchanal spirit and varied desires of that fabled yesteryear, participants in the Red Dog Experience soon found themselves scrambling to perform the Comstock, to "keep up" with their predecessors' and, inevitably barely scratched the surface of those ancient antics at dance halls, brothels, saloons, gambling houses, opium dens, melodeons, and opera-house-based bare-fisted boxing matches and animal fights. "In their [nineteenth-century] leisure the people [of Virginia City] could follow their desires to the limit of their imaginations and available facilities" whereas twentieth-century Virginians faced many more

limitations, due in large part to a general lack of infrastructure and amenities (Watson, 1964, p. 23). The lack of infrastructure, amenities, and people, however, held its own charms. By all accounts, Red Doggers experienced unprecedented personal freedom, and the majority of its participants blossomed in this hothouse of libertarianism, transforming their worldviews and redefining what was fast growing into a Countercultural movement.

Re-traversing the traditional cultural and financial interchange between the Bay Area and the Comstock, Virginia City happily welcomed and entertained this new group of San Franciscans (supplemented with individuals from Portland, Oregon; Seattle, Washington; and parts of Texas and the East). While hedonistically redefining their reality, the renovated Comstock House located at 76 C Street became ground zero for what would become a veritable cultural explosion or implosion, depending on the perspective. And, the bottom line was simple... Virginia City was far removed from law enforcement, parents, and authority figures. Virginians tended to be curious, at best; simply too drunk or blasé to care, at worst; and, incredibly difficult to shock in both regards. Not much had changed since Lucius Beebe's initial arrival on the Comstock and gleeful observation to his partner Charles Clegg, "Why, the alcoholic proof here is so high, and the moral tone so low, that we can be absolutely inconspicuous" (Glotfelty, 2008, p. 165).

A tourist trap of the most resolute kind, 1960s-Virginia City filled the minds of its visitors with panoply Wild West imagery, and the Red Doggers would prove only too happy to return the favor with outlandish, fiendish performances that both piqued and satisfied the expectations of the near-ghost town's remnant community. Conduits of history, the Charlatans readily took on the roles of outlaw banditos, hired guns, and desperados as they became more and more deeply entrenched in the atmosphere of the community and

the role-playing of other Red Dog cohorts enthusiastically involved in the same process. Anonymous play inspired by iconic images from the popularized frontier were particularly potent for the Charlatans and their fellow Red Doggers, all clear initiates of mid-twentieth century Wild West fable-weaving.

Raised prior to the advent of New Western Historians, they grew up wholeheartedly believing in the image of the virtuous cowboy, the tender trappings of the golden-hearted whore, and the noble resolution of frontier sheriffs bent on bringing order and civilization to the land. This education and indoctrination would serve them well as they took up imagined roles of the frontier thereby participating in the history and landscape of a truly unique place while creating an alternate reality. Or, as the renowned twentieth-century geographer of the grasslands, James Malin, alluded to in his own work, the relationships that develop between people and the land are reciprocal; just as people transform the land, so the land changes them. The Red Doggers, in resuscitating the faint Silver Queen, invariably and indelibly, were marked by the experience and *place*.

Participants in the Red Dog Experience consciously cultivated many of the folkloric images associated with Virginia City thereby reenacting and validating their own expectations and associations with the location, and so their interactions with the cityscape took on a participatory character not unlike that common to tourists in liminal spaces such as tourist resorts. Tourism as performance is a fairly new area of tourist studies wherein “tourists are conceptualized as embodied ‘actors’ who perform in various ways (and with varying degree of competence) on diverse stages” (Light, 2009, p. 241). Fundamentally, the concept has been asserted that tourists do far more than simply encounter place, they perform it, and the phenomenon of the Red Dog Experience — its

musicians and performers aside — still epitomizes this concept of place-induced performativity. Of course, when viewed in this light, it becomes fundamentally important to also take into account “various degrees of social and spatial regulation and management which, in turn, choreograph the ways that tourists can, and do, perform” under these circumstances (Light, 2009).

