
THE ESMERALDA EXCITEMENT

Forgotten by most today, Aurora rivaled Virginia City as the West's most spectacular mining town during the early 1860s. Aurora was the urban center for the Esmeralda mining district, which spread over the hills that surrounded the town in the trans-Sierra country. With a population of over five thousand people and a yearly bullion production in the millions of dollars, Aurora attracted the attention of nearly every western miner during its heyday. Ironically, the discovery of Aurora's wealth was purely accidental.

One day in August 1860, three down-on-their-luck and weary miners, J. M. Corey, James M. Braly, and E. R. Hicks, stumbled upon the riches of Aurora.¹ Corey and Braly, residents of San Jose, had crossed over the Sierra Nevada during the spring of 1860 to prospect Washoe, as the area immediately east of Lake Tahoe was then known. They soon joined forces with Hicks, a part-Cherokee veteran miner, who had been prospecting the trans-Sierra country from Oregon southward. The three of them continued to drift southward until they reached Mono Lake. Turning back to the northeast, the three luckless prospectors passed through the Bodie, El Dorado, and Masonic mining districts and found themselves in the rugged Wassuk Range west of Walker Lake.

When days of climbing and searching brought them no closer to riches, they decided to head south again: first to Coso, just below the Owens Valley, and then on to Arizona and perhaps Mexico. On the morning of 22 August 1860 they reached Esmeralda Gulch. Finding good grass and water, they decided to set their stock out to graze and to lay over for a day or two. Hicks, the hunter of the party, started up craggy Esmeralda Hill to the west of their camp in search of game. Just over the crest of the hill, he stumbled upon some ledges of quartz. He laid down his rifle and broke off a few pieces. Curious blue streaks ran all through the rock. Hicks had discovered what soon became known as the Old Winnemucca Lode.²

With quartz samples in hand, Hicks returned to camp. Corey and Braly immediately recognized the blue streaks as sulfurets of silver and feverishly tested the

1. J. Wells Kelly, *First Directory of Nevada Territory*, pp. 239–41.

2. Kelly, p. 240. James M. Braly later claimed that it was he, not Hicks, who first discovered the quartz ledges. See Joseph Wasson, *Account of the Important Revival of Mining Interests in the Bodie and Esmeralda Districts*, p. 43.

quartz. It was exceedingly rich. All three now examined the surrounding hillsides, and by 25 August they had established four claims: Winnemucca, Esmeralda, Cape, and La Plata. These claims would make the three partners moderately wealthy men.³ Hicks later sold out for \$10,000 and returned to his native Arkansas; Corey and Braly eventually received \$30,000 apiece for their shares and returned to the Santa Clara Valley. Somehow Hicks, Corey, and Braly managed to avoid the so-called curse that haunted discoverers of rich deposits of gold and silver in the Far West. Mining superstition had it that the discoverers of such deposits invariably came to untimely or violent ends.⁴

After posting notices on their claims, the three excited sourdoughs hurried off to Monoville, the nearest mining camp, and in the best tradition of prospectors, spread the news of the discovery. Some twenty miners from Monoville followed them back to their camp, and on 30 August 1860 a meeting was held to form a mining district.⁵ The district was christened Esmeralda—Spanish for “emerald”—at the suggestion of Corey, who had remembered the name from Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris*. Dr. E. F. Mitchell was elected president of the district, and James Braly was chosen recorder. The choice of Braly was a good one. He refused to record a claim until he had personally inspected the ground and had made certain that it was correctly staked.⁶ The potential for disputes over claims and for claim jumping—two important sources of violence in many mining camps—was thereby greatly reduced.

The day after the organization of the district, the Real Del Monte mine was located. The Del Monte would be one of the richest of Esmeralda’s mines. By November 1860, just two months after the discovery, 357 claims had been recorded, and the mining district had spread over Silver, Middle, and Last Chance hills.⁷ The rush to the Esmeralda “excitement” was on.

During the winter of 1860–1861, hundreds of hopefuls from Washoe and Visalia pushed their way through deep snow and over rutted roads and rock-strewn trails to reach Esmeralda.⁸ Most of these prospectors were soon staking claims that would have to wait until spring to be worked. New silver leads were being discovered all the time, but it quickly became obvious that large capital investment would be required to develop the mines and to build quartz mills to crush the rock. Investors were cautious. A recent silver lead swindle in San Francisco had made some wary, and the uncertainty of property titles in Esmeralda prior to the official organization of the area (slated for 1 June 1861) inhibited others.⁹

Nevertheless, by the end of June 1861 the first quartz mill—the Pioneer Mill—was in operation in Willow Spring Gulch, just below some rich claims on Last Chance Hill.¹⁰ Two more mills were crushing rock before the end of the year, and in 1862 eight

3. Wasson, *Account of Revival*, p. 44.

4. *Bodie Standard*, 3 May 1882.

5. Kelly, *First Directory*, p. 241; Wasson, *Account of Revival*, p. 44.

6. W. A. Chalfant, *Outposts of Civilization*, p. 55.

7. Wasson, *Account of Revival*, p. 44.

8. *Visalia Delta*, 19 Jan. 1861; Samuel Youngs’s *Journal*, 19–25 Nov. 1860. The original *Journal* is in the possession of Robert E. Stewart, Carson City, Nevada. A highly edited version of the original is Ethel Zimmer, ed., “Colonel Samuel Youngs’ *Journal*.”

9. *Visalia Delta*, 11 and 30 May 1861.

10. Wasson, *Account of Revival*, p. 45; Myron Angel, ed., *History of Nevada*, p. 416.

more were built. Eventually, Esmeralda would have seventeen mills in operation.¹¹ The mills charged \$50 a ton to process ore, but Esmeralda's rock, a high grade sulfuret of silver with a significant percentage of gold, assayed at \$100 to \$300 a ton.¹² A few mines, such as the Wide West, ran into fabulously rich veins and brought out ore worth nearly \$3,000 a ton.

Almost all of Esmeralda's wealth lay near the surface. When the mine shafts reached a depth of seventy-five or one hundred feet, they moved through the richest ore and into a layer of barren quartz. The Wide West mine struck its bonanza within fifty feet of the surface. Edmund Green, the superintendent of the Wide West, noted that the mine's ore chamber was wide enough to "turn a wagon and horses in."¹³ The Real Del Monte, Esmeralda, Antelope, Lady Jane, Winnemucca, Johnson, Pond, Young America, and Juaniata mines were also big producers.

