

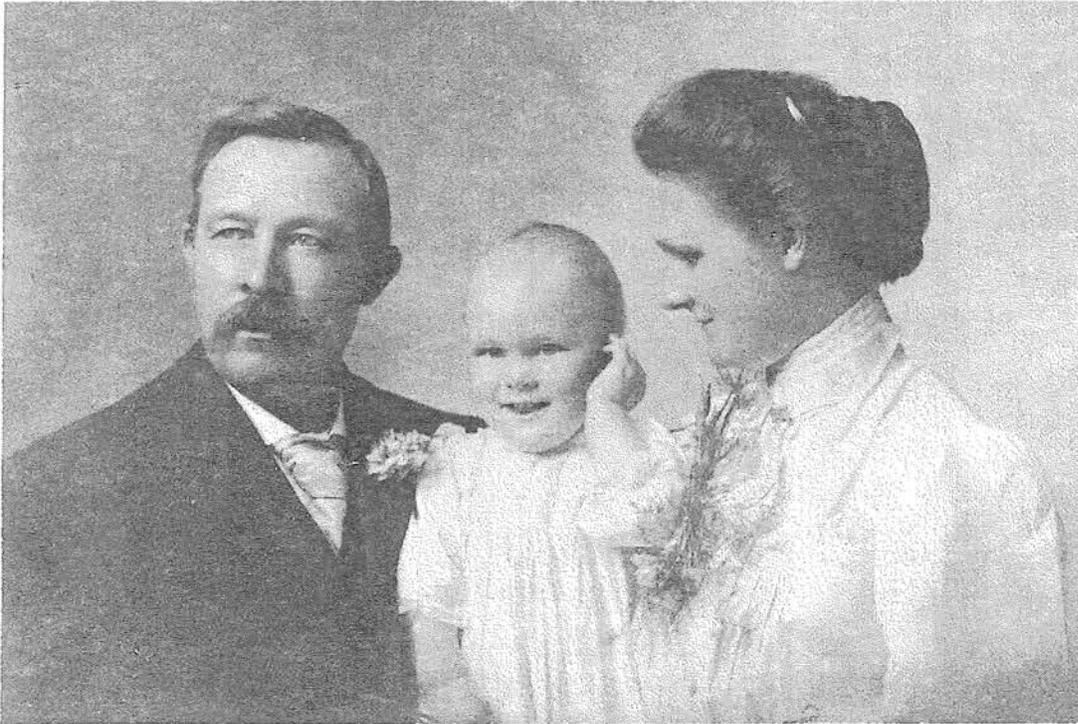
IMAGES FROM THE LAST BOOMTOWN: PER EDWARD LARSON'S GOLDFIELD PHOTOGRAPHY

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In the winter of 1905, Swedish-born photographer Per Edward Larson joined the rush to Goldfield, Nevada. The first locations in Goldfield had been made in 1902, the district was organized in the autumn of 1903, and at the time of Larson's arrival, the last great boom on the western mining frontier had not yet crested. The photographs Larson took there over the next three years reveal the changes that transformed a scattered collection of dugouts and tents into the largest city in Nevada and probe the colorful lives of its people. Although Larson saved only a small fraction of more than 1,000 photos taken during the Goldfield phase of a career that also encompassed Cripple Creek and the Klondike, these have fortunately been preserved in the Larson Collection at the Nevada State Museum in Carson City. This collection constitutes a refreshing personal view of Goldfield. Although Larson undoubtedly took many portraits of mining tycoons and politicians, he did not see fit to save them, nor did he preserve many depictions of important buildings. Instead his photos of prospectors, Shoshone wood choppers, and hillside dugouts, open a window upon the ordinary Goldfielder's world.