The behavior of the participants in the Red Dog Experience can be classified as inverting societal norms and the social ideologies of their home culture in San Francisco, and, in this respect their actions mirrored those of their nineteenth-century counterparts. There were some important distinctions, however. Although there are many famous accounts of alcohol-induced mishaps at the Red Dog Saloon and the presence of opiates is almost a given, a number of participants moved beyond these more traditional drugs of choice (for nineteenth-century residents alcohol and opium, for Beatniks alcohol and heroin) to experiment with marijuana and a variety of hallucinogens (including LSD and peyote). Unlike downers such as alcohol and heroin, which invariably produced introspective and depressive states, hallucinogens were associated with exuberant, vibrant experiences of expansion rather than diminution. Coupled with Virginia City’s expansive vistas where one is capable of seeing for one to two hundred miles on clear days (clear days being far more often than not the rule), participants experienced mind- and life-altering events. As described by numerous participants in the scene, these liminal events taking place in a liminal space, were clearly associated with the experiential acquisition

of esoteric knowledge; they had a very organic, transformative impact on their perceptions of the world and “real” reality.<sup>169</sup>

### *1965: Virginia City’s “Summer of Love”*

The history of the Red Dog Experience during the summer of 1965 was surprisingly short-lived largely because its popularity brought about its demise. This pattern would be repeated in San Francisco during the so-called ‘Summer of Love’ in 1967 when about 100,000 runaways and homeless youth descended on an unprepared, unequipped Haight-Ashbury. As Joan Didion chronicles in her essay “Slouching Toward Bethlehem,” the fabled Summer of Love was anything but idyllic. Moreover, as Selvin points out, adding media coverage to the mix only further exacerbated the problems and misconceptions tied to such large Countercultural gatherings.

The Summer of Love never really happened. Invented by the fevered imaginations of writers for weekly news magazines, the phrase entered the public vocabulary with the impact of a sledgehammer, glibly encompassing a social movement sweeping the youth of the world, hitting the target with the pinpoint accuracy of a shotgun blast.... What happened in a small neighborhood in San Francisco among a relatively small circle of people was never fully understood even by the people involved. Events, once set in motion, overtook them. The public instantly romanticized what they thought was going on. From the moment that word of strange goings-on leaked out of the Haight-Ashbury, the truth and the fantasy became entangled. (Selvin, 1994, p. 1)

The Red Dog scene and its singular place in the development of early psychedelia was quickly buried by the media frenzy surrounding, first, the Haight-Ashbury in ‘67; then,

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<sup>169</sup> During interviews with numerous firsthand participants to the Red Dog Experience, they consistently described the use of hallucinogenic drugs as “mind expanding”; “awakening a new consciousness”; and/or, leading to new understandings of the interaction between humans and the environment.” Additionally, many made the comment that they finally “got it” and that only other individuals with similar experiences could understand to what they alluded.

Woodstock in '69; and, finally the horrors of the Altamont Speedway Free Show at the end of that same year.

The Red Dog scene of 1965 represented a singular moment in Counterculture history — Virginia City's "Summer of Love." Like Bill Ham's light shows, it could never be recaptured or recreated twice. While there was a very invigorating summer of 1966 at the Red Dog with weekly performances transitioning back and forth between the Wildflowers and Big Brother and the Holding Company, the communal flavor of the place changed. It would never again be the same tight-knit community furtively experimenting with life, love, and music. Instead, it disintegrated into a mad dash toward stardom, commercialization, and personal interests, a micro-cell of the hurricane building in San Francisco. "The Red Dog is a serendipitous high, an exciting clash of old west and bright-eyed, bushy-tailed new. For six wild weeks in the summer of 1965 the band and coterie, awash in LSD, raise hell on the Comstock. It will be the band's moment in the sun. Routed by a drug bust, the party doesn't see out the summer, but the group had set their sights further afield on pop stardom" (Palao, 1996, p. 7). As bands such as the Charlatans, the Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother and the Holding Company, and the Grateful Dead chased commercial celebrity in the City, the Counterculture began to rot from within having fostered various strains of self-destructive, sometimes directionless, radicalism.

