HOW NEVADA BEGAN:
EARLY PROSPECTORS ON THE COMSTOCK

By Sally Zanjani

They waited, with mounting impatience. On the Comstock they waited, sporadically attempting to scrape away several feet of snow and resume prospecting. In Placerville they waited for the Sierra snows to retreat. The peripatetic journalist J. Ross Browne, on his way to the place they called Washoe, vividly described the scene: "Every hotel and restaurant was full to overflowing. The streets were blocked up with crowds of adventurers all bound for Washoe. The gambling and drinking saloons were crammed to suffocation with customers practicing for Washoe. Mexican vaqueros were driving headstrong mules through the streets on the road to Washoe." "In short there was nothing but Washoe to be seen, heard or thought of."

Browne started over the mountains through falling snow, repeatedly stumbling into deep holes made by floundering mules. "It was a constant struggle through melted snow and mud," he wrote, "slipping, sliding, grasping, rolling, tumbling." It was the spring of 1860 when the great rush to the Comstock poured over the Sierra, but it had been some ten years aborning.[1]

The main reason for the delay was gold, the fixation of the prospectors who placered in Gold Canyon below the Comstock for nearly a decade. They wanted gold, just like the gold of California. Silver was the cursed black stuff that they threw away when it clogged their rockers. Thus they continued placering for gold specks worth two to five dollars a day, while higher, on the slope below Sun Peak, the silver treasure of the great Comstock Lode, worth nearly $350 million lay undisturbed.

There were exceptions. One prospector who took an interest in the silver was an Italian aristocrat, Count Leonetto Cipriani. Passing through in 1853, the count took samples of silver, but despite rich assays in San Francisco, his discovery went nowhere. He wrote in his diary: "At that time in the gold country, silver was too poor a metal to deserve attention. Everyone refused to give it any importance."[2]

Hispanics also proved more perceptive than most about the silver potential of the area. One of them, a Brazilian known as Old Frank Antonio, who came to Gold Canyon in 1852 or 1853, was the first of record to recognize it. Back in the California gold country, he told two unsuccessful California placer miners, the brothers Ethan Allen and Hosea Grosh, about the possibilities east of the Sierra. Ready for a new start, they seized upon the idea, wrote to their father "Ho! For the mountains!", and headed over in 1853.

The Grosh brothers hold especial interest in Nevada history not because they were typical prospectors. They were not. Sons of a Pennsylvania teacher and Universalist minister, they were educated, sober, industrious, and too single-minded to fraternize much with the covivial brotherhood of prospectors who collected at the Johntown saloon. But the letters that they wrote home provide the only record that has yet come to light of a Gold Canyon prospector's life as it happened.

The Groshes thought the way of life in Gold Canyon so primitive—"about two or three years behind the age," they wrote—that the California diggings seemed civilized by contrast. In the

sagebrush hills lining the canyon, the scattered prospectors lived in brush shelters like the Indians or in tents in summer, and moved into stone huts in winter. The brothers busied themselves getting up a house (which they found quite a challenge without timber), trying to make expenses, and, of course, prospecting. They thought they discovered a silver mine. They wrote: "The one we found was the black silver ore, if silver it was, in masses as large as your fist. We were so hard pressed by poverty . . . that we never tested it."[3]

Yet they did not persist. In November 1854 they reported that they were "once more in California, after passing through trials and hardships which five years ago would have sent us to our graves." The Grosh brothers had a tendency to get distracted, sometimes by their repeated efforts to invent miraculous machines. Moreover, poverty held them back: "For this past two years we have been too poor to get out of mining, but have been driven on like arrastra horses, blindfolded." Except for a brief visit in 1856, they did not return to Nevada until 1857.

By then, Gold Canyon appeared to be a "played out country." The placers had been "cleaned up to bed rock" several times over. Estimated gold production sank to the lowest point since the first year that prospectors began shaking their pans, a mere $18,200. Even the winter snows failed, and little snow melt trickled into the ravine to sluice their rockers. Of the nearly two hundred prospectors who had been working the canyon at its zenith days, probably only twenty-five remained.