Larson was born in 1863 in a small town on the west coast of Sweden. When he was eighteen,

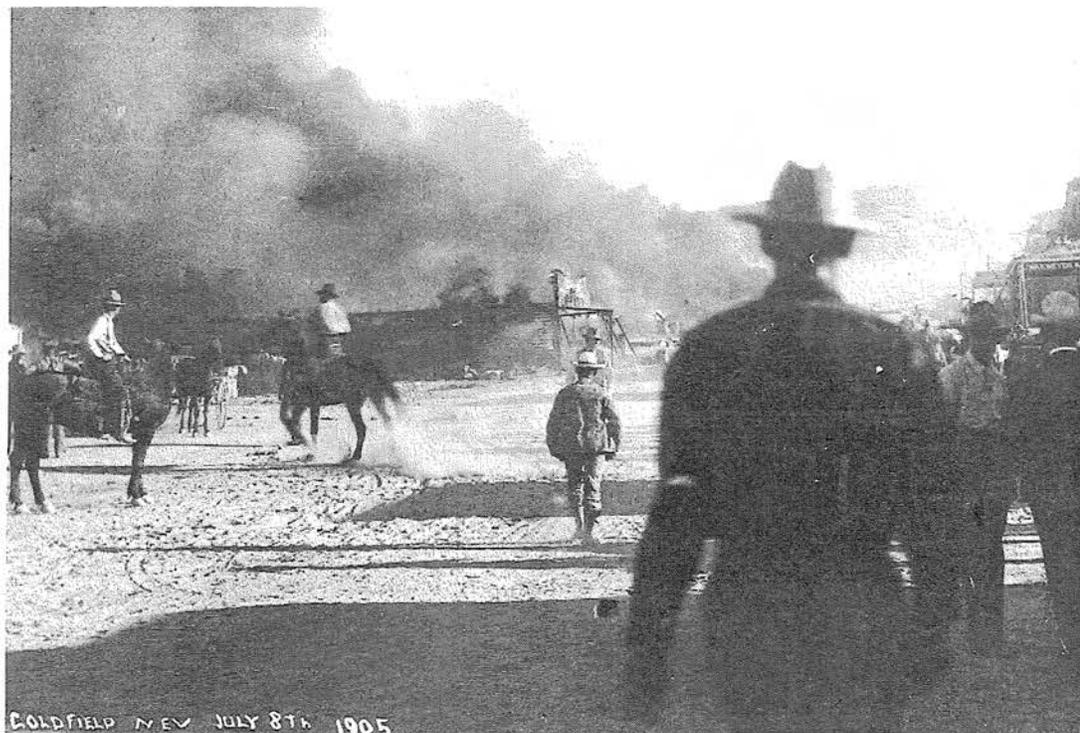
he emigrated to America through New York City and settled in Minnesota, where he worked as a mechanic and learned English. According to his daughter Adeliene, he had an intense desire to become a photographer. An apprenticeship with the Oswald brothers, photographers in Minneapolis, and his own intensive study of photographic techniques enabled him to gain the skills he needed. In the late eighties, he opened photography studios in Cloquet and Duluth, but he obviously yearned for greater adventures than he was likely to find in Minnesota. He headed west in 1890 to travel and work in California, Colorado, Washington, and on Vancouver Island. In 1898 he embarked on his greatest adventure to date and joined the Klondike gold rush. There he continued his photography, staked a gold claim, and mined until his departure in 1904. He married Hilda Johnson in Denver soon after his return, and the Larsons embarked upon their Goldfield adventure.



Per Edward Larson, with his wife Hilda and their infant son Edward, born in Goldfield.