But 1965 was different. It was the serendipitous year when two competing visions of an emerging Counterculture smashed headlong into one another creating a psychedelic supernova of vibrant style, sensational music, sensual living, and communal debauchery before diffusing into incense-laced legend. "If the psychedelic '60s were born in the dance halls of San Francisco, then they were conceived in a saloon in a small western

mining town” (Works, 1996, 0:02:15). The intriguing collection of nostalgic remembrances surrounding the Red Dog include: the Charlatans’ first LSD-splashed audition, the amazing ambience of the Red Dog and its seven course meals provided by Jenna the cook, Bill Ham and Bob Cohen’s psychedelic light show machine, Lynn Hughes’ spontaneous performances with the Charlatans — when not playing “Miss Kitty,” the furtive beginnings of Family Dog as the group coalesced in Virginia City, the creation of the first psychedelic rock poster, infamous instances of gunplay, the initial goodwill of locals interspersed with occasional venomous tensions, the arrival of exotic long-hairs from all over the Bay Area and Northwest, the visit of the Merry Pranksters, the Rodeo drug bust, and the arrival of health inspectors. Of course, these episodes were punctuated by drug use, sex, more drug use, lengthy trips to the hot springs, still more drug use, gunplay on the desert, lots of rock ’n’ roll, and, last but not least, still more heavy drug use during all-night peyote-infused Native American church ceremonies. Perspectives shifted. Minds expanded. This could not have occurred in the City, or, in any city for that matter. It needed the Comstock with its infinite vistas, vast landscapes, and colorful history. Mary Works-Covington (daughter of Don Works) and creator of the documentaries *The Life and Times of the Red Dog Saloon* (1996) and *Rockin’ at the Red Dog: the Dawn of Psychedelic Rock* (2005,) explained it this way:

Place has such a massive influence on people and their art, their music, who they become.... When you're out here in all this space in Nevada, for a lot of people, it was the first time that they had been in all this space, and it was like somehow it freed their creativity to try new things. And, like my dad talks about, nobody was there bugging you, so you could just do stuff. And, you got to try things out without... getting in trouble. Or, having it haunt... your record. You got to just try it and see if it worked. So, in terms of creativity, I think the expansiveness of the land allowed an expansiveness of their creative aspects, whether they were an artist or musi-

cian or a writer or whatever. It freed them, somehow because it was free up here. There weren't a lot of people. There wasn't somebody watching you all the time. And, that is a really critical aspect that hopefully comes across in the film in terms of that time and place and why this was allowed to happen here. Why it did happen. Because it was here... It wasn't anywhere else. It wasn't in the middle of the City. (Barnett, 2012b, pp. 38-39)

As the proverbial saying goes, “If you remember the ’60s, you probably weren’t there.” The liberal use of hallucinogens, marijuana, alcohol, heroin, and peyote during the six-week Comstock party — and about fifty years of temporal space — have definitely impacted the memories of its original participants. But the collective memory of this very tight-knit community of about 50 souls — intimately linked to this day — still preserves a vibrant array of vivid moments punctuating the psychedelic haze.

Like sepia-tinted prints shining forth from the pages of a vintage scrapbook, persistent recollections surface from interview to interview, fleshed out in startling detail, the well-worn tall tales of a cohesive community. Sometimes, small details differ slightly, but the overall impression is that these fabulous fables derived from the six week celebration at the Red Dog are now the stuff of legend, bandied about the communal campfire like wampum or rolled weed.

While this work does not purport to separate the fact from the folklore, and cannot, therefore, present a historically, definitive chronology of the six weeks of debauchery surrounding the first “Red Dog Experience,” it does represent a collection of moments that — when strung together like the notes of a musical phrase — create the unique, haunting melody that was and will ever remain the Red Dog.

### *Hipsters of the High West: An Afterlude*

The former interconnectivity of the Comstock and San Francisco is gone, but tourists flocking in from the Bay to attend Virginia City's annual psychedelic fest (Hipsters of the High West) sure don't think so. The Comstock Lode has dried up, but new mining endeavors in the area may prove otherwise. Virginia City is no longer an exurb of San Francisco, but it is an exurb of a shared history, and it continues to trudge along happily attracting about one and half million tourists per year. They come to "Step back in time" and to revisit the "Bonanza." They come to ride the rekindled V & T Railroad, which has been restored for travel between Virginia City and Carson City.