Within three years Esmeralda's rich ore chambers were virtually gouged out, and the mines went into a rapid decline. Most of the mills were disassembled and shipped off to Bodie or Virginia City to be reerected. The batteries and amalgamating pans of these disassembled mills, which nobody had bothered to clean off during the boom days, were found to contain gold and silver worth thousands of dollars.¹⁴ The average recovery of bullion had been about 80 percent, and no tailings had been saved. One miner estimated that "several millions of dollars floated off down the creek toward the East Walker river."¹⁵ Despite this reckless extravagance, Esmeralda's total bullion production has been estimated at \$16 million.¹⁶ In 1864 alone, nearly \$8 million in bullion was shipped out of the Wells, Fargo & Company's office in Aurora.¹⁷ Among the mining towns of the Great Basin, only Virginia City and Bodie produced more bullion than Aurora.

Most miners did not strike it rich in Aurora, but the few who did, did so in a big way. The three discoverers arrived with almost nothing and left as rich men. Alec Gamble, a former college dean from Maine, was one of the original owners of the Wide West mine. He sold his stock for \$275,000 and reinvested in the Real Del Monte mine. The Del Monte stock promptly increased several fold in value, and Gamble became a millionaire.¹⁸

Mark Twain, or Sam Clemens, as he was known in those days, almost had the same luck. He and his brother Orion had come west late in 1861, Orion to accept a job as Nevada's territorial secretary and Sam to escape the Civil War. Sam Clemens soon found himself in Aurora, occasionally prospecting for gold and silver and now and then writing a piece for one of the town's dailies, the *Esmeralda Star*. He spent most of his time telling stories in one or another of Aurora's many saloons or in a little cabin on

11. Wasson, p. 45; Angel, p. 416.

12. J. Ross Browne, *Report of J. Ross Browne on the Mineral Resources of the States and Territories West of the Rocky Mountains*, p. 336; Samuel L. Clemens, *Roughing It*, p. 164; *Sacramento Daily Union*, 19 March 1863.

13. Wasson, *Account of Revival*, p. 45.

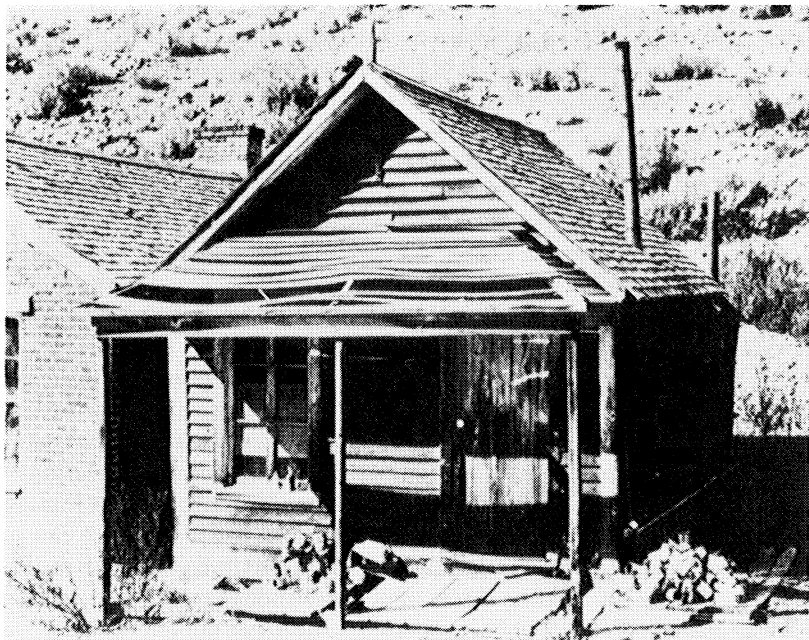
14. Wasson, p. 46; Chalfant, *Outposts*, p. 56.

15. Wasson, p. 46.

16. U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Report on the Internal Commerce of the United States for the Year 1890*, Part II of Commerce and Navigation, 51st Cong., 2nd Sess., HR Executive Document 6 (Washington, 1891), p. 670; Angel, *History of Nevada*, p. 416.

17. Wasson, p. 47.

18. R. K. Colcord, "Reminiscences of Life in Territorial Nevada," pp. 116-17.



2. The cabin of Sam Clemens and Cal Higbie on upper Pine Street (circa 1900). Clemens's cabin and the brick cabin next door were typical of dwellings in Aurora. (Credit: Nevada Historical Society)

upper Pine Street which he shared with his hard-working partner Cal Higbie. When Clemens ran out of money and found he lacked the security to borrow any, he actually went to work at a local quartz mill. He lasted one day.

Then Higbie, Clemens's trusty partner, had some real luck. He discovered a fantastically rich "blind lead" that cut diagonally through the Wide West vein and had gone unnoticed by the West's people.¹⁹ The lead was, therefore, public property. Higbie and Clemens immediately staked a claim, gave A. D. Allen, the foreman of the Wide West, a one-third share, and registered the claim with the recorder. The three men were on the verge of becoming millionaires. Clemens and Higbie sat up all night in their one-room cabin, discussing the grand houses they would build for themselves in San Francisco and the trip they would take to Europe.

Fate now interceded. The laws of the Esmeralda district required the locators of a claim to do a reasonable amount of work on their property within ten days, or it would revert to public domain. By virtue of a series of misunderstandings and unusual circumstances, neither Higbie, Clemens, nor Allen did the required work. All three believed that one of the others was doing it. At midnight of the tenth day a crowd of men, "duly armed and ready to back their proceedings," restaked the claim and recorded it as the Johnson.²⁰

19. Clemens, *Roughing It*, pp. 186–87.

20. Clemens, p. 193.

Higbie had been out of town prospecting for the legendary Lost Cement mines with Gid Whiteman and returned just five or ten minutes too late. Clemens had been on a mission of mercy visiting a dangerously ill comrade and arrived in Aurora about the same time as Higbie—too late. Ironically, as Clemens rode into town he noticed the crowd of men on the hill, who had gathered to relocate his claim, and fancied that a new strike had been made. Only Allen returned in time to confront the new locators. With a cocked revolver in his hand, he insisted that his name must be added to the new ownership list or he would “thin out the Johnson company some.”²¹ Since Allen was known as to be as good as his word, he was given a share. Much to the chagrin of Higbie and Clemens, the Johnson became a real bonanza, producing millions of dollars worth of gold and silver. Higbie continued prospecting with never more than limited success, and Clemens left for Virginia City to become a reporter for the *Territorial Enterprise*.

