

BOOM TOWN — GOLD TOWN

The Last of California's Old-time Mining Camps



BODIE STATE HISTORIC PARK



*And now my comrades all are gone;
Naught remains to toast.
They have left me here in my misery,
Like some poor wandering ghost.*

At the height of the boom in 1879-1880, Bodie was so rough and wicked that shootings, stabbings, and thefts took place nearly every day. But the local badmen who gave the town such a violent reputation did not bother the gold-crazed crowd, because the mines were the center of attention throughout the West. Perhaps to make Bodie a synonym for violence and toughness, a rival mining camp newspaper quoted a young girl in 1879, on learning that her family was moving to the camp, as reportedly saying, “Goodbye, God! We’re going to Bodie!”

*"Goodbye God,
I'm going to Bodie."*

WELCOME TO BODIE

Bodie State Historic Park

California State Parks

THIS IS BODIE, or rather the remains of Bodie. Only about five percent of the buildings it contained during its 1880 heyday still remain. Today, it stands just as time, fire and the elements have left it—a genuine California gold-mining ghost town. Designated a state historic park in 1962, it is now maintained in a state of “arrested decay.”

Bodie was named after Waterman S. Body (also known as William S. Bodey), who discovered gold here in 1859. The change in spelling of the town’s name has often been attributed to an illiterate sign painter, but was a deliberate change by the citizenry to insure proper pronunciation.

The town of Bodie rose to prominence with the decline of mining along the western slope of the Sierra Nevada. Prospectors crossing the eastern slope in 1859 to “see the elephant”—that is, to search for gold—discovered what was to be the Comstock Lode at Virginia City and started a wild rush to the surrounding high desert country.

By 1879, Bodie boasted a population of about ten thousand and was second to none for wickedness, badmen, and “the worst climate out of doors.” One little girl, whose family was taking her to the remote and infamous town, wrote in her diary: “Goodbye God, I’m going to Bodie.” The phrase came to be known throughout the west.

Killings occurred with monotonous regularity, sometimes becoming almost daily events. The fire bell, which tolled the ages of the deceased when they were buried, rang often and long. Robberies, stage holdups and street fights provided variety, and the town’s 65 saloons offered many opportunities for relaxation after hard days of work in the mines. The Reverend F.M. Warrington saw it in 1881 as “a sea of sin, lashed by the tempests of lust and passion.”

Nearly everyone has heard about the infamous “Badman from Bodie.” Some historians say that he was a real person by the name of Tom Adams. Others say his name was Washoe Pete. It seems more likely, however, that he was a composite. Bad men, like bad whiskey and bad climate, were endemic to the area. Whatever the case, the streets are quiet now. Bodie still has its wicked climate, but with the possible exception of an occasional ghostly visitor, its badmen are all in their graves.





BODIE STATE HISTORIC PARK

is a genuine California gold-mining ghost town. Visitors can walk down the deserted streets of a town that once had a population of nearly 10,000 people. The town is named for Waterman S. Body (William Bodey), who had discovered small amounts of gold in hills north of Mono Lake. In 1875, a mine cave-in revealed pay dirt, which led to purchase of the mine by the Standard Company in 1877. People flocked to Bodie and transformed it from a town of a few dozen to a boomtown.

Only a small part of the town survives, preserved in a state of "arrested decay." Interiors remain as they were left and stocked with goods. Designated as a National Historic Site and a State Historic Park in 1962, the remains of Bodie are being preserved in a state of "arrested decay." Today this once thriving mining camp is visited by tourists, howling winds and an occasional ghost.



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BODIE — BOOM TOWN GOLD TOWN

by Douglas McDonald

At the height of the boom in 1879-1880, Bodie was so rough and wicked that shootings, stabbings, and thefts took place nearly every day. But the local badmen who gave the town such a violent reputation did not bother the gold-crazed crowd, because the mines were the center of attention throughout the West.

