Mining and the Folklore of the West: The Role of Industry in Shaping Regional Traditions

By
Ronald M. James

With the publication of *Monumental Lies: Early Nevada Folklore of the Wild West* in 2023, my four decades of considering the role of mining in shaping the region's traditions has finally borne fruit.[1] The title memorializes the central role played by deceit in the folklore of the West. That playful factor aside, the mining industry is key to the other three cornerstones of regional stories that circulated during the nineteenth century.

Mining itself represents the first of these cornerstones. The quest for gold and silver enflamed the imagination, and many of the narratives that emerged as people settled the West dealt with how to acquire wealth and how others succeeded or failed in the endeavor. Without mining, beginning with the California Gold Rush of 1849 and continuing to the present, the folklore of the region would have looked very different.

The remaining two cornerstones are directly linked to the industry, namely its demographic consequences. Mining caused—and continues to inspire—dramatic fluctuations in the growth and decline of communities. In addition, mining has historically attracted a diverse assortment of fortune seekers, the second population-based factor affecting regional traditions. The groundbreaking historian of the mining West, J. S. Holliday, eloquently expressed this phenomenon with the title of his seminal publication, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience*.[2] What was true in 1849 has consistently been the case ever since: the lure of precious metals attracts an international array of people, who just as easily abandon a place when a resource is exhausted.

The pivotal role of rapid population change presented a situation that can seem contrary to the growth of tradition: the discipline of folklore studies was founded on the idea that it is possible to collect

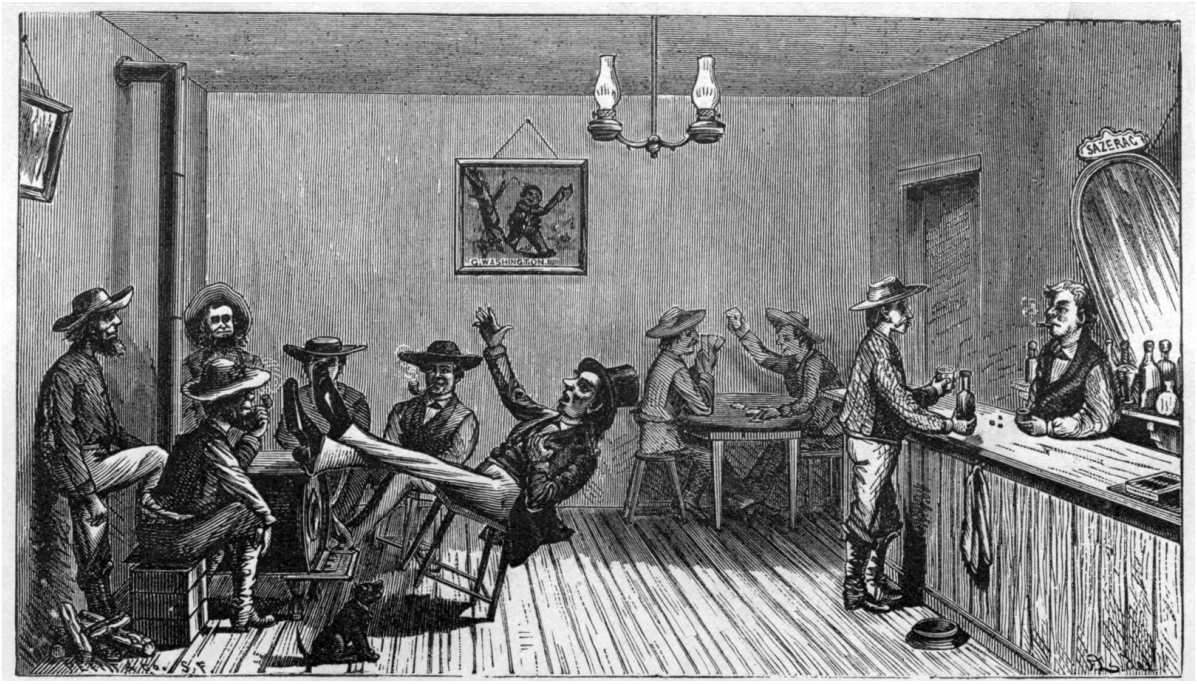

Figure 1: Fred Hart published The Sazerac Lying Club: A Nevada Book *in 1878, celebrating deceit, a cornerstone of western folklore. A lying club in Austin, Nevada, if it truly existed, was reputed to have inspired a similar institution in Virginia City. On the wall, there is an illustration of young George Washington chopping down a cherry tree, placed there for irony. According to legend, when his father questioned young Washington about the deed, the boy confessed with the preface, "I cannot tell a lie." (Fred Hart,* The Sazerac Lying Club*. Author's collection.)*

ancient evidence of stories told and rituals practiced. This romanticized view of folklore and the past motivated early collectors in Europe. It may seem counterintuitive, then, to consider oral traditions when dealing with a quickly changing society, where people were always chasing the next bonanza. After careful consideration, however, it became clear that because of—rather than despite—this consequence of the industry, the mining West proved to be a dynamic setting for the growth of folklore.