By midsummer 1857, the Groshes were hard at work assaying: "We cupelled with a hand bellows, by piling charcoal over the cupell. . . . Day after day and week after week we were at it from daylight to dark, hanging over glowing furnaces and the thermometer in the 'nineties.'" In mid August, tragedies far beyond hardship and failure overwhelmed them. Their backer, George Brown, was murdered at Gravelly Ford. Worse yet, Hosea accidentally cut a gash in his foot with a pick.

At first, the brothers gave it little importance, expecting that Hosea would be bedridden for only three or four weeks while the wound healed. But despite poultices, the foot swelled and the wound closed on the eighth day. It became very painful, strange sensations began, and fever set in. Nonetheless, Hosea made light of his sufferings in an effort to allay his brother's fears. Next came opium and an old pioneer remedy, a fresh cow dung poultice. Then the foot began turning cold. Leaving Hosea in the care of their partner, William "Cap" Galphin, Allen Grosh walked to Eagle Valley to consult a doctor. Dr. King advised continuing the cow dung poultices and assured Allen that none of Hosea's symptoms were worrisome.

The doctor was wrong. By the time Allen reached home, Hosea had died peacefully in his sleep. Allen was stricken—"Oh the terrible force of that blow! Oh! the utter desolation of that hour!"—but his deep religious faith shone through in his letter to their father: "When I reflected how well an upright life had prepared him for the next, and what a debt of gratitude I owed to God in blessing me for so many years with so dear a companion, I became calm, and bowed my head in resignation. Oh Father thy will and not mine be done."

Allen decided that it was his duty to make further efforts to determine the value of their silver claims, then to winter in San Francisco. Unfortunately, he delayed too long. It was 15 November when he and a young Canadian named Maurice Bucke finally set off to cross the mountains by a little-traveled route; this despite the general understanding that after October the weather in the high Sierra became too risky.

At Washoe Lake they lost five days hunting for their runaway jack. By the time they reached Squaw Valley, snow had started to fall, and they were completely caught, unable to turn back. When they attempted to ascend, the snow was so deep that they could not see the trail and had to turn back to Squaw Valley. Running out of

provisions, they killed their pack animal and lived on the unfortunate jack the rest of the time.

It was now 24 November. While it continued snowing, they tried to fashion snowshoes. Their troubles multiplied. When they started out again on the twenty-ninth, they took the wrong route and returned to the cabin "nearly frosen and tired out." Finally reaching a cabin on the other side of the crest, they found the provisions they expected there had been stolen. Another snow storm blew in, so they stayed in the cabin with three days worth of jack meat. Although snow continued to fall, they set out again, following the American River and burying themselves in the snow at night to keep from freezing. After they climbed a rocky ridge with great difficulty and found no human habitation, Bucke said to Allen that "we might as well lay there until we died," but Allen responded that he would not give up.

Exhausted, cold, and starving, they would soon be reduced to crawling through the snow. At last they came to a ditch and followed it to a miner's cabin, where they were cared for tenderly. They had been seventeen days in the snowbound mountains. As neither could walk on their frozen feet, the miners brought them down to Last Chance on sleighs and sent for a doctor.