September of 2012's "Hipsters of the High West" was marked by two days of solid concert-going — interspersed with mid-day Bloody Mary-laced brunches and BBQ dinners — were outstanding performances by notables such as Nick Gravenites,<sup>170</sup> David and Linda LaFlamme,<sup>171</sup> and Moonalice.<sup>172</sup> Conceived by the Red Dog's current owner, Loren Pursel, guided by a local creative panel including longtime Virginia City resident and frontman for Sopwith Camel, Peter Kraemer, Hipsters of the High West commemorated "the beatnik's [*sic*] that molded the music of the 1960's at the Red Dog Saloon."<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>170</sup> Nick Gravenites was an original Red Dog participant and continues to perform as a blues guitarist across the country. Formerly a performer with the Electric Flag and Big Brother and the Holding Company, he has written songs for entertainers including Janis Joplin, Paul Butterfield, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and Elvin Bishop.

<sup>171</sup> The virtuoso violinist David LaFlamme is founder of It's a Beautiful Day. He performed with the Electric Chamber Orkustra, an early Dan Hicks and the Hot Licks, and much earlier with Janis Joplin and Jerry Garcia.

<sup>172</sup> Moonalice was formed in 2007 by former members of the Flying Other Brothers and is the first band without a label to achieve one million direct-from-artist downloads of one song from its own servers. The riveting "It's 4:20 Somewhere" has been downloaded over two million times. See note 8, below, for the band line up; for the 2012 event, Moonalice released their own psychedelic-styled poster, very much in keeping with 1960s versions.

<sup>173</sup> For more information on Hipsters of the High West, see: <http://backroadbars.net/602/>.

During the three-day festival, the Red Dog was abuzz with nostalgia-infused remembrances of the saloon's former days as the origin point for psychedelia. Between sets, Chicago blues legend, Nick Gravenites, told me a story about his visit to the Red Dog in 1965 when Mark Unobsky proudly displayed a massive bowie knife that he was carrying for Nick to see. Gravenites was evidently very impressed by the Wild West savagery of the scene. The Red Dog was home to the first psychedelic light show, delivered via a contraption created by Bill Ham and Bob Cohen that flooded the saloon stage with a constant, hypnotic pattern of lights mechanically attuned to respond to on-stage harmonies (Ham 2013). The net effect was a sort of synesthesia produced by a machine that Bill Ham found in the tiny back-section ads of a *Playboy* magazine. Since synesthesia was a sizable obsession of late nineteenth century Decadent writers such as Joris-Karl Huysmanns, how oddly fitting it was that this device could migrate from the rear pages of a porno rag — with a bit of Rube Goldberg gimmickry on Bill Ham's part — into the confines of a period Victorian saloon, surely a kind of premonition fifty years ago of today's Steampunk style.

Virginia City's Red Dog Saloon offered the first paying gig to a psychedelic rock band, the Charlatans,<sup>174</sup> who quickly earned a distinction as the earliest group ever to acknowledge auditioning when fully loaded on LSD — again, at the Red Dog. Paying gigs and drug-limned performances aside, the Charlatans' time at the Red Dog inspired a hand drawn poster, inked by George Hunter and Michael Ferguson, advertising opening weekend in the summer of 1965. Now known as the "Seed," this iconic and highly prized

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<sup>174</sup> The original line up of the Charlatans included George Hunter (electric autoharp, vocals); Mike Wilhelm (lead guitar, vocals); Michael Ferguson (piano; vocals); Dan Hicks (drums, vocals); and, Richard Olsen (bass guitar, clarinet, vocals).

poster marks the very beginning of psychedelia — as it would come to be known — in San Francisco. The first and most enthusiastic promoters of the Charlatans psychedelia in San Francisco after the summer of 1965 were Family Dog, a group established by Red Dog participants Luria Castell, Ellen Harmon, Alton Kelly, and Jack Tolle. Finally, the Red Dog scene and its major participants, especially George Hunter and Chandler (Chan) Laughlin, developed a personal esthetic and a sense of style coined “proto-hippie” — long hair and eclectic clothing were the result of an unlikely mating of Wild West, Victorian, and Native American influences. The offspring was fodder and food for thought for the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Quicksilver Messenger Silver, and countless psychedelic fans once the Charlatans and Family Dog hit the pavement back in San Francisco.