In fact, a diverse and constantly changing population enhanced the establishment of local traditions, as residents shaped and reshaped their origin story and struggled to establish a distinct identity for their new home. A booming mining district experiences a sudden influx of newcomers who typically outnumber the earliest miners and prospectors who had worked the area. In the example of the Comstock Mining District, now in western Nevada, a handful of California-style placer miners toiled for a decade until the first big strikes occurred in 1859. Hundreds arrived that summer, and thousands followed in 1860. Repeated waves of new arrivals enhanced the demographic instability.[3]

More important, the earliest placer miners lacked the skill to begin work underground, or the ability to invest in large-scale undertakings. Because of this, they usually sold out to investors who arrived in the first or second post-strike waves. The effect of this process was that even after a few months, newcomers to the prosperous mining district had little direct way to understand the foundation of their new home. Without a written history and with few first residents in their midst, people relied on stories that were circulating for insight into what had previously

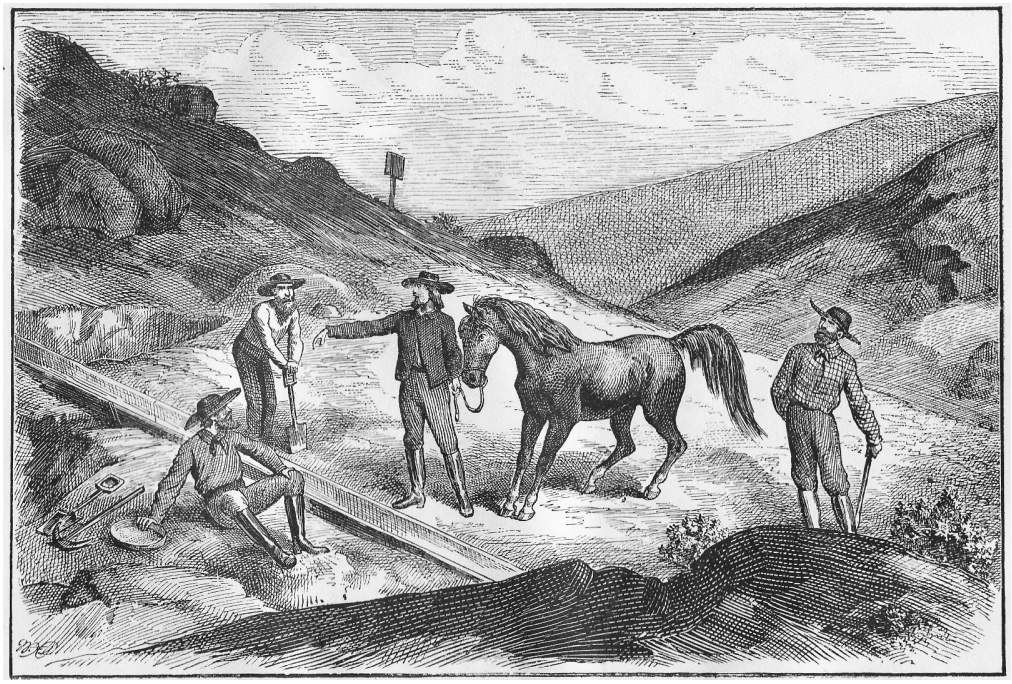

Figure 2: Folklore celebrated the strike on June 8, 1859, establishing the Comstock Mining District in what was then the far western part of the Utah Territory. Numerous illustrations captured the moment when Henry Comstock arrived and argued himself into a share of the claim. This example is from The History of the Big Bonanza *(1876) by William Wright, using the penname Dan De Quille. (Author's collection.)*

transpired. The folkloric process honed the narrative. This became a fertile breeding ground for historical legends, casting the earliest placer miners and their discoveries into mythic terms.

William Wright, more widely known by his pen name, Dan De Quille, took center stage when it came to documenting the folklore of the region. He earned local fame as an excellent journalist who understood the mines better than most of his colleagues. He gained some regional, if not national, fame for his hoxes, but for the past century, De Quille has been mostly remembered as the lesser associate of Samuel Clemens who selected his pen name, Mark Twain, while working in Nevada in 1863. Despite lacking the success and fame of his fellow writer, De Quille published his *History of the Big Bonanza* in 1876, providing the first comprehensive attempt to chronicle the first years of the Comstock Mining District.[4]

De Quille's book was soon eclipsed by a more serious history, written by Eliot Lord in 1883.[5] This caused many to view De Quille's effort as a passing lark, more humor than history, and crucially, less amusing than Twain's *Roughing It*, published in 1872.[6] Nevertheless, De Quille's work assumes remarkable importance when considering the mining West through a folkloric lens. He was gathering what can be regarded as legends, narratives told generally to be believed, beginning with letters he wrote in 1860 when he first arrived on the Comstock.[7]

To be fair, De Quille would not have understood the stories he recorded as folklore. The term had only been coined fourteen years earlier, at which point it was taken to refer to hoary tales like those gathered by the Brothers Grimm. Nevertheless, De Quille's legacy is extraordinary in this context. He documented an array of sto-

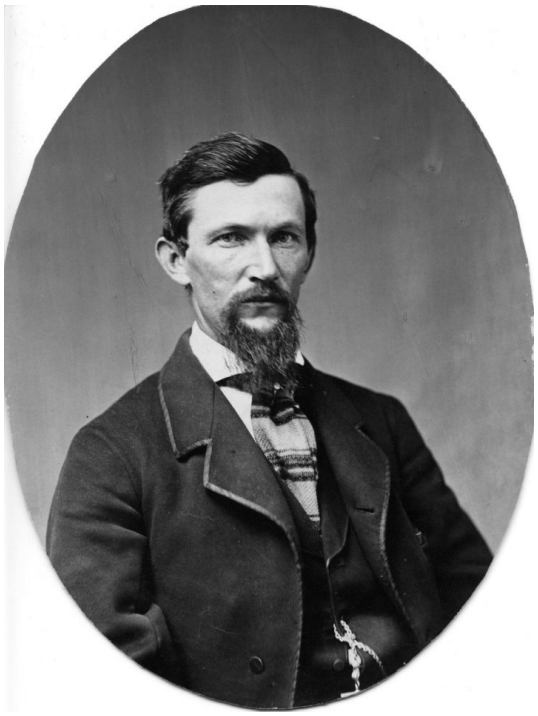

Figure 3. William Wright was writing as Dan De Quille even before he began submitting articles to the Territorial Enterprise *in late 1861. He became the dean of Comstock journalism during the nineteenth century, reporting on the mining district for nearly forty years. In this most recent consideration of his many contributions, he is celebrated for gathering stories featured in the folklore of his time. (Courtesy of the Special Collections and University Archives Department, University of Nevada, Reno, Libraries.)*

ries that were clearly circulating at the time, a coalescing folk tradition responding to the dynamic growth of mining in the region.[8]