The average prospector never had the success of an Alec Gamble or even the near-success of a Sam Clemens. Conditions in Aurora, noted Roswell K. Colcord, a prospector and later governor of Nevada, “were practically the same as at all other mining camps. A few men became rich quickly and were ruined later through speculation in stocks and dissipation.”²² The ordinary miner located a claim and sank a shaft, hoping to hit pay dirt. Meanwhile, in order to pay for the necessities of life, he probably had a second job at a quartz mill or another mine, earning four or five dollars a day.²³ These were good wages at a time when eastern workingmen earned only a dollar a day. Moreover, the cost of living in Aurora was not significantly higher than elsewhere. The mines were developing so fast in 1862 and 1863 that there was more work than there were workers; wages were therefore high. The *Esmeralda Star* noted in March of 1863 that at least three hundred jobs in the mills and mines were going begging.²⁴

The miner lived in a small cabin made of stone and wood and cooked for himself. He was usually bewhiskered and wore a slouch hat, a woolen shirt, and trousers stuffed into high-topped boots. Slung or tucked into his belt was a revolver, and not infrequently he carried a derringer in an easily reached pocket. “We pack six shooters and derringers for fear of the knave,” wrote George A. Whitney, an Esmeralda miner and hay rancher, to his brother in Iowa.²⁵ Sam Clemens noted that he had never had occasion to kill anybody with the Colt Navy revolver he carried, but he had “worn the thing in deference to popular sentiment, and in order that I might not, by its absence, be offensively conspicuous, and a subject of remark.”²⁶

The first settlement in the Esmeralda district was at the head of Esmeralda Gulch, where Hicks, Corey, and Braly had made their original camp. Within a few months, however, settlement had moved farther to the north. There, where Esmeralda and Willow gulches joined, grew the town of Aurora, named for the Roman goddess of dawn. At an elevation of 7,500 feet, Aurora was nestled among mountains—three of which were named after the discoverers—that rose another two or three thousand feet

21. Clemens, p. 194.

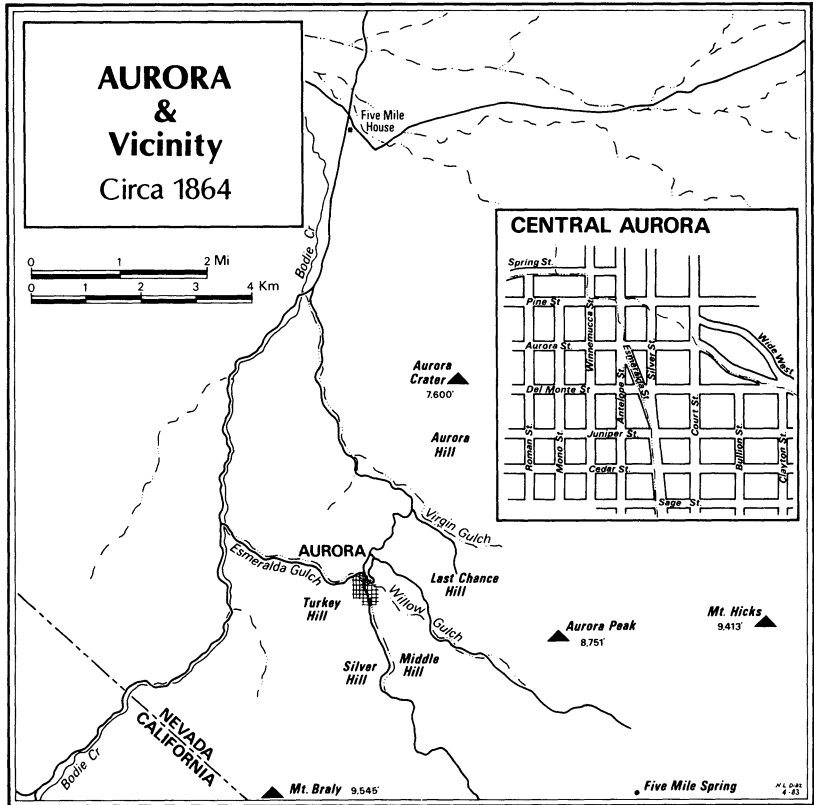
22. Colcord, “Reminiscences,” p. 116.

23. *Sacramento Daily Union*, 21 March 1863.

24. *Esmeralda Star*, 14 March 1863, as reprinted in the *Sacramento Daily Union*, 19 March 1863.

25. George A. Whitney to William T. Whitney, 7 July 1863, Whitney Letters and Correspondence, 1862–1887.

26. Clemens, *Roughing It*, p. 197.



3. Aurora was located at an elevation of 7,500 feet and surrounded by mountains that rose still higher. Its grid pattern of streets was laid out early in 1861. (Cartography by Noel Diaz)

higher. Two miles to the southwest lay Mount Braly (known now as Brawley Peaks), which reaches an elevation of 9,545 feet; a mile to the southeast was 8,751-foot Aurora Peak; four miles to the east was 9,413-foot Mount Hicks; and a dozen miles to the northeast was 10,520-foot Corey Peak.²⁷ On those mountains and on the hillsides immediately surrounding town, Aurorans found some piñon and juniper, but mostly sagebrush. A few small groves of stunted birch and aspen and patches of meadow grass grew along the creeks and around the springs.²⁸

Aurorans quickly learned that the climate was harsh and the weather totally unpredictable.²⁹ At any time of the year it could be hot or freezing, raining, snowing, or clear, and windy or calm. Precipitation was not something to count on. The first two years of Aurora's existence were very wet, whereas the next two were desert dry. Al-

27. U.S. Department of the Interior Geological Survey, *Aurora Quadrangle*, 1956.

28. D. I. Axelrod, "Miocene Floras from West-Central Nevada," pp. 22–23.

29. Samuel Young's Journal. Youngs maintained a daily record of Aurora's weather from November 1860 to December 1866.

though precipitation in that country averages twelve inches a year, most years are either well above or well below that average figure. Aurorans also found that seasonal temperature variations were great. Winter lows of fifteen to twenty degrees below zero were not uncommon, and summer highs in the eighties were normal. The diurnal temperature range could be dramatic: a forty-degree increase between sunrise and noon was common. If, as some writers contend, the rugged terrain and harsh climate of the West hardened the people and made violence less abhorrent to them, then Aurora could not have been located in a more violence-encouraging environment.