Perhaps to make Bodie a synonym for violence and toughness, a rival mining camp newspaper quoted a young girl in 1879, on learning that her family was moving to the camp, as reportedly saying, "Goodbye, God! We're going to Bodie!"

Such insult did not go unnoticed. The belligerent Bodie Daily Free Press quickly corrected this, claiming that there had been a typographic error in the printed story. What she really said, according to the newspaper, was "Good! By God! We're going to Bodie!"

Wells Drury, the famous editor of Virginia City, Nevada, remembered a remark made by a local undertaker which enhanced Bodie's notorious violence. The mortician said, "We never get any breaks in this business here in Virginia City. As soon as the local talent gets to thinking they're tough they go try it out in Bodie and Bodie undertakers get the job of burying them."

Gold was first discovered in this area in 1857 at Dogtown, twelve miles west of present-day Bodie. By the time this small boom died two years later, another gold region was developing at Monoville, a few miles farther south. These original locations prompted prospectors to venture further afield in search of additional mining sites.

Late in 1859 a German from New York, William (or Waterman) S. Bodey uncovered a vein of gold at the foot of Bodie Bluff, supposedly while shoveling to retrieve a wounded rabbit which had taken refuge in a hole. Enough prospectors and miners came to these wind-swept hills that within a year a mining district was organized, named for the original discoverer who unfortunately perished in a blizzard shortly after making his find. By 1862 the district's name had evolved into Bodie because of a careless misspelling on a sign, according to local legend.

In the early 1860's the fledgling Bodie mines began to be worked, but they were always overshadowed by the spectacular development of the gold mines in nearby Esmeralda Mining District centered at Aurora, just 12 miles to the northeast in Nevada.





The camp of Bodie gained only passing attention, and by 1864 one observer counted no more than 20 wood-frame buildings.

Desultory mining continued over the next few years, although a social life developed as some families joined the camp's single miners. Bodie's first wedding took place in December 1867 when Rodger Horner married Marietta Butler. They bore a son in April 1869, the first birth at Bodie.

The main rush to Bodie began with the formation of the Standard Mining Co. in April 1877. Originally located in 1861 as the Bunker Hill Mine, this property became part of the first mining company incorporated in this district in 1863. Known as the Bodie Bluff Consolidated, and owned in part by Leland Stanford and Judge F.T. Bechtel, this venture failed in less than a year.

Believed to be worthless by 1873, the Bunker Hill property changed hands several times until an unexpected cave-in revealed a fabulously rich ore chamber. In late 1877, spearheaded by the rich ore shipments from the Standard Co. mines, a real mining stampede to Bodie got underway.

As Virginia City's mines began to decline about

that same time, many former Comstockers swelled the local population into the thousands. In July 1879 the Bodie Daily News claimed a population of 8,000 people for the camp, including transients, at the height of the boom. One newspaper account stated, "The growth of the town has no parallel in the history of mining... Society has not assimilated, but the elements exist in a state of chaos. Fine residences, saloons, business houses, brothels and cabins are in a motley jumble as to location. There are 47 saloons and 10 faro tables. This is not a disparagement of the district, but an evidence of its prosperity... There are however two banking houses, five wholesale stores, and an excellent daily newspaper, and all the accessories of civilization and refinement will soon follow."

Bodie's reputation as a tough town was emphasized by newspapers where such sensationalism was found to increase sales. Through the spring of 1878 accounts of shootings and sundry violence in the booming mining camp were avidly reported throughout the country which prompted E.H. Clough to pen a fictional parody of these events. Originally published early in the June 1 issue of *The Argonaut*, it was soon reprinted all across the nation. This is credited as the origin of the term "Bad Man of Bodie" which soon became the "Bad Man From Bodie," a generic term for the large number of "roughs" in the community.

Though myth soon out-distanced the truth, Bodie was indeed plagued with more than its share of mayhem. Not infrequently there was a "man for breakfast" because of early morning gunplay. A visiting journalist wrote of the virtual shooting gallery at Bodie, noting that "six shooters were of no account unless used."