One of the things that De Quille and others celebrated was a seeming contradiction in the incredible prosperity of the booming mining district and the realization that the first discoverers sold their interest for what often amounted to only a few thousand dollars. Many who sought to understand this regarded the first players as foolish, insane, or drunken—or some combination of these attributes. This, then, became pivotal in the first layer of folklore that took root in the Nevada Territory as it was organized in the autumn of 1861.

A range of misunderstandings and falsehoods became attached to the earliest miners in the area. Of course, false does not necessarily equate to folklore. Some stories have elements of veracity or are entirely true: what was essential is that they circulated in the pool of popular narratives. That said, encountering the false or improbable is a good indication that the roots of a story are, indeed, in folklore.

In the case of Allen and Hosea Grosh, narratives about the brothers were circulating as early as 1860, according to De Quille. Their tale described an earlier discovery of silver within a few miles of the 1859 strikes, but fate was unkind. In 1857 the Grosh brothers met their tragic ends: one died of blood poisoning after striking his ankle with a pickaxe; the other died of the effects of frostbite after crossing the Sierra during a November snowstorm.[9]

When their father initiated a lawsuit fought in the courts between 1863 and 1865, wind billowed the sail of the tragic tale. Most would have been unaware that the Grosh brothers had been prospecting for silver in the region. Nevertheless, their achievement was impressive, and it gave their father reason to hope that he could leverage a legal claim into some of the profits from the mines. Although the lawsuit failed, the names of the Grosh brothers had entered wider circulation.[10]

As a result of this, the Grosh name became attached to a common motif in the mining West, namely that of the lost mine. Their narrative did not become as popular or as well honed as its better-known counterpart, the story of the Lost Dutchman Mine in Arizona. Still, the pathos of discovery and fatal tragedy were essential to keeping the story of the Grosh brothers alive. Indeed, it is still told on the Comstock to this day.

Accounts of the first strikes in 1859 were soon told as historical legends, quickly stepping away from fact into the realm of myth. These narratives described the earliest months of the mining district with memory lost in the fog of the past. In

these cases, some of the first discoverers lingered for several months, so the first and second waves of new arrivals would have had a fleeting opportunity to hear first- or second-hand stories. It did not take long, however, for legends repeatedly retold to grow in their flamboyance, drifting from verifiable or even plausible history.

For example, the naming of Virginia City in late 1860 quickly became a fixture of local legend, and yet the truth of the account remains unknown. The story features an illiterate placer miner named James "Old Virginny" Finny, a native of the Virginia Commonwealth. Noted for his drunkenness and remembered as one of the first to make the big strike in Gold Hill, Finny was reputed to have been walking home one autumn night, staggering about in a newer community that was taking form to the north of Gold Hill. Finney stumbled and broke his bottle of whiskey. Some of the precious elixir lingered in the base of the shattered vessel, and not wishing to waste it, Finny poured it on the ground and declared that he was baptizing the newly founded town as Virginia, in honor of his home.

Did this really occur? Perhaps. There is no way of knowing. The written record describes a community debate that considered the names Ophir and Winnemucca before settling on Virginia City.[11] It is significant that many people were repeating the story about Finney and his whiskey within months of when it allegedly occurred, but folklore can be deceptive when it comes to truth. Whether this really happened does not matter in this context; what is significant is that the story circulated and can be regarded as part of the oral tradition that was taking root as the community was first settled. The historical legend can be dated to late 1860 when the community did, indeed, adopt the name, and the episode remains an important element in local storytelling, yet another example of a frequently told narrative.[12]

There were also numerous legends about the

Figure 4: People continue to tell the story of James "Old Virginny" Finney christening the ground with whiskey, giving the young community the name of Virginia City. (Wright, History of the Big Bonanza. *Author's collection.)*

transactions that involved the first discoverers selling their claims. In these cases, narratives often drift much further away from truth. A ubiquitous motif in these transactions was that a horse figured into the price of the sale. This became a shorthand device to describe the absurdity of these early transactions for nominal fees, involving claims that would prove to be worth millions. De Quille, likely borrowing from his contemporary oral tradition, described Old Virginny as selling his interest in a pivotal mine "for an old horse, a pair of blankets, and a bottle of whisky."[13]

Henry DeGroot, an early reporter of events in the western Great Basin, recounted how a local horse breeder, J. D. Winters of Washoe Valley, traded some gold coins and a horse for a share in one of the earliest claims. The placer miners recognized the need to take a technological step up and wished to use the horse in an arrastra, an expedient approach to milling borrowed from Mexican miners and used in the early West. With perception akin to that of a folklorist[14], DeGroot commented upon how the horse in this verified transaction affected accounts of those that followed: "in this way Winters got into the Ophir as one of the locators, and from this came the 'old horse' story that has always been saddled upon Old Virginia—to fix it still more firmly upon the old fellow, the bottle of whisky was added."[15]

The story is repeated many times throughout subsequent decades, but this is not merely literary borrowings.[16] Again, the story persists in oral tradition, and it appears that the horse, often with the whiskey, was easily attached to the tale of any number of transactions held by many of the first prospectors. The point of these legends was to characterize the early claimants as ridiculously out of touch with the fortune at their fingertips. Recognizing the value of the claims, however, is a matter of the keenness of hindsight.