Prospectors are not the types to be deterred by rugged terrain or harsh climate. During the winter of 1860–1861, they trudged by the hundreds through snow that covered the ground to a depth of two feet, enduring near-zero-degree temperatures to reach Aurora. By February 1861 the town contained some 150 places of residence or business built along streets laid out in a grid pattern.³⁰ Spring, Pine, Aurora, and Del Monte streets, running east–west, intersected north–south Winnemucca, Antelope, Silver, and Court streets. Pine Street would become the principal thoroughfare. Town lots, covering an area nearly as large as Sacramento was then, were in the process of being surveyed and staked.³¹ Although some of these town lots were already selling for \$500 apiece, ground was set aside for a school, a courthouse, and other public buildings.³²

At this early date most of Aurora's structures, which included two general stores, six warehouses, two meat markets, four blacksmith shops, one saddlery, two bakeries, and two carpenter shops, were simple wooden frames covered by tightly stretched canvas. Meals could be had for just twenty-five cents a serving at any of several restaurants, and room and board ran only \$10 a week. These prices compared favorably with those in Sacramento and San Francisco. Aurora's two livery stables, however, charged \$3 a day to feed a horse hay, \$5 if grain were included. Already there were "six small drinking places and four large establishments with billiards and card tables, where much gambling was done." The population of Aurora in February 1861 was approaching eight hundred people, only a dozen of whom were women.

By April the number of businesses in town had reached twenty, and residences were estimated at four hundred.³³ A miner set the population at about twelve hundred people. "Two hundred," noted the same miner, "are on the hills prospecting, two hundred are building houses . . . , two hundred more are exhibiting rich specimens of silver ore—to their particular friends, of course; fifty are using their influence to get an old and well known ledge recorded under a new name. Claims are claimed on claims. The balance of the good citizens of Esmeralda District are taking or making cocktails, or observations, or discussing the relative merits and advantages of California State laws with Territorial laws." "Making cocktails" was right. Since the town was not yet officially organized, no licenses were required to sell liquor. Consequently, nearly every store in Aurora sold "red-eye" whiskey "to the thirsty prospector and traveler in quantities to suit spirits depressed or buoyant hopes."

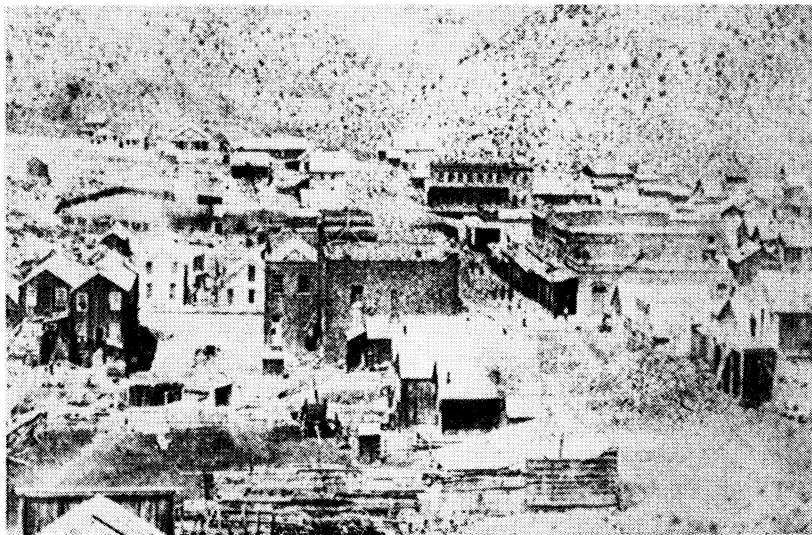
Trains of immigrants were arriving daily—almost hourly—throughout the

30. *Sacramento Daily Union*, 9 March 1861.

31. *Visalia Delta*, 27 April 1861.

32. *Sacramento Daily Union*, 9 March 1861, described Aurora's buildings and their uses at this date.

33. *Visalia Delta*, 27 April and 11 May 1861, described the people of Aurora and their habits.



4. *Downtown Aurora (circa 1865). View is east on Pine Street. Large, two-story, balconied building in the background is the county courthouse. When Aurora declined and lost the county seat, the courthouse was converted into the Esmeralda Hotel. Only one other photograph of Aurora during its boom years exists (see p. 67). (Credit: Nevada Historical Society)*

spring. A prospector noted that in one day on the Esmeralda road he passed forty-five wagons on their way to Aurora.³⁴ The first stagecoach to reach Aurora arrived in town at midnight on 15 April 1861 after a nineteen-hour drive from Carson City.³⁵ A capacity load of passengers was aboard, and each of the riders had paid a \$20 fare for the trip to the new promised land. By July there were nearly two thousand people in Aurora.³⁶ Most of these residents were living in stone- or adobe-walled and canvas-roofed huts. Wood was scarce and prohibitively expensive at \$150 per thousand board feet.³⁷ Four brickyards were soon answering the need for construction materials. One of the first buildings erected from brick was Patrick Hickey's general store. The new brick edifice replaced Hickey's original store, reputed to be the first in Aurora, which was made of canvas, wood, mud, and stone.³⁸

Aurora thus became unique among western mining towns: most of its major buildings were made of brick. As a result, dozens of these structures would remain standing, and in good condition, well into the twentieth century. However, when used brick became fashionable for the fireplaces and patios of expensive homes, Aurora was doomed. Its brick buildings were sold to construction firms from southern California,

34. *Visalia Delta*, 30 May 1861.

35. Samuel Youngs's Journal, 15 April 1861.

36. Kelly, *First Directory*, p. v.

37. *Visalia Delta*, 30 May 1861.