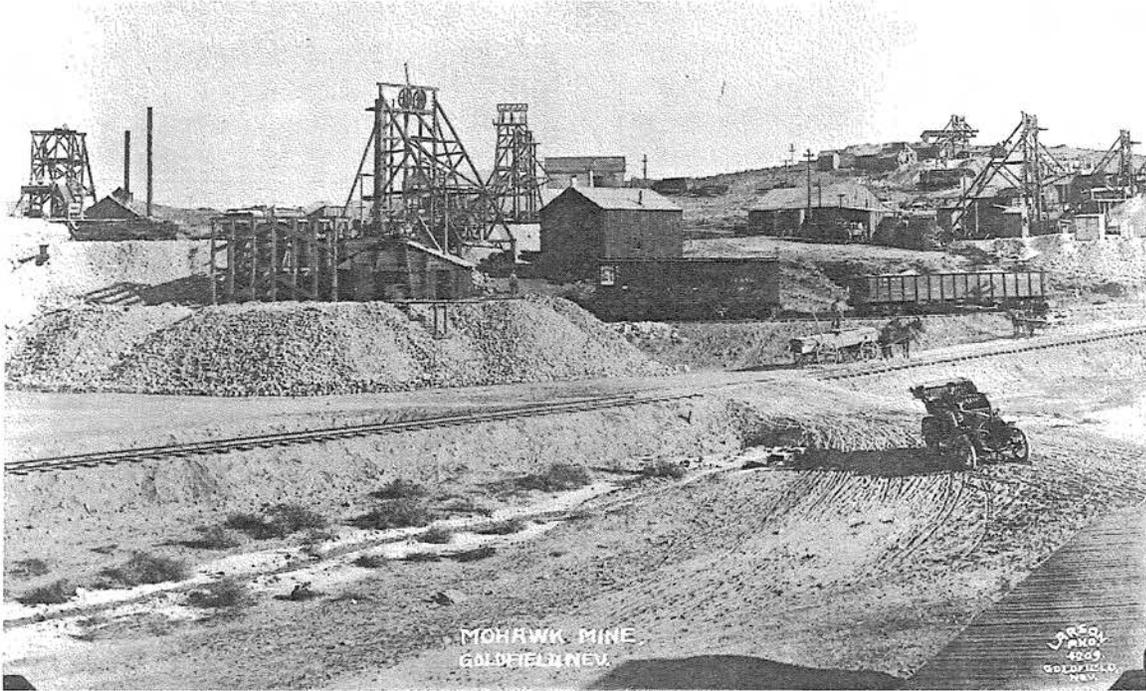
Goldfield at the time of Larson's arrival in 1905 was still a primitive camp, with people living in dugouts, as well as bottle and barrel houses and tents.



A major fire broke out in 1905, but beer is credited with saving the city. After water pressure dropped to a trickle, Goldfielders doused the flames with kegs of beer and applied beer soaked blankets to the sides of buildings. For some weeks afterward, a stale beery odor wafted from downtown Goldfield.



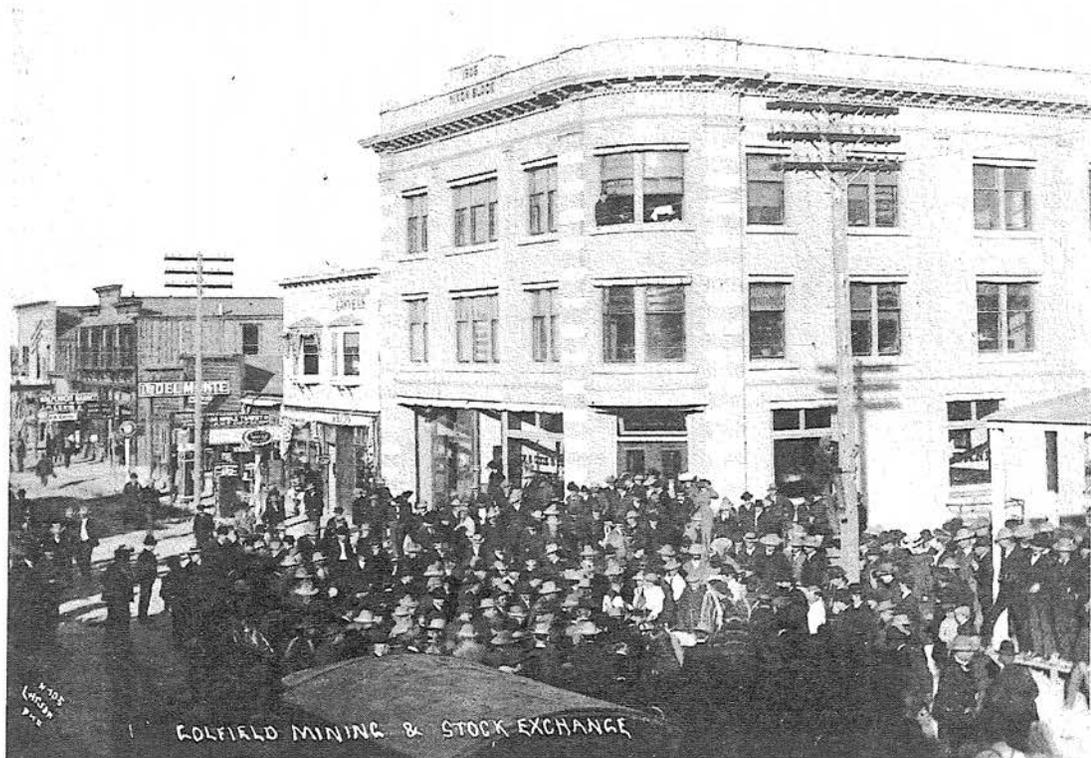
Goldfield's distinctive landmark, Columbia Mountain, looms in the background of this 1905 street scene. A year later the streets became so crowded that a man could only move at a slow shuffle, gold rushers slept in six hour shifts with no changes of bedding in the old Esmeralda Hotel (left), and customers packed the saloons like "bees in a hive."