Mark Twain famously exploited the motif of the horse in *Roughing It*, his farcical memoir of his western sojourn:

> An individual who owned twenty feet in the Ophir mine before its great riches were revealed to men, traded it for a horse, and a very sorry-looking brute he was, too. A year or so afterward, when Ophir stock went up to three thousand dollars a foot, this man, who had not a cent, used to say he was the most startling example of magnificence and misery the world had ever seen—because he was able to ride a sixty-thousand-dollar horse—yet could not scrape up cash enough to buy a saddle, and was obliged to borrow one or ride bareback. He said if fortune were to give him another sixty-thousand-dollar horse it would ruin him.[17]

Twain likely heard the story—or stories—about horses in mining transactions while he worked as a journalist in Virginia City between 1862 and 1864.

Intuitively, it might seem that Twain would be central to a treatment of the folklore of the West, but the nature of his writing takes him a step removed from this analysis. Folklorist Carolyn Brown suggests that *Roughing It* can be regarded as an extended tall tale, its own genre of folklore, but Twain's book is more of a literary adaptation of what circulated in oral tradition.[18] His genius was in adapting what he heard—stories and the way people spoke—for his remarkable novels. Folklore lurks beneath his craft, but his purposefully mutated stories in print do not provide an easy path to what was circulating at the time. For that, De Quille remains the better authority.

From the contemporary point of view, placer miners considered the possibilities represented by their claims and took the bird in the hand in preference to two—or more—in the bush. Most had already extracted thousands of dollars in gold from surface deposits during the first months following the big strikes. In addition, they recognized that valuable ore might pinch out with another few feet of excavation, for that was too of-

ten how mining booms ended. More important, they understood that the technological and financial demands of extensive underground hard-rock mining were beyond their abilities. Further, the discovery in July 1859 that silver was an important part of the matrix accentuated the realization that sophisticated and expensive milling would be required. Selling out for a few thousand dollars made perfect sense at the time.

Despite the obvious reasons for selling claims and leaving the embryonic district, these justifications were largely forgotten within months as newcomers arrived. They took the opportunity to ridicule the early claimants for abandoning what was a good thing, something that seemed obvious from their point of view. The narratives surrounding this earliest chapter of the mining district consequently transformed into stories about how the first prospectors were drunk, insane, lazy or some combination of these characteristics.

The mechanic of early folklore is clear in the transformation of the Nevada origin story with the lost mine of the Grosh brothers and sales featuring a horse and a bottle of whiskey. The notion of folklore with ancient roots could not apply in a place where thousands had just arrived, but the fresh foundation of the community did not prevent it from becoming a home to new traditions. This insight is not in itself innovative. I developed this theme in the 1990s, culminating in my first chapter in *The Roar and the Silence: A History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode*.[19] Nevertheless, *Monumental Lies* takes the demographic consequences of mining even further, combining them with the larger effect of the mining industry on folklore as it took shape in the West.

Changes in approaches caused the first placer miners to be replaced by corporate owners and wage earners. As one early phase yielded to the next, a sort of technological amnesia took hold, so that today there is an assumption that underground labor directly followed the placer miners. All but forgotten was the period of open pit excavations when simple placer diggings transformed into the industrial-scale processing of surface deposits.

That said, the evolution in the method of mining was only one way in which the changing industry affected folklore. For two decades, repeated fluctuations in bullion production caused people to leave, only to be replaced by newcomers, providing a steady stream of new audiences for stories that were told, retold, and mutated along the way. While miners employed various types of technol-

Figure 5: Constructed in 1863, the Territorial Enterprise *building on North C Street served the famed newspaper until it burned in 1875. Mark Twain and Dan De Quille worked at this location. Although both are celebrated as Nevada's most famous journalistic hoaxers, De Quille stood out for his expert reporting on the mining industry. (Courtesy of the Special Collections and University Archives Department, University of Nevada, Reno, Libraries.)*

ogy, which consequently affected the traditions of the region, the industry itself also became the subject of oral narratives. *Monumental Lies* describes how it is important to understand that the folklore of the Intermountain West consisted of both stories about mining told by those outside the industry as well as the legends and beliefs of the miners themselves.[20]

This difference of perspective is crucial when evaluating folklore preserved in primary sources. Clearly there was overlap, since miners and non-miners told stories to one another: miners would have heard surface accounts that discussed aspects of their industry, even if they featured a layman's perspective. The stories of the miners, however, were their exclusive property, being what folklorists would term *laborlore*.