38. Chalfant, *Outposts*, p. 55.

and almost nothing of the town remains today. Yet, in a manner of speaking, Aurora lives on in the homes of Beverly Hills, Pacific Palisades, and Malibu.³⁹

The summer of 1861 was made spectacular by the passing of a great comet with an “immense tail stretching nearly across the Heavens” and a bright display of the aurora borealis.⁴⁰ It was also made spectacular by phenomenal real estate appreciation. Town lots that had sold for a few hundred dollars apiece in early spring were now selling for \$1,500 each.⁴¹ Supplies and provisions did not keep pace with real estate. Although most goods had to be freighted into Aurora from Visalia or Sacramento, the majority of items sold for only slightly more than they did on the western side of the Sierra. One item, clothing, actually sold for less.⁴² Room and board was still only \$10 a week. If the Auroran cooked for himself, he could buy a hundred-pound sack of flour for \$21, a dozen extra-large speckled gull eggs from Mono Lake for seventy-five cents, and fresh beef from Big Meadows or the Owens Valley at twenty cents a pound.⁴³

Aurora continued to boom throughout 1862 and 1863. In April 1863 a miner reported, “Our town grows—rapidly in every respect—over 50 men per day have come in for the last two weeks, and people say they have hardly started in yet—still wages keep up.”⁴⁴ In May the town of Aurora was incorporated through an election in which nearly 1,500 votes were cast.⁴⁵ During the summer of 1863 Aurora reached its zenith. The town boasted two daily newspapers, the *Esmeralda Star* (known as the *Union* after 1863) and the *Aurora Times*; two stage lines, the Pioneer Line and Wells, Fargo & Company; a telegraph, hundreds of businesses, nearly eight hundred houses or cabins, some three hundred commercial buildings, and a population estimated at five thousand people.⁴⁶ Women numbered between two hundred and three hundred, about five percent of the total population, and there were some eighty children. A small Chinese district existed, but no clue remains to the actual number of Chinese. Indians came into town to sell brook trout and gull eggs, and to ~~stage~~ dances for the entertainment of the whites, but for the most part the red men remained in the hinterland, hunting and gathering.

With some five thousand residents, Aurora was bursting at the seams. Every hotel, lodging house, and miner’s cabin was jam-packed, and hundreds of people went without accommodations.⁴⁷ The streets were crowded with wagons that had carried freight over the Sierra on the new Sonora Pass trail. On both sides of Pine Street for its entire length new brick buildings, some three stories high, were being erected, and real estate prices continued an upward spiral until choice lots sold for \$5,000 apiece or

39. Don Ashbaugh, *Nevada’s Turbulent Yesterday*, p. 123.

40. Samuel Youngs’s Journal, 30 June 1861; *Visalia Delta*, 25 July 1861. This was Tebbutt’s comet. The earth passed through the comet’s tail on 29 and 30 June 1861.

41. Chalfant, *Outposts*, p. 55.

42. *Visalia Delta*, 30 May 1861.

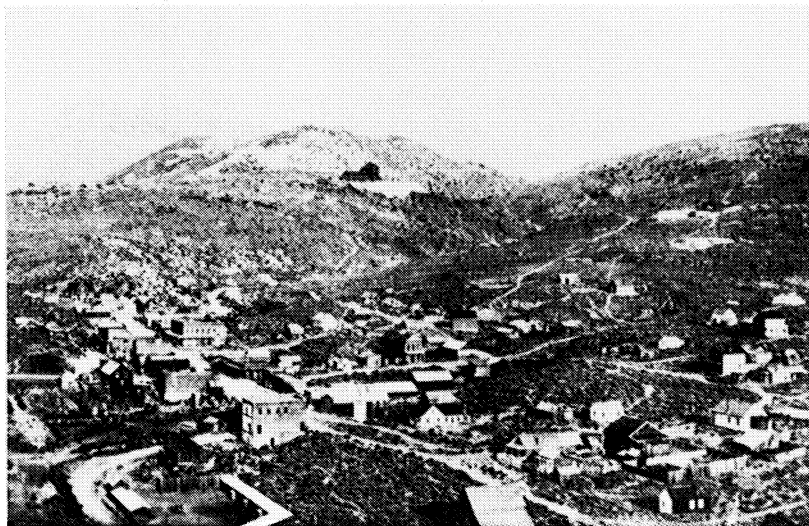
43. Samuel Youngs’s Journal, 13 Jan. 1861, 30 May 1861.

44. George A. Whitney to William T. Whitney, 7 April 1863, Whitney Letters.

45. G. Whitney to W. Whitney, 15 May 1863.

46. Francis P. Farquhar, ed., *Up and Down California in 1860–1864: The Journal of William H. Brewer*, p. 420; Colcord, “Reminiscences,” p. 114; Chalfant, *Outposts*, p. 57; California, *Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for 1864–65*, pp. 180–84.

47. Farquhar, *Journal of William H. Brewer*, p. 420.



5. By 1889 Aurora was only a skeleton of its former self. Hundreds of wooden structures had been consumed for fuel, and dozens of brick buildings had been leveled and their bricks carted off. During the 1930s and 1940s, used brick became fashionable for residential use, and the last of Aurora's many fine brick structures were demolished. View is southeast, with the Real Del Monte hoisting works in the background on Last Chance Hill. (Credit: Nevada Historical Society)

more.⁴⁸ The boom was not to last much longer, however. During the fall of 1864 Aurora began a rapid decline.⁴⁹ Real estate prices fell faster than they had risen. On 8 February 1865 the now semiweekly rather than daily *Esmeralda Union* lamented that a “fine brick house” sold for only \$12 at a tax auction, and a two-story brick building, “which could not have been purchased 18 months ago for \$5000,” was now offered for \$500. Town lots dropped in value by 95 percent. Just a year and a half after its peak, Aurora was experiencing the beginning of the end.

Although the number of children in Aurora probably never exceeded eighty, their education was given high priority. During Aurora's first year of existence, a twenty-by-forty-foot brick schoolhouse was erected.⁵⁰ Twenty-seven children attended the school in 1862, and fifty-one in 1863. Evidently the teacher was paid per pupil, for she earned \$216 in 1862 and \$400 in 1863.⁵¹

Of far less importance to Aurorans than education was organized religious worship. The first church service was not held until October 1863, more than three years after the town's founding.⁵² It was four more months before the first church, the Meth-

48. George A. Whitney to William T. Whitney, 7 June and 7 July 1863, Whitney Letters.

49. *Esmeralda Union*, 30 Dec. 1864.

