

THE COMSTOCK LODGE

By ELMO SCOTT WATSON

THROUGHOUT THE WEST ONCE more is ringing that thrilling, that electrifying, that magical word—"Gold"! It's all because of the "New Deal." For ever since the Roosevelt administration began bidding up the price of this precious metal, the gold fever has been coursing through the veins of Americans once more. Thousands of men and women—yes, even children—are washing and sluicing the sands of western streams, panning for pay dirt just as the placer miners did in the golden days of '49. Old shafts are being re-explored and grass-covered dumps are being worked over again. "That's gold in them thar hills" has become again something more than a conventional literary joke.

In the old time gold camps of California, Montana, Colorado, South Dakota and Nevada, either dead or sleeping these many years, there is renewed activity. "Ghost towns" are coming to life again. Old shacks are being patched up and once more smoke rises from their chimneys. Buildings along deserted streets are being renovated, repainted and repaired in preparation for the opening up of new business enterprises. Among these rejuvenated mining camps is Virginia City, Nev., and the activity there recalls once more the romantic story of the Comstock Lode. And since President Roosevelt issued his order for remonetization of silver, thus stimulating the mining of this metal again, there is all the more reason for recalling the Comstock Lode. For even though it was the search for gold which led to its discovery, it was the silver in that lode which made Virginia City the "greatest mining town upon the continent" and set the stage for a series of dramatic events, echoes of which are heard to this day, even though the discovery of the Comstock Lode took place three-quarters of a century ago.

The story of the Comstock Lode has been told and retold many times but seldom, if ever, has it been told more interestingly, in all its ramifications than in two books by C. B. Glascock—"The Big Bonanza—the Story of the Comstock Lode," and "Lucky Baldwin—the Story of an Unconventional Success," published in recent months by the Bobbs-Merrill company. The scene of this modern fairy tale was a valley in Storey county, Nevada, a few miles southeast of Reno, and more particularly a mushroom mining camp which had sprung up in Gold Canyon late in the fifties.

Among those who eked out a bare existence there were men whose names were destined for future fame. "There was Henry Thomas Paige Comstock, a lanky, loud voiced, boastful, bullying prospector with a short chin beard and a shaven upper lip which gave him a sanctimonious air entirely out of keeping with his real character. He was known familiarly as 'Old Pancake,' because he subsisted chiefly upon flapjacks, insisting he was always too busy to make the sour dough bread of the miners.

"There was James Finney or Fenimore, a drunken, irresponsible teamster otherwise known as 'Old Virginia,' for his habit of boasting of his native state, who had drifted into the region with the Mormon expedition of 1851 and remained to become as famous as he was bibulous. There were Peter O'Riley, Patrick McLaughlin, Manny Penrod, Jack Bishop, Joe Winters and a few other choice spirits with some claim to fame."

One January day in 1850 a group of these Johtown prospectors took samples from the slope on the upper east side of the canyon and washed the dirt in a tiny spring nearby. Each pan of dirt showed from eight to fifteen cents worth of gold. This wasn't a rich strike, of course, but it was sufficiently encouraging so that they set up tents and brush huts and established a new settlement to which they gave the name of Gold Hill.

After several weeks, pay dirt of sufficient richness to reward them with \$15 or \$20 a day for their work was found. "That was enough for the Johtowners, who were earning an average of \$4. Johtown moved to Gold Hill. The slopes were worked with prospectors. But the rich ground was limited. There was not enough to provide profitable claims for the 70 or 80 men who made up the settlement. They scattered, searching for more. Prospecting interest centered for a time near the head of Six-Mile canyon.