De Quille, as was often the case, collected evidence of narratives that centered on mining but were the common property of the larger community. For example, treacherous open shafts were a frequent topic for persons who lived in their proximity. De Quille published an account of animals and people falling into a shaft, each landing on the previous. The cushion of the successive victims spared lives but broke bones.[21] Similarly, De Quille recounted a story about a teamster who had left his oxen chained together but unhitched so that they could graze:

> They were fastened together in a string by a heavy log chain which passed through their several yokes.... In picking along they reached an old shaft, round which those on the lead had passed; then moving forward had so straightened the line as to pull a middle yoke into the mouth of the shaft. All then followed, going down like links of sausage. The shaft was three hundred feet in depth, and that bonanza of beef still remains unworked at its bottom.[22]

Accounts like these may have been based on actual events, but, again, circulation is more im-

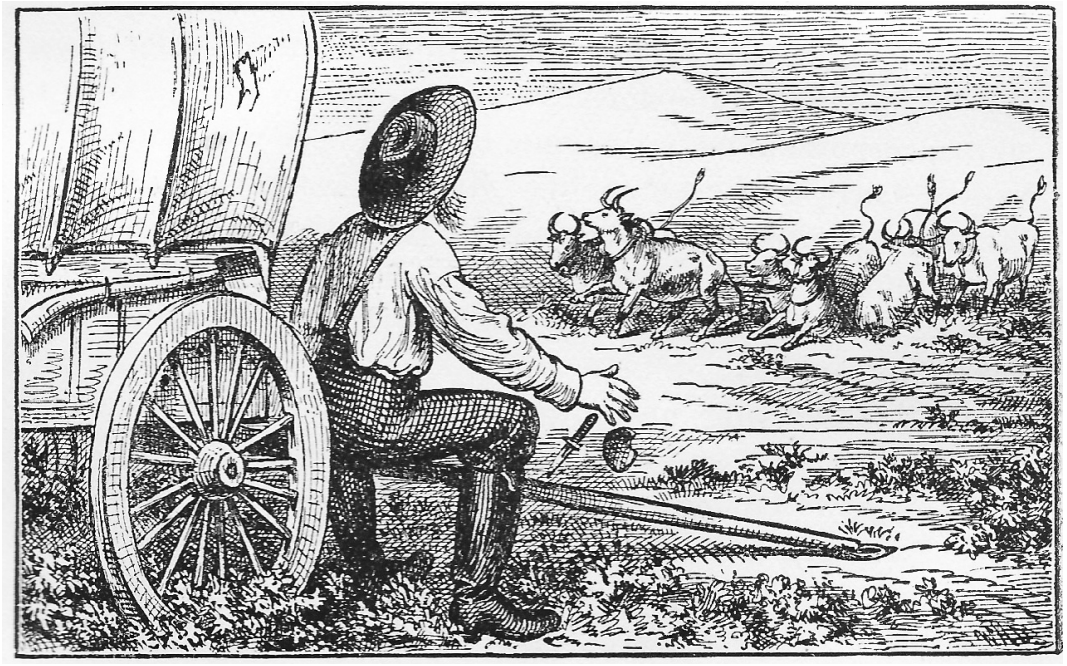

Figure 6: In 1876, Dan De Quille published an account of oxen being pulled into a mining shaft. The story, which underscores the hazard of living near industry, likely circulated in local oral tradition. (Wright, History of the Big Bonanza. *Author's collection.)*

portant than truth when considering the place that a narrative may have had in local folklore. Fortunately, De Quille, and others for that matter, often indicated when a story was commonly told.

To this point the stories presented have been about miners and their mines. Although these narratives likely circulated among those who toiled underground and in the mills, they do not reflect the legends and traditions of the workers themselves. Unfortunately, the laborlore of the miners can be elusive in the written record. It was undoubtedly far richer than we can know, for no one was attempting to collect underground traditions, per se, in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, some things can be deduced. Although the period saw the growth of mining engineering as an academic pursuit, there remained much in the way the industry was practiced that was traditional, implementing skills handed down through generations by word of mouth.

Donald Hardesty's exploration of historical forms of mining technology in Nevada documents both the new and the folkloric. The previously mentioned arrastra was a traditional, Mexican means of milling ore, its roots solidly planted in folklore. Similarly, when archaeologists documented one thousand feet of a newly reopened historic adit in Virginia City, it was possible to observe traditional technologies in situ. Tools and even clothing had been left behind when the mouth of the mine collapsed decades earlier. The tools and approaches that the miners implemented were the cheapest and simplest possible. The Comstock was known for its cutting-edge industry, but when miners hoped to make their own discoveries with privately held claims, they resorted to the traditional.[23]

Published in 1881, *A Glossary of Mining and Metallurgical Terms* by Rossiter Raymond provides a hint of the range of possibilities when it comes to the traditional vocabulary of the industry, for this, too, is a matter of folklore. He documented thousands of words, many with roots in generations of use rather than being modern and academically conceived. Raymond also included the country of origin for each term, pulling back the curtain on the amazing diversity of the miners who added facets to the way that mining was