50. Chalfant, *Outposts*, p. 55.

51. *Report of the Superintendent of Public Instruction for 1864–65*, pp. 180–84.

52. Samuel Youngs's Journal, 4 Oct. 1863.

odist Episcopal church, was built.⁵³ In November 1864 construction was begun on a Catholic church.⁵⁴ However, because of the rapid depopulation of Aurora during 1865 the church was never completed.⁵⁵ Despite the lack of churches, religious services were held in rented halls during 1864 for Catholics, Presbyterians, and Baptists. The establishment of these services coincided ironically with the decline of Aurora.

If Aurorans were less than zealous about religious service, they certainly were enthusiastic when it came to being served. Some twenty-five saloons—more than one for every two hundred Aurora men—kept the “boys” well watered.⁵⁶ P. J. McMahan’s Del Monte Exchange featured fine French brandies and old whiskeys such as Virginia Mountain Dew. Frank Schoonmaker’s Bank Exchange saloon carried the usual assortment of liquors, wines, bitters, and cigars and it also had a billiard room. There was always action at the Wide West saloon, but the finest Havana cigars and Old Tom Holland gin were available at Porter and Barber’s.

After recording a claim a miner only had to cross Silver Street to imbibe Old Government and Old Virginia whiskey at Runyon and Harkness. Old London Dock brandy was available at the Sazerac saloon, and imported wines at the Merchant’s Exchange. If a prospector’s taste ran to beer, there was the Esmeralda Brewery, which claimed to have the finest lager beer on the West Coast. The proprietor, F. Staehler, maintained that he used only the best barley for malt and the purest mountain spring water from the Sierra Nevada. No one ever went thirsty in Aurora for lack of watering holes.

Almost as numerous as saloons were gambling houses and brothels. Roswell K. Colcord, then an Esmeralda prospector and later governor of Nevada, called Aurora “the wickedest town of its size in America.”⁵⁷ The miner’s favorite way to lose his gold or silver—the medium of exchange in Aurora—was at the card table playing faro, monte, or blackjack. Roulette was also popular. If the miner had any dust left after visiting the bar and gaming table, the prostitute was almost certain to relieve him of it. Nevertheless, few were upset with the night life of Aurora, although at one point the grand jury urged the authorities to take action against “the numerous disgusting Chinese brothels that exist on most of our public streets, to the great detriment of public morals and danger of property.”⁵⁸ Nothing was ever done, however, beyond fining a couple of Chinese prostitutes \$20 each.⁵⁹

Perhaps the best description of Aurora night life was that of William H. Brewer, who visited the town during July 1863:

Aurora of a Sunday night—how shall I describe it? It is so unlike anything East that I can compare it with nothing you have ever seen. One sees a hundred men to one woman and child. Saloons—saloons—saloons—liquor—everywhere. And here the men

53. *Virginia Daily Union*, 8 Jan. 1864.

54. *Esmeralda Union*, 23 Nov. 1864.

55. Angel, *History of Nevada*, p. 205.

56. *Esmeralda Star*, 20 Sept. 1862, 18 Nov. 1863; *Aurora Times*, 11 June and 7 Oct. 1864; *Esmeralda Union*, 23 March 1864–11 March 1865.

57. Colcord, “Reminiscences,” p. 119.

58. *Esmeralda Union*, 31 March 1864.

59. *Esmeralda Union*, 6 May 1864.

are—where else *can* they be? At home in their cheerless, lonesome hovels or huts? No, in the saloons, where lights are bright, amid the hum of many voices and the excitement of gambling. Here men come to make money—make it *quick*—not by the slow, honest industry, but by quick strokes—no matter *how*, so long as the law doesn't call it *robbery*. Here, where twenty quartz mills are stamping the rock and kneading its powder into bullion—here, where one never sees a bank bill, nor “rag money,” but where hard silver and shining gold are the currency—where men are congregated and living uncomfortably, where there are no home ties or social checks, no churches, no religions—here one sees gambling and vice in all its horrible realities.

Here are tables, with gold and silver piled upon them by hundreds (or even thousands), with men (or women) behind, who deal *faro*, or *monte*, or *vingt-et-un* or *rouge-et-noir*, or who turn *roulette*—in short, any way in which they may win and you may lose. Here, too, are women—for nowhere else does one see prostitutes as he sees them in a new mining town. All combine to excite and ruin. No wonder that one sees sad faces and haggard countenances and wretched looks, that we are so often told that “many are dying off”—surely, no wonder!⁶⁰

If the Auroran enjoyed indoor dissipation, he also found time for several outdoor recreational activities and amusements. Bodie Creek and the East Walker River supplied the fisherman with trout, and the hunter learned that the local hills were full of sage hens.⁶¹ Extended trips, especially during winter, were made to Mono Lake to hunt migrating and wintering waterfowl. Irish-born J. Ross Browne, a prolific and widely read author who traveled extensively in the West while serving as a U.S. commissioner of mining statistics during the 1860s, noted that “during the winter months the waters of the lake are literally covered with swans, geese, brant, ducks, and smaller aquatic fowl. It is incredible the number of these birds that appear after the first rains. Sportsmen find it a laborious job to carry home their game. A regular gunning expedition in this region results in nothing short of wholesale slaughter. Twenty or thirty teal duck at a single shot is nothing unusual.”⁶²

Dog fights or dog and badger fights were staged from time to time in Aurora. One miner thought the dogs provided “classic amusement” and estimated that “there must be at least two canine specimens to every man, woman and child in the community.”⁶³ A dog and badger fight usually drew a sizable crowd and heavy betting. Because of his superior quickness, the badger invariably bested several dogs before he finally succumbed.⁶⁴ Aurorans never failed to admire the “pluck” of the ornery little fighter.