In 1966, Big Brother and the Holding Company alternated weekends with the Wildflowers at the Red Dog while premiering the newest member of their band, Janis Joplin, a primly dressed little Texan with a HUGE voice. While most of my interviewees could not remember Janis performing with BBHC that summer, a few did concede that the band performed with “a woman” that summer. Sam Andrew and Peter Albin, however, both were adamant that she did make the trek up to the Red Dog with them, and Sam remembered her liking the strange western fantasy land that they called home for a few weeks. Yet, despite many firsts in Virginia City, the psychedelic reverberations of the Comstock would soon be overwhelmed by the voices of countless runaways spurred onward by the media to descend in great waves upon the Haight-Ashbury. San Francisco would never be quite the same. By 1967, as these same bands stood onstage surveying

the massive crowd of 100,000 teenagers flooding their beloved city, one can only imagine what they were thinking.

As San Francisco exploded with social unrest, massive runaway populations, and all of the problems inadvertently wrought by a press who still wanted to sell newspapers (not unlike those long lost Comstock journalists of the 1860s), Virginia City slumped back into its peaceful bleary-eyed slumber as a half-forgotten ghost town happy to welcome tourists on nice summer days. The Red Dog Saloon would go through many transformations before coming back into the hands of an owner truly interested in preserving its Hipster heritage. Loren Pursel has revamped the place and even erected a historical landmark in 2011 that does an excellent job of outlining groups from the 1960s and contributors to the psychedelic scene that bloomed in San Francisco during the 1967 Summer of Love. The historical marker does a superb job of creating new Comstock legend, too. After all, the Grateful Dead and the Jefferson Airplane were never known to have been affiliated with the Red Dog although perhaps a member or two of the former hitchhiked up with Ken Kesey's merry bunch. Nonetheless, the plaque reads:

During the summer of 1965, Laughlin recruited much of the original talent that led to a unique amalgam of traditional folk music and the developing psychedelic rock scene. He and his cohorts [*sic*] created what became known as "The Red Dog Experience," featuring previously unknown musical acts — Big Brother and the Holding Company, Jefferson Airplane, Quicksilver Messenger Service, The Charlatans, The Grateful Dead and others — who played in the completely refurbished, intimate setting of Virginia City's Red Dog Saloon.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> For the entire historical marker description, see: <http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=45572>.



Figure 6.4 Photograph of the Historical Marker at the most current incarnation of the Red Dog Saloon in Virginia City, Nevada. Photo courtesy of Barry Swachamer, July 22, 2011.

During Hipsters of the High West, Moonalice<sup>176</sup> attracted a large enclave of Grateful Dead fans easily distinguished by colorful tie-dyed shirts, dancing bear logos, and iconic skulls. Following hot on the heels of Moonalice's explicit references to legalizing pot came eddies of smoke outpouring from indiscreet joints. Event organizers reproduced a psychedelic light show digitally projected on the back of the stage. This light show corresponded hypnotically to the diverse harmonies, throbbing rhythms, and classic counterculture messages of their music and gave some inkling of what it must have been like to inhabit the Comstock during its 1965 'Summer of Love.'

While the music of Moonalice pulsed through the quaint nineteenth-century frontier saloon, many a self-identifying Dead Head spoke as if the Holy Grail was found: the place and the very stage that launched the Grateful Dead's career. They walked around the Red Dog, dark-lit like a chapel, wide-eyed, reverent, zonked, and generally incredulous: "Jerry was here!" Not to be outdone, Jefferson Airplane fans came up with a few historical concoctions of their own. There were whispered exclamations of: "Grace sat here! Grace sang here! Can you believe Jorma and Grace were here?" Not really, but I've some time to catch on to how the Comstock plays with history. As Jon Christensen rightly observed, "Virginia City still underestimates the value of real history. It has the real thing but does its best to cover it up. And if a good fantasy will do better at attracting tourist dollars, well then, by all means" (Christensen, 1998, p. 93). Ironically, most did not acknowledge the potential that Janis, according to a number of sources, *was* there. This is irony at its extreme! But, it has much to do with how Comstockers have always

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<sup>176</sup> Moonalice plays a mixture of original tunes as well as hits made famous by the Grateful Dead, Nick Gravenites, and others. Its members include: Roger McNamee (bass, guitar, vocals); Pete Sears (bass, keyboards, accordion, vocals); Barry Sless (bass, guitar, pedal steel guitar, vocals); and, John Molo (drums).



Figure 6.5 Dennis Loren's whimsical refashioning of "The Seed" to promote Moonalice's performance at Virginia City, Nevada's Hipster of the High West 2012. Image courtesy of Dennis Loren.

embellished, embroidered, and reworked the past to suit their own current needs.