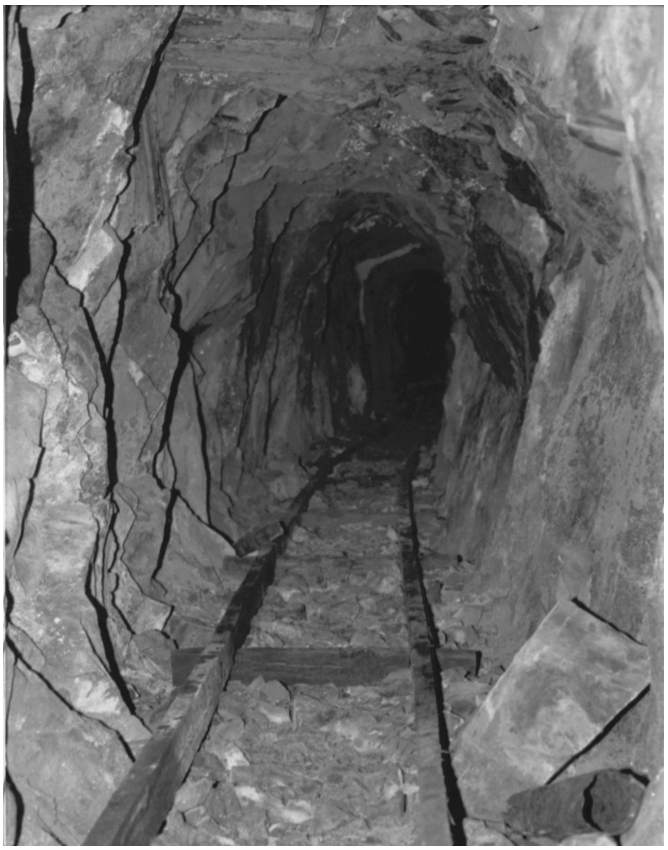

Figure 7: In 1991, a team of archaeologists documented a newly discovered adit on the north end of Virginia City, within the National Historic Landmark District. The mouth of the excavation had collapsed around the turn of the twentieth century, preserving tools, workstations, and mechanics. Wooden tracks capped with iron served as an inexpensive alternative where the adit was straight, but where a cart needed to navigate a turn, iron rails were necessary. (Author's photo.)

Figure 8: Mining with heavy equipment and explosives made for a dangerous occupation. Underground accidents were frequent and dreaded. Death was often the consequence, and predictability, incidents became topics in folklore. (Wright, History of the Big Bonanza. *Author's collection.)*

practiced. The folklore of the underground miner of the American West was a mosaic, reflecting the diversity that came together to form its own, unique laborlore. What drew from the entire globe in turn became international, as these workers carried their folklore—including the traditional terms and technologies—across the worldwide mining frontier.[24]

Some of the clearest documentation of mining laborlore centered on underground pranks. In the 1930s and 1940s, Wayland Hand (1907-1986), an important twentieth-century folklorist of the West, recorded accounts of well-crafted practical jokes, which in turn circulated as narratives about the incidents; both the prank and the story were expressions of the period's folklore. He also recorded the dictum against whistling underground, as well as issues related to candles, particularly when their flames faltered or extinguished. Hand also noted the prohibition against harming underground rats, and other traditions related to mules and unlucky numbers.[25]

In all, Hand went a long way toward documenting the folklore of miners in early-twentieth-century California, but defining the dynamic forces at play as traditions coalesced is another matter. This is particularly the case when it comes to understanding the contrast between the emerging folklore of the West and the laborlore of the specialist. The subject of ghosts is critically important when exploring what separated perceptions in the mines from those on the surface. By midcentury, and especially in the wake of the Civil War, many North Americans joined their European counterparts in celebrating the rise of the spiritualist movement. The nineteenth century opened with a near universal fear of the spirits of the dead throughout North America and Europe. As the decades unfolded, the direction of the wind began to shift, and efforts to summon dead spirits at séances became increasingly common.[26]

Earlier folklore tells of similar efforts to contact the deceased, but legends invariably concluded with the horrible punishment of those who

would attempt such a deed. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, there was a general sense that the spirit world could be domesticated. Humanity's command of all things was extending into the beyond. Now, people could summon ghosts and interrogate them for the amusement of the living, all without fear of retribution. This was a profoundly important shift in a millennia-old tradition that warned against dealings with the dead. In the decades following the American Civil War, stories circulated about how séances were yielding insights gained from beyond.[27]

Miners working underground did not join in this new view of the departed. Ghosts remained something to be feared, and the idea of summoning the dead while exploring the dreadful depths would have been unthinkable. This dangerous place was not a likely setting for the emerging brand of spirit domestication. The Victorian-era sense of being able to command and exploit the entire world including the beyond was restricted to the surface. Feared possibilities lingered in the miners' adits and drifts, and danger defined their perspective.[28]

This dichotomy is vividly illustrated with the tommyknocker, the elfin-like spirit of the mines. The story of the tommyknocker is a folkloric curiosity because it is rare for traditions about a supernatural being to emigrate from the Old World. Not only did the Cornish knocker manage to survive the trip, but it also thrived in the mining West, diffusing to non-Cornish workers, and that is nearly unprecedented. In Britain, the knocker and its cousins were often entwined with spirits of the dead: the Cornish often claimed the knockers were the lingering spirits of Jewish slaves sent to work there during Roman times.

In fact, Northern European fairies—featured with a variety of names—were often seen as expressions of ancient spirits of forgotten people.[29] That is a different process, however, distinct from the idea of ghosts of the recently deceased. In the mines of the West, there could be no ancient spirits laboring underground, and the line separating human spirits and mining fairies blurred. It was not always clear whether the miners thought their adits were haunted by ghosts of miners who had recently died or by something more elf-like.

Hand documented miners leaving breadcrumbs before clay statues of tommyknockers, much as occurred in Cornwall. This practice was far from offering tributes to dead miners. Instead, the clay tommyknockers clearly drew from the old stock of European mining elves, and yet, there is other evidence that underground belief shifted along the spectrum that included both ghost and fairy. Folklore is notoriously fluid.[30]

Hand documented an example of this when he described how "one miner quit the Wyoming Mine in Nevada County [California] in a hurry when he heard tapping, which he called a ghost; more seasoned miners chuckled and said it was only a Tommy Knocker."[31] One miner's ghost

Figure 9: Following Wayland Hand's description, a clay tommyknocker fashioned by the author with red matchstick eyes is a twin of what was placed on exhibit in 1986 at the Historic Fourth Ward School Museum in Virginia City. Hand described miners leaving food for these objects, an act related to the tommyknocker's elfin origins. The practice was also documented in Cornwall. (Author's photo.)

was another's tommyknocker. Boundaries can be vague in the realm of folklore. The important thing is how definitions could be flexible, and when it came to tommyknockers and ghosts, the difference was vague. The only time when perception was keen was when miners believed they were encountering a ghost of someone they had known. Such a spirit would not likely be confused with a more elfin one.