Perhaps the recreational activity one would least expect to find in a mid-nineteenth-century western mining town is skiing. Nevertheless, Aurorans took to the slopes by the dozens. “The citizens amused themselves,” wrote prospector and territorial delegate Samuel Youngs, “in going up the mountains on snow shoes about 8 to 10 feet long, 4 inches wide, turned up in front like a sled runner. They use a pole like pushing a boat

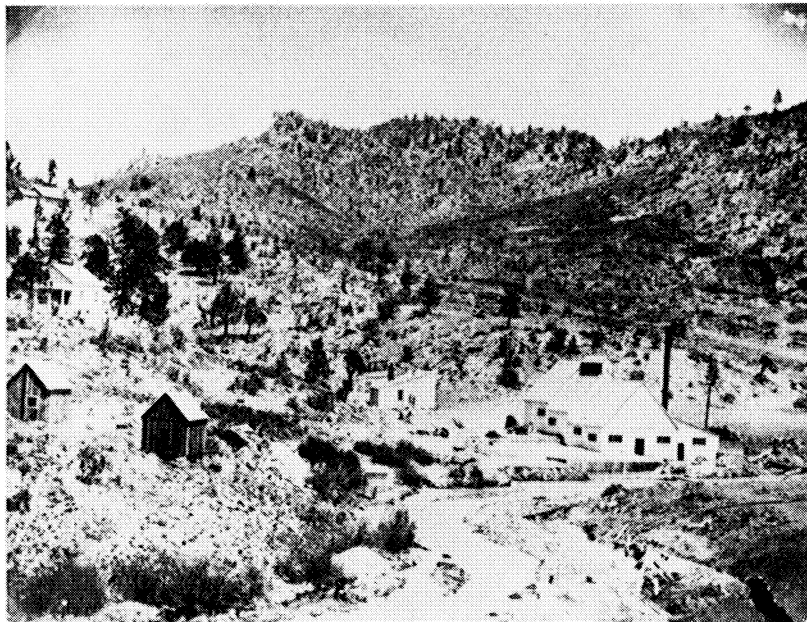
60. Farquhar, *Journal of William H. Brewer*, pp. 420–21.

61. Samuel Youngs's *Journal*, 16 June 1861, 4 and 20 March and 27 June 1862, 5 June 1865.

62. J. Ross Browne, *Adventures in the Apache Country: A Tour through Arizona and Sonora, with Notes on the Silver Regions of Nevada*, p. 422. For a biographical sketch of Browne see *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, vol. 8, pp. 117–18.

63. Chalfant, *Outposts*, p. 57.

64. *Esmeralda Union*, 5 Sept. 1864; Browne, *Adventures in Apache Country*, pp. 421–25.



6. Cabins and mills and juniper and piñon dotted the hills that surrounded Aurora. After good snowfalls skiers could also be found on the hills. (Credit: California Historical Society)

and come down rapidly more than a mile a minute.”⁶⁵ After each good snowfall the mountains around Aurora would be covered with numerous telltale tracks. “There are several gentlemen here,” noted the *Esmeralda Union* on 4 February 1865, “who have acquired wonderful proficiency in the use of these shoes, and it is pleasant to see them ride down a moderately steep hill at railroad speed.”

Skiing gave rise to many a tall tale in Aurora. One newspaper told of a prospector who left the summit of Mount Braly one morning, intending to ski to Esmeralda Gulch. The prospector’s speed grew greater and greater until, according to the reporter, it could not have been less than a hundred miles an hour. Near the Esmeralda tunnel a stump loomed up, and the luckless miner plowed straight into it. His legs and arms wound around the stump so fast that his body was cut in twain but his skis kept going. The newspaper claimed to have received a dispatch from Wellington, some forty miles away, that a lone ski had passed by there early in the afternoon. “Which way the other shoe [ski] went,” concluded the newspaper, “we don’t know, but think it is still running.”⁶⁶

Aurora’s institutions of law enforcement and justice were not unlike those of other western communities.⁶⁷ Law enforcement in and around Aurora was left to the county sheriff and the township constable. The sheriff was the general law-enforcement

65. Samuel Youngs’s Journal, 7 Jan. 1862.

66. *Esmeralda Union*, 4 Feb. 1865.

67. See Frank R. Prassel, *The Western Peace Officer*.

officer of the county as well as the ex officio tax collector.⁶⁸ His duties included conserving the public peace, making arrests, preventing and suppressing affrays, attending courts of record having criminal jurisdiction within the county, and executing warrants and other processes. He was also required to summon jurors and run the county jail.⁶⁹ The sheriff was an elected officer, but he appointed his own deputies.

N. F. Scott, G. W. Bailey, and D. G. Francis served as sheriff during Aurora's heyday.⁷⁰ Scott was killed fighting Indians; Bailey and Francis, who served four terms each, retired unscathed. Because Aurora was the county seat for Mono (then Esmeralda) County, the sheriff's office and the county jail were in Aurora.

The county jail was evidently a sight to behold. In September 1862 the grand jury noted that although the jail was kept clean and the prisoners were well treated, the building was unsafe. Said the jury:

The walls are badly sprung and cracked, owing probably to the insecure foundation in front. The ties which are supposed to hold the front to its place, they do not consider any security or benefit, and it would not surprise them any day to hear of its falling and especially when the snow begins to melt in the spring; neither do they consider it a secure place to keep a prisoner without a guard.⁷¹

The grand jury recommended that two or three "substantial" cells be built to confine persons convicted of criminal acts and keep them separate from other prisoners. Nothing was done, however, to improve the facility, and the grand jury of October 1863 found the jail totally unfit to secure the inmates. A half year later the grand jury again found the county jail "inefficient and insecure, and totally unfit for the lodgment and safe-keeping of prisoners therein."⁷² No improvements were made, and at the end of 1864 the grand jury was noting once more that the county jail was "unfit for confining prisoners" and recommending that a safer building be procured.⁷³

Surprisingly, there is record of only one escape from the county jail. Late in March 1864 three prisoners who were awaiting trial for grand larceny cut a hole through the jail wall and crawled to freedom.⁷⁴ A fourth prisoner, who was not associated with the first three, also crawled through the hole, walked leisurely down to the Sazerac saloon, had a drink, and then sauntered over to the courthouse to report the escape to Sheriff D. G. Francis. Although a large posse attempted to overtake the fugitives, it failed to turn up any trace of the men.

In addition to the county sheriff and the county jail, Aurora maintained a township constable, known in Aurora as the city marshal, and a city jail. The constable's jurisdiction did not extend beyond the township, unless the constable was deputized by

68. *California Statutes*, 1861, p. 235.

69. *California Statutes*, 1850, p. 258; 1851, pp. 190-97; 1852, p. 108.

70. Angel, *History of Nevada*, pp. 401-2, 405.

71. *Esmeralda Star*, 20 Sept. 1862.