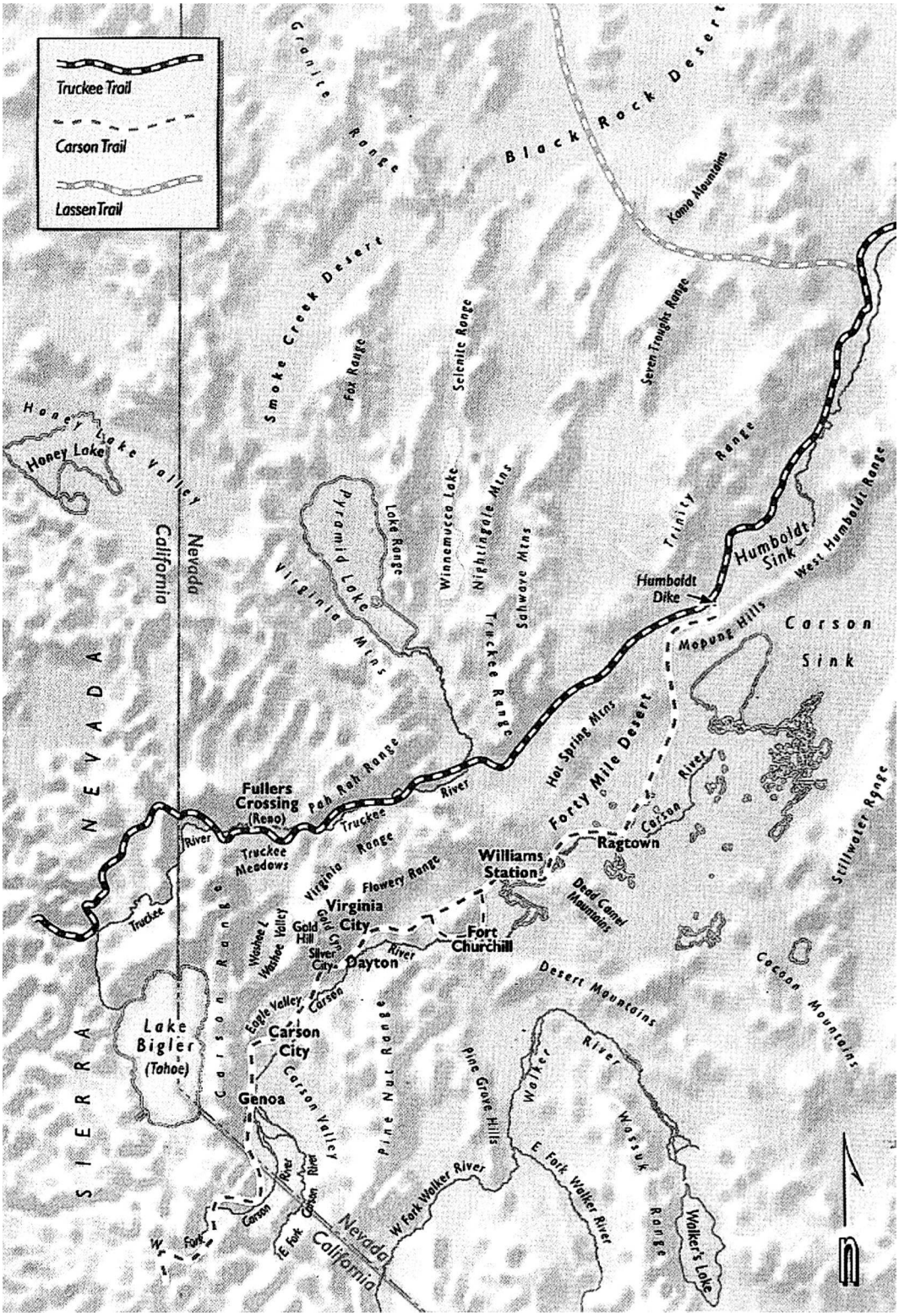
Maurice Bucke survived the amputation of both of his frostbitten feet and went on to become the director of a mental hospital in Canada. But Allen Grosh developed a high fever and died on 19 December. After the loss of Hosea, Allen had written: "We had lived so much together, with and for each other that I was of the earnest desire that we might pass out of the world as we had passed through it—hand in hand." Less than four months after Hosea's death, his earnest desire had come to pass.[4]

The Grosh brothers left behind a grieving family, two mining companies, practically no record of the location of their claims, and a central mystery about which I'll presently have more to say. Another year and a half would pass before the Gold Canyon prospectors finally blundered onto the Comstock Lode. While out hunting during the snowy winter of 1858-59, James Finney, known as "Old Virginny," noticed a little yellow hill at the head of Gold Canyon and apparently thought that yellow equalled gold. Finney was probably Nevada's first permanent settler, having stayed through the winter of 1850-51, pickled in a burrow in the hillside, when the traders on the emigrant trail in the valley left for the season. He was also a good prospector when sober.

On 28 January 1859, Finney returned to the spot at the head of the canyon with a few friends. They scraped away the snow, panned a little of the yellowish dirt, and thought it promising enough to record placer claims and name the site Gold Hill. After the snows retreated in the spring, Finney and the others began washing the dirt in their rockers and crushing chunks of decomposed quartz with surprisingly good results. About ten feet down they broke into a vein of red-tinged quartz laced with gold. Two or three years would pass before the rich mines developed there, including the Belcher, the Crown Point, and the Yellow Jacket, were recognized as silver mines. Although they didn't know it, these prospectors had struck the southern end of the Comstock Lode.