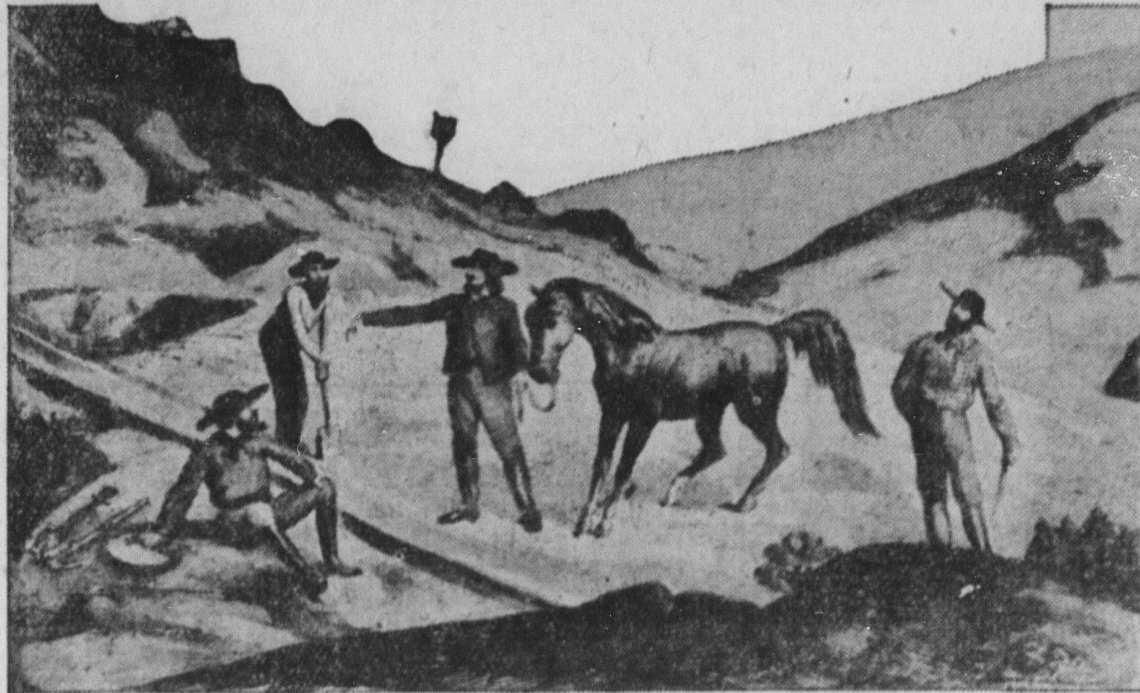
"There in the spring of 1850 Peter O'Riley and Patrick McLaughlin, who had been mining in the district for several years, opened a trench from which they took a wage of \$1.50 to \$2 a day. It was poor pay. The Irishmen were discouraged. They wanted to get away to a new placer strike on Walker river, of which there was much talk in camp. But they were broke. They needed \$100 for a grub-stake. So they remained and toiled and sweat, and instead of \$100, received \$43,500!"

And this is where the fairy story of the Comstock Lode begins. For these two Irishmen were the real discoverers of the vein of precious metal, the like of which has never been seen in the world since but it bears the name of neither of them. Instead it bears the name of that "lanky, loud-voiced, boastful, bullying prospector" Henry Thomas Paige Comstock, and it was thus christened "by sheer force of a loud voice and some cunning understanding of human nature."

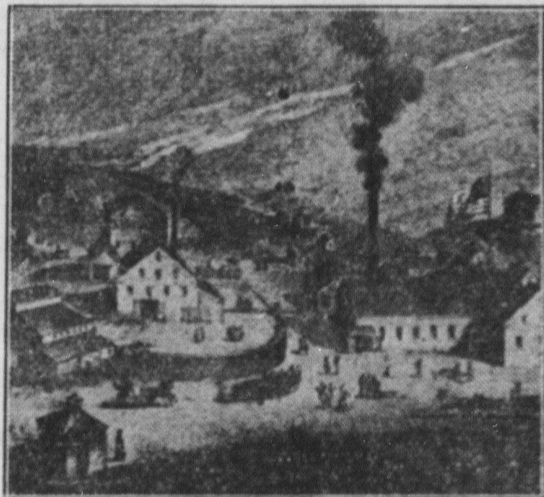
The story of the discovery by O'Riley and McLaughlin and Comstock's part in it is told by Glascock as follows:

"It happened that upon the day when O'Riley and McLaughlin made their first cleanup, amounting to more than \$200, Comstock was searching the slopes for a horse which he had turned out to rustle for a living. He had found the horse and was riding back to Gold Hill when he came upon the Irishmen, cleaning their rocker for the day.

"One glance was sufficient. 'You've struck it, boys!' he shouted, and promptly declared himself in. 'The only trouble is that you've struck it on my land. You know I bought this spring from Old Man Caldwell. And I took up 160 acres here for a ranch.'



THE DISCOVERY OF THE COMSTOCK LODGE
(From an Old Print Reproduced in Glascock's "The Big Bonanza"
Courtesy, Bobbs-Merrill Company.)