72. *Esmeralda Union*, 31 March 1864.

73. *Esmeralda Union*, 23 Dec. 1864.

74. *Esmeralda Union*, 26 March 1864; George A. Whitney to William T. Whitney, 27 March 1864, Whitney Letters.

the sheriff. It was the duty of the constable to maintain order, attend the court of the justice of the peace, execute all orders issued by the justice, assist the district attorney, and run the city jail.⁷⁵

The town constable was elected by a vote of the people, but he appointed his own officers, or policemen, as they were known.⁷⁶ Daniel H. Pine, M. Center, Robert M. Howland, and John A. Palmer held the office of constable or city marshal of Aurora during the town's boom years.⁷⁷ A small frame building containing a one-room office and two cells constituted the marshal's office and the city jail. Although the less than formidable structure appeared to invite escape, no jailbreaks ever occurred.⁷⁸

Aurora boasted two militia companies, the Esmeralda Rangers (also referred to as the Rifles) and the Hooker Light Infantry (known as the Aurora City Guard after March 1864).⁷⁹ The Rangers, a company of cavalry, were officially organized on 2 April 1862 under the laws of California and were included in the Third Brigade, California Militia. H. J. Teel served as Captain and A. D. Allen as First Lieutenant of the fifty-five-man outfit. The weaponry of the Rangers included cavalry sabers and Starr's army pistols. Ranger uniforms were elegant: coats of fine, black broadcloth with stripes of gold lace on the collars and arms, and dark blue cloth pants with a broad stripe of gold running down each pant leg.⁸⁰ The Hooker Light Infantry, led by Captain Jacob Hess (then by Captain John A. Palmer) and First Lieutenant George H. Donnell, was not organized until 18 May 1863. Its sixty-three members carried rifled muskets with bayonets. Headquarters and armory for the militia companies were in the Wingate Building at the corner of Aurora and Silver streets. In 1864 both companies were dropped from the roster of the Third Brigade, California Militia, because the newly established boundary had left Aurora in Nevada.⁸¹ Nevertheless, they continued to function until the end of the Civil War.

The success of the militia companies in attracting members and drilling regularly evidently inspired Joseph W. Calder to form a cavalry company from Aurora to fight in the Civil War. During August 1863 he began a correspondence with Nevada's territorial governor, James Nye, and on 4 December 1863 was commissioned captain and empowered to raise a cavalry company to be known as Company F, Nevada Volunteers.⁸² By the spring of 1864 Captain Calder had recruited eighty-eight men, many of whom had been members of one of Aurora's militia companies.⁸³ Although the men had been promised active service in the Civil War, they did nothing more than a tour of duty at Fort Churchill, Nevada.

75. *California Statutes*, 1850, p. 263.

76. *California Statutes*, 1861, p. 238.

77. *Esmeralda Union*, 1 April, 2 May, 28 and 29 July 1864; Colcord, "Reminiscences," p. 117; Kelly, *First Directory*, p. 246.

78. *Esmeralda Union*, 31 March 1864.

79. *Report of the Adjutant-General of the State of California for the Year 1863*, pp. 181–82; *Esmeralda Union*, 16 April 1864; Samuel Youngs's *Journal*, 4 July and 27 Nov. 1864, 15 April 1865.

80. *Esmeralda Union*, 7 May 1864.

81. *Report of the Adjutant-General of the State of California from May 1, 1864, to November 30, 1865*, p. 15.

82. Joseph W. Calder to Governor James W. Nye, 14, 16, and 21 August 1863, in *Unsorted Territorial Correspondence*, Nevada Division of Archives.

83. *Virginia Daily Union*, 9 Jan. 1864; Angel, *History of Nevada*, pp. 267–68.

Aurora's court system consisted of a justice court and a county, or district (after September 1863), court.⁸⁴ F. K. Bechtel, J. W. Tyler, and John T. Moore served as justices of the peace during Aurora's boom years.⁸⁵ The first county court judge was J. A. Moutrie. He was followed by Alexander Baldwin and George Turner.⁸⁶

Representing the people of the state as criminal prosecutor was the district attorney.⁸⁷ Between 1861 and 1866 five different men, R. E. Phelps, William M. Dixon, R. S. Mesick, George S. Palmer, and S. H. Chase, filled this post.⁸⁸ Another important county officer was the coroner. It was his duty, when informed that a person had been killed, committed suicide, or died suddenly under suspicious circumstances, to summon a jury and hold an inquest to determine the probable cause of death, and to render a verdict as to those responsible for that death. If the party determined responsible was still at large, the coroner was commanded by law to issue a warrant for his arrest.⁸⁹ The coroner could also bind over witnesses to testify at the subsequent trial.

Rounding out the institutions of justice in Aurora was the grand jury. It was the duty of the grand jury to inquire into public offenses committed within the county and, if warranted, hand down indictments.⁹⁰ The jury also audited the records and accounts of all the officers of the county. Members of the jury were chosen by lot from the list of registered voters.

Aurora, then, was one of the West's largest and most spectacular mining towns during the early 1860s. Hundreds of miles from any major city and isolated by rugged mountainous terrain, dominated by a harsh climate with violent and unpredictable weather, Aurora would have had no reason to exist were it not for the fabulous quantities of silver and gold that were mined from the surrounding hills. Although its life was brief, Aurora nevertheless developed all the governmental forms of a mature town. Its institutions of law enforcement and justice were highly structured and fairly sophisticated and not unlike those of other mid-nineteenth-century American towns. Aurora's population peaked at something over five thousand people, nearly all of whom were white and male. Of the small number of women in town, perhaps half were prostitutes. Family life was almost nonexistent. Aurorans paid little attention to organized religion, drank heavily, gambled incessantly, and carried revolvers and derringers. Only a few became wealthy, but wages were high and hopes were higher.

84. Angel, *History of Nevada*, pp. 401, 403.

85. Kelly, *First Directory*, pp. 245–52; *Esmeralda Union*, 30 March and 23 Nov. 1864.

86. Angel, *History of Nevada*, pp. 401–3.

87. *California Statutes*, 1850, p. 112; 1861, p. 235.

88. Angel, *History of Nevada*, pp. 401–2, 405.

89. *California Statutes*, 1850, pp. 264, 265.

90. *California Statutes*, 1850, p. 288.