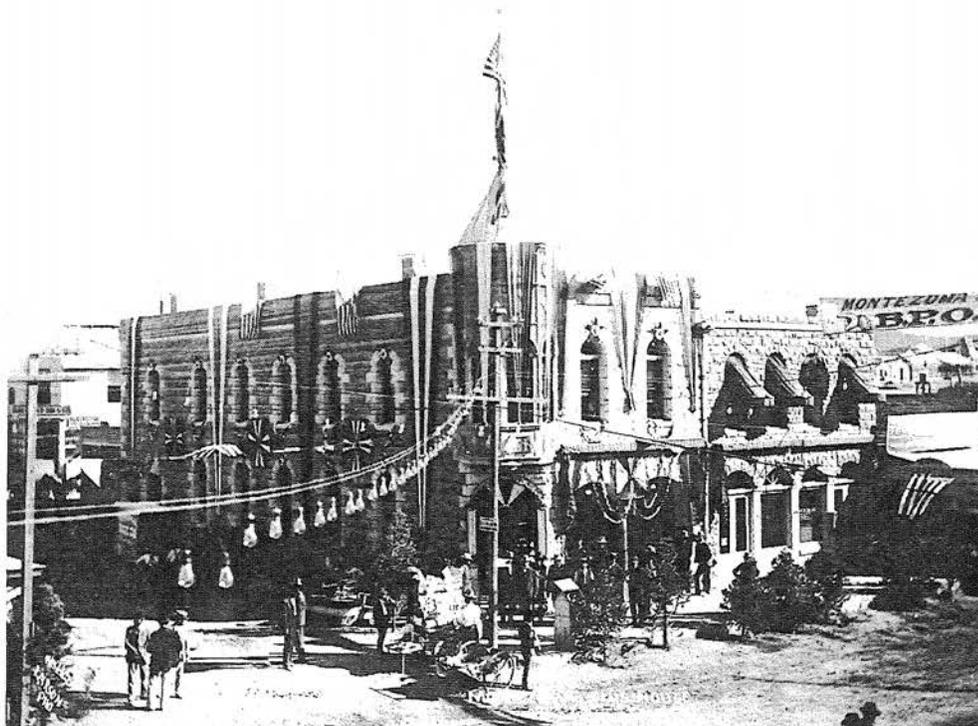
The Mohawk Mine seemed a worthless hole in the ground until the spring of 1906. Then the discovery of a great bonanza, a virtual Aladdin's cave of gold, in the Hayes-Monnette lease ignited tremendous excitement.