VIRGINIA CITY IN THE SEVENTIES



HENRY THOMAS PAIGE COMSTOCK
The "Old Pancake" for Whom the Comstock Lode Was Named.

also a fact that he had never recorded title to the water rights. "But Comstock nevertheless made his demand and his bluff convincing. His legal rights were negligible, if indeed they existed at all, but his character was such as perhaps might justify the fame which came to him in this doubtful manner with the naming of the Comstock Lode."

The news of the rich strike spread and "there was such wild activity as only a free gold camp can inspire. Claims were located in all directions. A few old prospectors had sufficient experience to trace the richer outcroppings and claim valuable ground. But all were placer miners.

"Always they cursed and threw away the heavy blue-black deposit which clogged the rifles and carried away their quicksilver. No one recognized this black stuff as the rich silver ore which was the true wealth of the Comstock." For this is an essential part of the fairy tale that is the story of the Comstock Lode—not only did the real discoverers fail to win lasting fame by having it named after them but by a queer turn of fate they also failed to recognize the real source of fabulous wealth which might have been theirs.

And there is another angle to this story which has to do with the naming of the town that sprang up there, "the greatest mining town upon the continent." It might appropriately have been named for either McLaughlin or O'Riley or even for the spurious godfather of the source of its greatness—Comstock. Then again it might have been named for another man who was soon to appear on the scene—Judge James Walsh. But that honor fell to none of them. Instead, it went to that "drunken, irresponsible teamster," James Finney or Fenimore, "Old Virginia." And here is how that came about:

Early in the history of the new camp, the prospectors gave it the comparatively meaningless name of Pleasant Hill. Some of them called it Mount Pleasant Point until a short time later when a miners' meeting decided to give it the official name of Winnemacca, honoring the principal chief of the Piute Indians who lived in that country. Then Finney, "Happily drunk as he had been for weeks since money and whisky had circulated freely, finished a night's revel by falling at the door of his cabin and breaking his bottle. Rising to his knees, he waved the bottle neck and shouted 'I baptize this ground Virginia Town.' The name was promptly and generally accepted, though for years the 'town' was generally ignored and 'city' finally was appended."

In the meantime Comstock had induced O'Riley and McLaughlin to include the names of Manny Penrod, J. A. ("Kentuck") Osborne and his own in the location notice which they had posted on the scene of their rich strike. The claims of these five men covered 1,500 feet of ground along what was to become known as the Comstock Lode. Within a short time they were taking out \$250 worth of gold a day.

Then in July, 1859, a Truckee river rancher happened to visit the new gold camp. He picked up a piece of the blue-black ore which was causing the gold miners so much grief and carried it away with him to Grass Valley, a gold camp on the west slope of the Sierras, where he presented it to Judge James Walsh, a leading citizen of that camp. Judge Walsh had it assayed and this revealed the astonishing fact that this blue-black ore ran \$3,000 a ton in silver and \$1,000 a ton in gold.

Walsh did not hesitate a moment. Accompanied by Joe Woodworth, a friend, he started before daybreak for the Nevada diggings and only by driving the mule, which they had packed, and themselves to the limit of their endurance did they reach the Washoe district ahead of the greater part of the citizenry of Grass Valley. For news of the rich strike had leaked out and the rush to the new diggings was on.

Walsh bought Comstock's interest in the claim for \$11,000. Later McLaughlin sold his interest for \$3,500. Penrod for \$8,500, Osborne for \$7,500 and O'Riley, who held on longer than any of the original locators, for \$40,000. And if this connection it might be well to tell of the later fortunes of these men. McLaughlin became a

cook at \$40 a month and died a pauper. O'Riley lost his entire \$40,000 in stock speculation and died in an insane asylum. Penrod and Osborne died poor. "Old Virginia," while on a long spree, was thrown from his horse and killed. Comstock squandered all of his \$11,000 in a short time, drifted to Montana and there, penniless and almost starving, committed suicide in Bozeman on September 27, 1870.

But to return to the genesis of Virginia City. "Casual placer mining in Nevada gave way to something far greater upon the day when word reached the Washoe district that the black stuff which the ignorant miners had been throwing away for weeks was in reality silver ore which assayed as high as \$4,791 in silver to the ton. With that word came the vanguard of such a motley army of rich men, poor men, beggar men, thieves, merchants, miners and barroom chiefs as the world has seldom seen."