Despite their initial skepticism, the Gold Canyon crowd based at Johntown presently decamped to Gold Hill. Two Irish miners, Peter O'Riley and Pat McLaughlin, worked at the top of the ravine where the mountain slope begins to rise. So poor were the pickings that they planned to leave for the Walker River diggings after they accumulated a few more days' earnings. Then on 1 June, about four feet down, they struck a mass of black decomposed material spangled with gold. Their returns soon skyrocked to one hundred dollars or more per day.

In this way, both the northern and southern ends of the lode were discovered by placer miners who did not realize that its riches lay in silver. Prospector William Dolman later voiced a thought that must have commonly occurred among the old Gold Canyon crowd when the



Settlements in Western Nevada Territory, 1861. (Drawn by Paul Cirac.)

Comstock was well on its way to producing nearly $350 million worth of ore: "I had tramped over one of the richest treasures of the earth, but a few yards under my feet, and knew it not."[5]

And what of the ill-fated Groshes and their claim to have found silver in masses as large as your fist? Were they the original discoverers of the Comstock? Because the mining district did not yet have a recorder, no record of their claim existed. Their partner, Cap Galphin, related that they had been working at the Pioneer Lode, a site west of Devil's Gate that never proved profitable. Traces of their mining activities remained for some time.

However, evidence that the Groshes had missed the bonanza posed no barrier to litigation and stock sales when the enormous value of the Comstock became known. After the mining company the Groshes had established was sold, the new owners began law suits in the 1860s to acquire the Ophir and the Gould and Curry mines, flooded the West with propaganda, publicized a false diary, and sold stock. The pamphlet begins with errors about the Grosh's journey to California, goes on to cite witnesses (without naming any) and records and diagrams (without reproducing any), then unleashes poisonous invective against newspaper editors, such as the "imp of infamy," who had not supported the company.[6]

Author Eliot Lord calls the lawsuit "a clear case of blackmail"—one which would undoubtedly have appalled the honest and upright Allen and Hosea Grosh. The cases were dismissed, with the defendants' substantial legal expenses charged to the company. Apart from this episode, the sympathetic public of the day and later historians have viewed the Grosh brothers as tragic figures who died on the brink of fortune. Although they had not discovered the great lode, in time they would surely have done so because, in the words of the authoritive mining historian Grant Smith, they were "the first in that region to prospect intelligently for silver."[7]

Fortunately the Comstock proved no bonanza to the con artists, but it was the making of Nevada. Although the great rush to the Comstock was the catalyst, the settlers in the valleys clinging to the eastern slope of the Sierra had laid the foundation for territorial status. The DeMont party in 1850 erected the first structures, a roofless cabin and a corral, at what quickly became known as Mormon Station (the present Genoa). In 1851 John Reese rolled his thirteen wagons in from Utah, built more structures, planted cabbages—which he sold for prices that amazed him to emigrants struggling through to California on the Carson Trail—and most importantly, *he stayed*.

Enough traders and ranchers also moved into the Carson Valley that year to form a rudimentary government in the late fall, and to petition Congress for territorial status. They protested against being forced to live under a theocracy as part of Utah territory. This was but the first of several meetings seeking territorial status that they would convene in ensuing years. Although they often resorted to shameless exaggerations in making their case and fell short of success, at least they kept the ball in play. Settlements that didn't agitate for territorial status rarely received it.

In 1857, with a push from an ambitious newcomer, William Ormsby, the settlers sent an unofficial delegate to Congress to press their cause. Virginia congressman William "Extra Billy" Smith, probably a friend of Ormsby's, presented the bill in Congress with flowery oratory. It still fell short of success, but external events, however disastrous for the nation, were moving in favor of a new territory.

