

# Mining History Association

## Readings on Virginia City Area Mining History

by Bob Spude

Anyone wanting to know the Virginia City story must begin with Ronald M. James, *The Roar and the Silence, a History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998); as Roger Burt wrote in his 1999 *MHJ* review, “this is...what must now be regarded as the definitive volume on the history of the district which briefly made Nevada the mining capital of the world.” Enough said. Ron James has also expanded his exploration of Comstock history, primarily social, with an edited work on women and, another, a history through archeology and material culture: Ronald M. James and C. Elizabeth Raymond, editors, *Comstock Women, the Making of a Mining Community* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998) and Ronald M. James, *Virginia City, Secrets of a Western Past* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012). With his wife Susan he has also provided two popular books more for the tourist trade: Ronald M. and Susan James, *Virginia City and the Big Bonanza* (Arcadia, 2009) and Ronald M. and Susan James, *A Short History of Virginia City* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2014), both handy graphic introductions to the Comstock.

Primary sources are the meat of anyone wanting to dine on the sumptuous Comstock bibliographic feast. Again, Ron James, a prolific author of Virginia City history, with Robert Stewart provides the introduction and editing of the Grosh brothers letters and story: *The Gold Rush Letters of E. Allen Grosh & Hosea B. Grosh* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2012). Did the brothers discover the Comstock Lode before all the others? Read the book. It is also a good account of the early placer mining era, as is past MHA president Sally Zanjani's *Devils Will Reign, How Nevada Began* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2007). Everyone has to read Mark Twain's classic *Roughing It* (1872; University of California, Berkeley reprint recommended) just to get a feel for the mining fever, or at least his antics during the early Comstock days. As Otis Young wrote years ago, in *Western Mining*, “Twain's hard-rock mining experience was a compendium of everything the expert miner did *not* do.”

Among the original works can be considered Twain's friend and contemporary reporter William Wright, *nom de plume* Dan De Quille, magnum opus *The Big Bonanza, an Authentic Account of the Discovery, History, and Working of the World-Renowned Comstock Lode* (1876, reprinted often). The work is mostly clippings from columns or stories from early newspapers that have been handed down as the true history of the Comstock (and much of it refuted or modified by Ron James' work). Still, it contains worthy period descriptions, and enthusiasm. More accurate because he interviewed multiple sources and had first hand data on mining and milling operations is Eliot Lord, *Comstock Mining and Miners* (1883; reprint San Francisco: Howell North, 1959). Everyone should have a copy of this work, especially the illustrated reprint. Or, less satisfactory, is the 1883 edition of this U S Geological Survey publication easily found on-line through Google Books. In 1943 the Nevada Bureau of Mines and Geology issued as a bulletin Grant H. Smith's expansion on Eliot's work, and this bulletin in turn was more recently updated by Joseph V. Tingley. The revised collaborative edition

appeared as, Smith and Tingley, *The History of the Comstock Lode, 1850-1997* (Reno: University of Nevada Press and Nevada Bureau of Mines and Geology, 1998 revised edition; original 1943), bringing the mining story up to the end of the twentieth century.

Also found on-line are many of the early travel accounts, recollections, or first histories, such as J. Ross Browne, *A Peep at Washoe* and "Washoe Revisited" in *Adventures in Apacheria* (1869); Henry DeGroot, *The Comstock Papers*(1876); Charles Howard Shinn, *The Story of the Mine, as Illustrated by the Great Comstock Lode of Nevada* (1896). But it is often far better to find a cheap paperback reprint with a good introduction, such as the reflections of an every-day woman on the Comstock brought into context, that of Mary McNair Mathews, *Ten Years in Nevada or Life on the Pacific Coast*, edited and introduced by Mary Lee and Clark C. Spence (1880, reprint with introduction, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

Many of the Comstock characters were larger than life, and a stream of biographies have poured from the silver region over the past century. Many of these are journalistic products, very light and hagiographic, but recently more serious biographies have appeared. See especially recent works by Michael J. Makley: *The Infamous King of the Comstock, William Sharon and the Gilded Age in the West* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2006) and *John Mackay, Silver King in the Gilded Age* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2009), both major Bonanza Kings whose Comstock wealth gave them influence beyond Virginia City. Similarly, the insanity of Virginia City newspaper business is exposed in Richard Dwyer and Richard Lingenfelter, *Dan De Quille, a Biography and Anthology* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1990). Still valuable are Russell R. Elliott, *Servant of Power: A Political Biography of Senator William M. Stewart* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1983) and Robert E. and M. F. Stewart, *Adolph Sutro, a Biography* (Berkeley: Howell-North Books, 1962), about the dreamer and his tunnel.

Another prolific author, Stanley Paher has done much to write and publish on Nevada history, primarily as a ghost town aficionado. A recipient of the MHA's Rodman Paul Award for his writings, his classic is: Stanley W. Paher, *Nevada Ghost Towns & Mining Camps* (Berkeley: Howell-North, 1970; reprint Reno: Nevada Publications), worthy handbook for those interested in Nevada's mining remains left across the landscape. Supplementing this volume is Stanley W. Paher, *Nevada Ghost Towns & Desert Atlas* (Reno: Nevada Publications, revised edition 2012), with color maps and directions to mine sites and ghost towns. Stan's Nevada Publications has reprinted or offers for sale many of the early publications; see his web page:

<http://www.ghosttowns.com/nevadapublications.html> One of my cherished items is a small pamphlet, autographed by the author: John M. Townley, *The Comstock Guidebook* (Reno: Great Basin Studies, 1984). An early offering for the tourist interested in seeing behind the false fronts of C Street, John was a friend and early member of the MHA, and our Mining History Journal founder and first editor. His essays and books reflect a potential lost by his untimely death.

To ensure that all understand that we enjoy ghost mining landscapes, but don't collect relics from "abandoned" mines sites because of the potential information they can provide, I highly recommend two example archeological studies: Kelly J. Dixon, *Boomtown Saloons, Archeology and History in Virginia City* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005) and, of course, past MHA president Don Hardesty's classic *Mining Archeology in the American West, A View from the Silver State* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010). Both reveal the important stories that come from the artifacts and mining features strewn across the mining landscape. Great reads all.

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