Of even greater significance was, again, the difference between those above ground as opposed to the miners themselves. The tommyknocker, like the underground ghost, was a fearful thing, lurking in a dangerous environment that was not as easily domesticated as the world above. Of course, tommyknockers also could be simply mischievous or even beneficial, but, in general, they were regarded as best avoided. The persistence of the tradition was given voice by a miner who worked in Golconda, Nevada, during the 1950s. One night after he had been drinking, he crept into an abandoned level to "sleep it off." He awoke to sounds in the mine, convinced that it was a tommyknocker, and he was terrified.[32] No sensible worker would seek to summon a ghost or a tommyknocker within a mine, regardless of the decade.

By the middle of the twentieth century, people above ground began celebrating tommyknockers by naming shops after the supernatural beings, and crafting dolls of the entities for sale. Those who did not venture underground regarded the elfin creatures as quaint and not a matter of terror. The difference between the widespread western folklore and the laborlore has persisted.[33] Without understanding how traditions above ground and in the mines were distinct, unraveling what one encounters in the West can be a challenge. This understanding is a necessary building block to begin the process of tackling the subject.

At the meeting of the Mining History Association in Tonopah, Nevada, in 2000, I proposed an effort to gather mining folklore, with a call to members to contribute traditions and stories that they had encountered. Understandably, there was no response to that request. Folklore is one of those terms that is bandied about but rarely understood. *Monumental Lies* is my effort, over two decades later, to place the industry's traditions into context. While I set myself the challenge to do this as early as 1980, putting my arms around the topic was an elusive goal, and when it comes to the folklore of the mining world itself, my effort only touches the periphery. A bonanza of possibilities remains to be tapped.

My latest book is more an effort to place mining folklore into a larger context than it is a thorough exploration of this important aspect of international laborlore. Mining folklore consists of what others say and believe about the industry, juxtaposed with how its workers themselves saw—and see—their craft and the setting of their careers. All of this was shaped by the context of communities that often burst into existence, prone to dissipating just as quickly.

The effort here is to tease out the mining thread from a larger tapestry. *Monumental Lies* explores the context, placing mining at the heart of three of the four folkloric cornerstones of the early West. The importance of deceit, at the remaining corner, is underscored by my volume's title, yet it is given short shrift here for want of space to explore how this, too, figured into the matrix of the region's traditions. It is nevertheless worth noting that it was an entirely different process when charlatans too-often exploited falsehoods to bilk investors in nineteenth-century mining. Lying for corrupt motives is separate from the deceit celebrated in the region's folklore: the journalistic hoax, the tall tale, the practical joke, and the burlesque lie. These were each grounded in humor and were intended for entertainment.

The subject of historical mining folklore is as enormous as the international frontier where one could find ore. Traditions have changed over time, for flexibility is a hallmark of folklore. The narratives and cultural practices that can be explored are consequently as varied as the locations

where miners worked and the decades when they labored before moving on. *Monumental Lies*, and this article, can serve, then, to renew the challenge expressed in Tonopah in 2000, to gather and to appreciate mining traditions and stories wherever they can be found.

Ronald M. James is a retired, longtime state historic preservation officer for Nevada, who also served as chair of the National Historic Landmarks Committee. In 2015, he was awarded the Rodman Paul Award for Outstanding Contributions to Mining History. The following year, James was elected to the Gorsedh Kernow, the bardic council of Cornwall, taking the name Carer Henwethlow, "Lover of Legends."

Notes:

1. Ronald M. James, *Monumental Lies: Early Nevada Folklore of the Wild West* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2023). For a nineteenth-century celebration of deceit in popular culture, see: Fred H. Hart, *The Sazerac Lying Club: A Nevada Book* (San Francisco: Henry Keller and Company, 1878).
2. J. S. Holliday, *The World Rushed In: The California Gold Rush Experience* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981).
3. This is previously documented in: Ronald M. James, *The Roar and the Silence: A History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998), 21-5, 79-81, 108-10.
4. Dan De Quille [William Wright], *History of the Big Bonanza: An Authentic Account of the Discovery, History, and Working of the World Renowned Comstock Silver Lode of Nevada* (Hartford, CT: American Publishing Company, 1876).
5. Eliot Lord, *Comstock Mines and Miners* (1883; reprint: Berkeley, CA: Howell-North Press, 1959).
6. Mark Twain [Samuel Clemens], *Roughing It* (1872; reprint: Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993 [Harriet Elinor Smith and Edgar Marquess Branch (eds.)]).
7. Donnelyn Curtis and Lawrence I. Berkove (eds.), *Before the Big Bonanza: Dan De Quille's Early Comstock Accounts* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2015). Wright had adopted his pen name at least as early as 1860.
8. For the history of the term "folklore," see: Alan Dundes, *International Folkloristics: Classic Contributions by the Founders of Folklore* (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 1999) 9-14; *The Athenaeum* 982 (22 Aug. 1846): 862–3.
9. Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 35-6; Ronald M. James and Robert E. Stewart (eds.), *The Gold Rush Letters of E. Allen Grosh and Hosea B. Grosh* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2012).
10. James and Stewart, *Gold Rush Letters,* 202.
11. James, *The Roar and the Silence*, 43; Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 59.
12. Wright, *Big Bonanza,* 59; Wells Drury, *An Editor on the Comstock Lode* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1936), 12; see also: Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg, *Legends of the Comstock Lode*, 2nd ed. (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1956) 12-3; George D. Lyman, *The Saga of the Comstock Lode: Boom Days in Virginia City* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 37; Geryl Gould, "Guide of Virginia City: The Cover of the 'Pot of Gold' and Silver" [pamphlet] (Virginia City: Virginia City News Print, 1941).
13. Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 54.
14. A folklorist being one who studies folklore, not one who creates it.
15. Henry DeGroot, *The Comstock Papers* (Carson City, NV: Dangberg Foundation, 1985) 9; see also: Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 54.
16. For example, Beebe and Clegg, *Legends of the Comstock Lode,* 13; the price paid to Finney, including the blind mustang, is also mentioned by Lyman, *Saga of the Comstock Lode,* 34: in this case it is Henry Comstock who buys the claim, but there is no reason to believe that this comes from oral tradition, since Lyman frequently created his own version of history.
17. Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, 301.
18. Carolyn S. Brown, *The Tall Tale in American Folklore and Literature* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 90.
19. James, *The Roar and the Silence*; also: Ronald M. James, "Drunks, Fools, and the Insane: History and Folklore Concerning the Comstock's Earliest Period of Development," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 35, n. 4 (1992): 215-38.
20, Social scientists refer to this difference of perspective as etic (outsider) and emic (insider), but the narrative here attempts to avoid the jargon; see: Alan Dundes, "From Etic to Emic Units in the Structural Study of Folktales," *Journal of American Folklore* 75, n. 296 (Apr.-June 1962): 95-105.
21. Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 149-50.
22. Wright, *Big Bonanza*, 153.