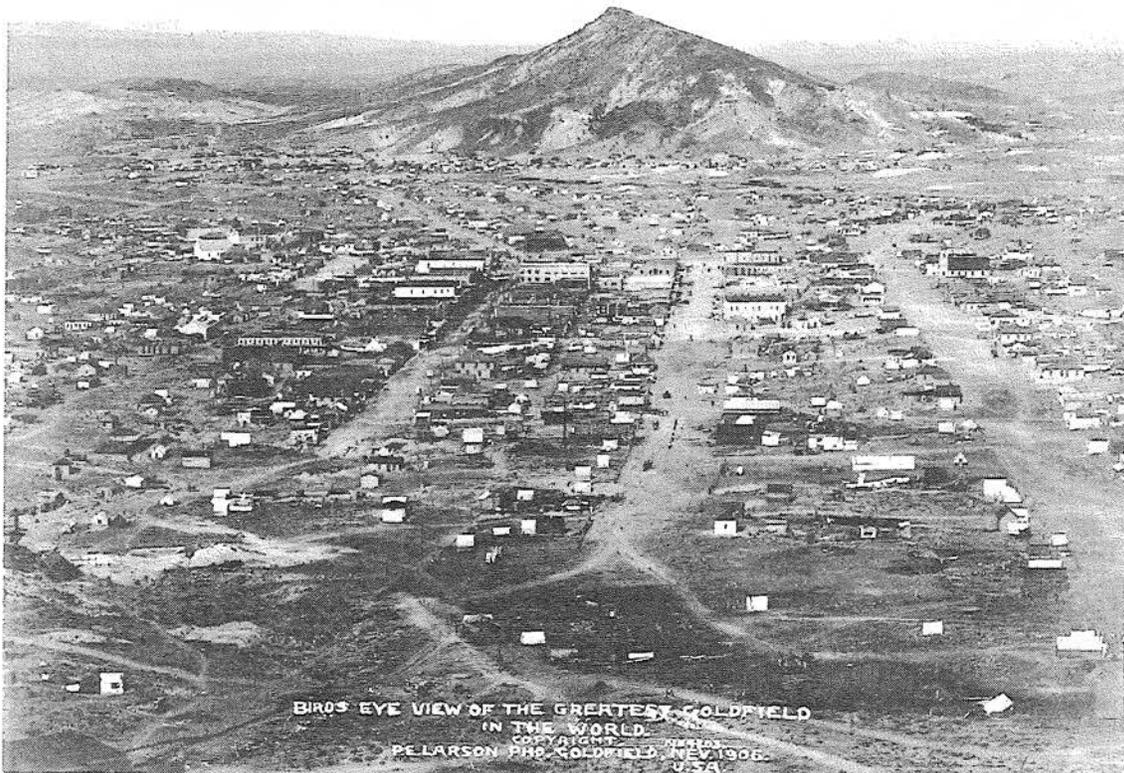
Rich ore led inevitably to highgrading, and a miner often lurched forth from his shift with up to sixty pounds of rich ore concealed in his lunch bucket, his long pockets, his inner shirt, and his double crowned hat. Often he sold his booty at the shop of an illegal assayer. This photo was taken after a raid on one of these establishments.



The boom led to skyrocketing prices at Goldfield's two mining stock exchanges. This one opened in the basement of the stone building known as the Nixon block, later moving to better quarters. Crowds on the inside exceeded the crowd seen here spilling over into the street, and observers wrote of "semi-suffocated humanity packed in like sardines," and the "whooping, screeching voices of the brokers," as they waved their notebooks, arms, and fists in a scene of mad frenzy.



The Goldfield elite met at the new Montezuma Club, on the second floor of the Palace Saloon. When they laid the cornerstone for a new clubhouse, it contained certain mementos dear to the hearts of the Montezuma Club crowd, including an ivory pool ball from the Northern Saloon and a replica of the tooth that glittered in the enticing smiles of "Gold Tooth Bess," a popular queen of the tenderloin.



This 1906 panorama showed the city in the flush times before mine owners crushed the miners' union. After that pivotal event, Goldfield was never the same. Boomtown euphoria faded, and the population rapidly declined.

With Goldfield's deepening decline evident at every turn, the Larsons departed at the end of 1908. Mining production steadily decreased after 1912 as the mining district's rich but limited ore bodies were exhausted, and the Goldfield Consolidated Mines Company Mill closed its doors in 1919. Total production of the district through 1960 has been calculated at \$89,700,000.

After his departure from Goldfield, Larson abandoned professional photography. He moved to Allegany, Oregon, where he operated a hotel and general store and did some farming. Unlike most gold rushers, he said little about his past adventures. He moved once more in 1920 and ran a grocery store in San Pedro, California until his death in 1941 at seventy-eight. In 1973 the three Larson children opened trunks and boxes that had remained untouched in the garage of the family home for half a century. Here they discovered Larson's Goldfield photographs and his photographic equipment. These were donated to the

Nevada State Museum and as a consequence has gone a long way in forming our images of one of the last great boomtowns. And, ironically, although Larson rarely mentioned his Goldfield experience in later years, he speaks to us unforgettably and for eternity through his photographs.

REFERENCES

Adelien Larson, "P.E. Larson, Photographer, 1863-1941," unpublished Sept. 18, 1975 memoir, Nevada State Museum, Carson City.

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