First, the confrontation between the Mormons and the U.S. Army that stopped just short of war, and the infamous Mountain Meadows massacre, in which Mormons murdered the members of an emigrant wagon train, led Congress to view the Mormons even more darkly than before. Congressmen would shed no tears over chopping a large chunk from the western part of the bloated Utah Territory they had created in 1850. Second, for years the immovable obstacle preventing the

creation of new western territories had been the Southerners' fear that they would lose power in Congress if the new territories became free states. The election of 1860 reshuffled the deck.

Lincoln and the Republicans won in a divided field, and the Southern states began to secede. The Civil War was just around the corner. William Smith, the former advocate of a Nevada Territory, apparently gave up hope that it would become a slave state, voted against the bill he had formerly sponsored, and departed for the Confederate Congress.

But Nevada had a new champion, Pennsylvania congressman Galusha Grow, a fierce fighter who had engaged in fisticuffs on the floor of Congress with a Southerner who called him a "black Republican puppy." He energetically promoted the territorial bills in Congress and would later be known as the father of the Homestead Act.

For several reasons, the newly ascendant Republicans wanted to organize the West into territories. They wanted to strengthen the bonds between the West and the Union; they wanted to settle farmers there under the forthcoming Homestead Act (farmers who would, not incidentally, vote Republican); they wanted to spur railroad construction with land grants; and they wanted to satisfy the host of office seekers beating on their doors with the patronage opportunities of new territories.

In a riotous scene of great confusion, cries for order, and motions for adjournment, the territorial bills for Nevada, Dakota, and Colorado whipped through Congress on 2 March 1861, two days before Lincoln's inauguration. Of course Nevada's population was ridiculously small compared to previous territories, but congressmen who thought about the matter at all may have supposed that another event comparable to the California gold rush had erupted, and the population would rapidly balloon.

The struggle was over, and in an amazingly short time. Nevadans had been granted their territory and a scant three years later, their state. While repeated agitation and shameless exaggeration had kept the territorial issue alive, it took the excitement of the Comstock discovery to catapult it through Congress. Not long before, the intrepid Snowshoe Thompson, skimming over the Sierra on skis, had been the only link between the tiny settlements clinging to the eastern slope and the outside world in winter. Scarcely enough time had passed for crude trails to become roads, frame houses to replace tents, and fledgling orchards to bear fruit. In all, it was just ten years since John Reese rolled his wagons into the Carson Valley in 1851 and set up the first permanent trading station.[8]

If we go to this neglected place, Gold Canyon, we stand upon historic ground, because it was here so many years ago, along this creek lined with trees greening with spring, that the first prospectors began panning for gold. When they finally worked their way up to the great Comstock Lode, Nevada really began. ■

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Notes:

[1] J. Ross Browne, *A Peep at Washoe and Washoe Revisited* (1860 and 1863; reprint, Balboa Island, CA: Paisano Press, 1959), 16.

[2] Leonetto Cipriani, *California and Overland Diaries,* trans. and ed. by Ernest Falbo (Portland, OR: Champoeg Press, 1962), 42-4.

[3] Ethan Allen Grosh and Hosea Ballou Grosh, Papers, 1849-1857, Nevada Historical Society, Reno, NV.

[4] Grosh Papers. Also see: Eliot Lord, *Comstock Mining and Miners* (1883; reprint, Berkeley: Howell-North, 1959), 21-4.

[5] Ronald M. James, *The Roar and the Silence: A History of Virginia City and the Comstock Lode* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998), 6-11, 14-20. Austin E. Hutcheson, "Before the Comstock: Memoirs of W'illiam Hickman Dolman," *New Mexico Historical Review* 22 (July 1947): 115-6.

[6] Benjamin R. Nickerson, *A Statement of the Grounds of the Claim of the Grosch Consolidated Gold and Silver Mining Company, to the Comstock Mine in Nevada Territory: Together with Their Reply to the Attacks of the Press* (San Francisco: Towne and Bacon, 1863). Copy in the Rare Book Collection at the Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, CA..

[7] Grant H. Smith, "The History of the Comstock Lode," *Geology and Mining Series* no. 37 (Reno: Nevada State Bureau of Mines and the Mackay School of Mines, 1943): 91.

[8] Zanjani, *Devils Will Reign: How Nevada Began* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2006), ch. 1, 5, 11, and pp. 139-40.