23. Donald L. Hardesty, *Mining Archaeology in the American West: A View from the Silver State* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010); Otis E. Young, Jr., with the technical assistance of Robert Lenon, *Western Mining: An Informal Account of Precious-Metals Prospecting, Placering, Lode Mining, and Milling on the American Frontier from Spanish Times to 1893* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970) 69-71; William G. White and Ronald M. James, "Little Rathole on the Big Bonanza: Historical and Archaeological Assessment of an Underground Resource" [technical report] (Carson City: [Nevada] Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology, 1991).
24. R. W. Raymond, *A Glossary of Mining and Metallurgical Terms* (Easton, PA: Lafayette College, 1881).
25. Wayland Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground," *California Folklore Quarterly* 1, n. 2 (1942): 127-53. See also the counterpart to the article: Wayland Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Above Ground," *California Folklore Quarterly* 1, n. 1 (1942): 24-46.
26. Bernadette S. Francke, "Spiritualism and Fortunetellers on the Comstock," in: Ronald M. James and C. Elizabeth Raymond (eds.), *Comstock Women: The Making of a Mining Community* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998), 165-78; David K. Nartonis, "The Rise of 19th-Century American Spiritualism, 1854-1873," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, n. 2 (June 2010): 361-73; Daniel Herman, "Whose Knocking? Spiritualism as Entertainment and Therapy in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco," *American Nineteenth Century History* 7, n. 3 (2006): 417-42; Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Christopher M. Moreman, *The Spiritualist Movement: Speaking with the Dead in America and around the World* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2013).
27. The journals of Alfred Doten describe his many attempts to summon the dead: Alfred Doten, *The Journals of Alfred Doten: 1849-1903*, Walter Van Tilburg Clark (ed.) (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1973); Ronald M. James, "In Search of Western Folklore in the Writings of Alfred Doten and Dan De Quille," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 64, n. 3 (Fall 2021): 241-58. For the earlier dreadful consequences of summoning the dead consider, for example, the widespread narrative catalogued by folklorists as Aarne-Thompson-Uther [Index] 365, "The Lenore Legend"; see also: Ronald M. James: *The Folklore of Cornwall: The Oral Tradition of a Celtic Nation* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2018), 107-21.
28. For the role of danger in shaping folk tradition, see: Elliott Oring, "Four Laws of Folklore," *Western Folklore* 81 n. 1 (Win. 2022): 60-3.
29. Katharine Briggs, "The Fairies and the Realms of the Dead," *Folklore* 81, n. 2 (Sum. 1970): 81–96; John P. Brennan and Jane Garry, "Otherworld Journeys: Upper and Lower Worlds," in: Jane Garry and Hasan El-Shamy (eds.), *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2005), 196–7.
30. Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground," 128; A. K. Hamilton Jenkin, *The Cornish Miner: An Account of his Life Above and Underground from Early Times* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1927), 297; Jane P. Davidson and Christopher John Duffin, "Stones and Spirits," *Folklore* 123, n. 1 (Apr. 2012): 99-109; Lydia Fish, "The European Background of American Miners' Beliefs," in: Kenneth S. Goldstein and Neil V. Rosenberg (eds.), *Folklore Studies in Honour of Herbert Halpert: A Festschrift* (St. John's, NL: Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980), 165; Oring, "Four Laws of Folklore," 54-6.
31. Hand, "California Miners' Folklore: Below Ground," 132.
32. The testimony occurred when I was giving a presentation at the Nevada Historical Society in Reno in 2007. The miner said that he had heard of tommyknockers from his father. When asked if his father were Cornish, he answered that he was Portuguese, thus providing further evidence of how well the Cornish tommyknocker thrived, moving into the greater population of miners. James, *Folklore of Cornwall*, 149.
33. James, *Folklore of Cornwall*, 136-62; and see: Ronald M. James, "Knockers, Knackers, and Ghosts: Immigrant Folklore in the Western Mines," *Western Folklore* 51, n. 2 (Apr. 1992) 153-77.