To it came young Sam Clemens to work as a reporter on the Territorial Enterprise, the leading newspaper of the region, and out of his experience there to write "Roughing It" as one of the books which have made the name of Mark Twain famous. To it came two sturdy young Irishmen, John W. Mackay and James G. Fair, and from the fortunes which they made there were financed great telegraph and cable lines. Other names which link Virginia City's historic past with the present and with several great American fortunes were those of Darius Ogden Mills, James R. Keene, James C. Flood, and John T. Bradley. Nor should there be neglected that "most spectacular figure in all the bizarre scramble for riches, the Hoosier who never shoveled a pound of ore, yet made millions from the Comstock Lode"—"Lucky" Baldwin.

As the great mines which tapped the riches of the Comstock Lode—the Ophir, the Crown Point, the Belcher, the Yellow Jacket, the Imperial, the Kentucky, the Empire, the Gould and Curry, the California and the Consolidated Virginia—came into being, Virginia City grew and flourished.

More substantial houses replaced the rude shacks that were thrown up at first. A theater was built and on its stage appeared such world-known figures as Modjeska, Booth, Barrett and McCullough. There was an era of extravagant living and extravagant spending, for the citizens of Virginia City believed that the wealth of the Comstock Lode was inexhaustible.

They were confirmed in that belief by the repeated discoveries of "bonanzas," great pockets of rich ore, 10 in number, the last and greatest of which provides the title for the latest Glascock book—"The Big Bonanza." It was discovered in the Consolidated Virginia in 1873, a mighty treasure vault containing the greatest mass of precious ore ever uncovered in a single spot. From it was taken more than \$100,000,000 worth of gold and silver during the six years that the Big Bonanza lasted. No wonder there was a wild orgy of speculation in mining stocks, but like all such orgies it came to an end at last.

By 1870 the treasure chest of the Big Bonanza had been cleaned out. There had been a panic in San Francisco where nine out of ten people had invested in Comstock securities and thousands who were rich one week were poor the next. Stock that had been selling for \$800 a share dropped to \$1.25 and thousands of speculators were ruined.

In the years that followed Virginia City's fortunes steadily waned. Occasionally there have been flare-ups of hope that the "ghost town" which it had become might be resuscitated but few of these hopes ever materialized to any extent. Under the "New Deal" it may have a return to a measure of prosperity but it will probably never again see a return to those dazzling days of three-quarters of a century ago when the discovery of the Comstock Lode made mining history for all time to come.

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NO "GLAD HAND" HELD OUT HERE

Westerners Not Wanted in Land of Nepal.

After ten years' wandering in untraveled regions of the Orient, I came at last to Nepal, that country of which Percival Landon wrote: "Of all the closed lands of this world—closed by the deliberate will and policy of those who live in them; closed whether from plety, superstition, jealousy, or perhaps above all from mistrust of the European—Nepal is the only survivor."

Only 100 or so Englishmen and perhaps ten other Europeans have known the secret valley of Katmandu and Nepal's capital, "the sacred city of Katmandu." Nepal's inaccessibility is proverbial. Rarely has an exception been made to the rule against the admission of foreigners. The self-importance and self-sufficiency of Katmandu have not been altered by time or the proximity of conquering Europeans. The Nepalese, far from feeling inferior to Europeans, rather look down on them as I had occasion to learn, Constance Handley writes, in Asia Magazine.

One morning when we were riding in Katmandu we were literally swept into the gutter to permit a Nepalese aristocrat to pass. He was escorted by one of the most fantastic entourages I have ever seen. First came a man galloping on a small ungroomed, wild-mannered pony and blowing with might and main upon a conch. He was followed by a cavalcade, in the center of which was a closed Rolls Royce, surrounded by a dozen or more huge men well over six feet, in quaint uniforms on tiny hill ponies. They looked ridiculous with their feet brushing the ground.

Only the urgently whispered injunctions of my companion kept me from laughing as they swept by. I was warned of the possible dire results of a misplanned smile in a country that has always abhorred even the sight of a white face.

Certainly western women seem an

intrusion in this valley of lovely women. The women of Nepal are pale alabaster in color, with chiselled features and perfectly shaped mouths, small teeth like pearls, large brown eyes and lashes that would make our brightest film stars envious. Their costume consists of a bodice and full swinging skirts or trousers. Handsome carved anklets and rings adorn their little feet. From their waving hair hang long bright veils, fastened with ornaments.

It Needs the Icy Mitt
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