Although no evidence confirms the Grateful Dead's or Jefferson Airplane's presence — in part or as a group — at the Red Dog Saloon in the mid-1960s, the legend has such potency that the Grateful Dead are now tightly woven into its fabric, truth be darned. After all, the unvoiced complaint would have it, if the Red Dog was such a happening place in 1965 and 1966, how could the Grateful Dead *not* have been there? “Jerry was THE man. He had to be there!” The same was obviously true for Grace Slick and Jorma Kaukonen. Yet, why do so many still adamantly believe that Janis *wasn't* there? It may be as simple as they are embarrassed to admit that they saw her and found nothing as of yet remarkable about her. She was still just Miss Janis Joplin. She had yet to become *Janis*, the psychedelic enigma. Overtly sexual, strange, drug-laced, and doused in lace and velvet, she was the Adah Isaacs Menken of her day. Christensen is certainly on to something about Virginia City not appreciating the value of real history...

Just as Piper's Opera House one street uphill from the Red Dog in Virginia City boasts a list of hundreds of performers, many of whom never actually visited Virginia City, so, too, the list of fictitious players at the Red Dog has become a gilded feature of Virginia City legend. Although the fabled confabulators of the nineteenth century, up to and including Mark Twain, left the Comstock a long time ago, new legends are woven. When various individuals —whether audience members or performers at Hipsters of the High West — were asked if they knew whether the Grateful Dead or Jefferson Airplane performed at the Red Dog, the general answer was a variation of the following, “Duh! It's on the historic marker out front. Go read it!” Although by no means a scientific poll,

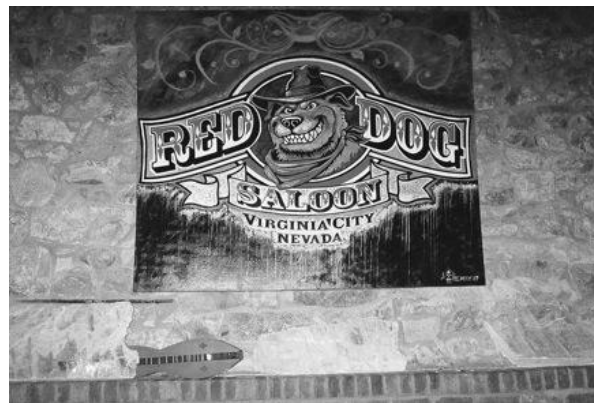


Figure 6.6 Even the Dog's gotten a makeover! Photographs of the Red Dog Saloon as it appears today under the ownership of Loren Pursel with his dog, Ruby, as the mascot, Virginia City, Nevada, 2012. Courtesy of Dennis Loren.

these haphazard interviews suggest a trend. And, so, alas, myth passes into history.<sup>177</sup> That said, the Grateful Dead's western clothing style and their spare and folksy musical endeavors circa 1970 certainly point toward the influences of a Wild West esthetic. The same can certainly be said for the Quicksilver Messenger Service, and it is well-known that John Cipollina visited the Red Dog in 1965 and liked what he saw. When the Red Doggers came to Virginia City, like the Forty-Niners turned Comstockers, they set into motion a series of events that can now be counted history (even with the somewhat shady parts.) They embraced the area's multi-layered liminality, re-plowed the long forgotten paths of connectivity once binding the two cities inextricably together, explored their "Otherness" onstage and on the dance floor thereby developing many of the fundamental features that would underscore the Counterculture's exoticism in San Francisco, and melded so completely with the community, landscape, and history as to become a very part of local place myth and legend.

The Charlatans' summer-long stay at the Red Dog had many repercussions for the San Francisco cultural scene, and maybe that explains (along with the historic marker, a somewhat ambiguous documentary film, and a general human tendency to localize and romanticize historic events) the temptation among Deadheads and Airplane fans to place their favorite band in an imagined place and uncertain time. The net effect is *Bonanza* starring the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane! It can get no better than that. And, so the Comstock legends continue. Silverland, after all, was always a place masterly placed

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<sup>177</sup> The process of mythologizing the history of the Red Dog is exponentially sped by the Internet, namely, through a variety of poorly researched yet highly popular counterculture blogs.

to weave stories of a fantastical past for those who need it today. Besides, “This is the West... When the legend becomes fact, print the legend” (Ford, 1962).

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