

Waiting For The Line

**Aurora as County Seat for Mono County, CA and Esmeralda County, NT
1854-1864**

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PROLOGUE

September 2, 1863, Aurora - a mining boomtown along the California/Nevada Territory border; Men began trickling into Armory Hall early in the day to cast their votes in California's general election. Upon exiting Armory Hall, some Aurorans proceeded to walk down the muddy street to the Post Office, the polling station for Esmeralda County, Nevada Territory.¹ Not everyone in town cast two sets of votes. Some avoided Armory Hall altogether, as though California politics was tainted. Certainly patriotism was running high. The Civil War raged on in the east. Within a few days this mining community would learn of the overwhelming Union sweep in which Lux, Mitchell, and Perrin were sent to the California Assembly, Haskin and Evans to the California Senate. Coddington, Calder, Gray, and Hess were elected to the Third Territorial Legislature of Nevada. It would be Calder's second time around. William Hoyt, a young miner, was ineligible to vote owing to the fact that he was six days shy of his twenty-first birthday. Nevertheless, he noted it in his diary. "Election today. All quiet."² It was reported that between the Armory and the Post Office men jokingly declared if they didn't elect the right men the first time, they at least had a second chance. No one feared being accused of voter fraud. No one had reason to fear.

In this book, I will explore this political anomaly. In examining the dynamics of Aurora's history through contemporary newspapers, diaries, letters, and government documents, I will show that social and political activities during the antebellum years were characterized by two significant factors. First, Aurorans displayed an individualism-flowing ethos that was driven by values characteristic of the social culture of mining.

¹ Primary sources exist that verify Armory Hall as the polling location for California. The Post Office and the Police Station are named in secondary sources as the location of Nevada's polls. The majority believe that it was the Post Office.

² Diary of William W. Hoyt (1863). William W. Hoyt Papers 1856-1926, University of Nevada Reno.

INTRODUCTION: THE AURORA DILEMMA

This paper explains the social and political development of Aurora, a Civil War era mining boomtown along the unsurveyed boundary of California and Nevada Territory (NT). Founded in 1860, a year after the nearby Comstock Lode, Aurora was claimed by both jurisdictions until a joint boundary survey was completed in 1863. The town's location relative to the boundary became an issue in 1861 when Nevada Territory was created from the western section of Utah Territory, and Aurora became the county seat for Mono County, CA and Esmeralda County, NT, concurrently. California held jurisdiction until the official surveyors located the community inside of Nevada by three miles. Aurora was one of two California/Nevada boundary towns whose community-building processes were handicapped by the incomplete boundary survey, the other being Susanville, in the Honey Lake Valley north of Lake Tahoe. During the period of contested jurisdiction, residents of both communities were challenged to adjust their institutions to the unique situation, although their approaches to the dilemma differed significantly.

Aurora has, up to this point, provided amusing anecdotes for historical narratives of Nevada. However, the privilege of being a registered voter in two overlapping political jurisdictions invites a closer look at this political anomaly. In examining the dynamics of Aurora's history through contemporary newspapers, diaries, letters, and government documents, I will show that social and political activities during the contested years were characterized by two significant factors. First, Aurorans displayed an institution-forming ethos that was driven by values characteristic of the social culture of mining communities, which are often perceived as being different from those of agrarian

communities like Susanville. As Patricia Limerick explained, "[M]ining appeared to be the social and economic opposite of farming. Mining meant sudden riches for some and hard and unrewarding labor for most. In farming, the theory went, both labor and rewards were distributed evenly through the population; permanent, responsible settlement resulted."³ Secondly, although the residents of Aurora did not have a choice in which state they belonged to (the boundary was legally determined by the California Constitution) pro-California/pro-Nevada factions existed nonetheless and were based on Civil War politics. "The attempt of the Republican administration to impose political machinery upon the territory through appointed officials comprises one portion of the history of the [Nevada] territorial period," Kent D. Richards has explained. Appointees to territorial positions were all Union loyalists who had records of previous service to the Republican Party.⁴ Civil War politics in California, on the other hand, showed a dynamic quality, with both Republican and Democratic rhetoric changing in ways that reflected the national changes of those parties' ideologies.⁵

The first part of this paper examines how the perceived differences between mining and agrarian communities may have influenced the institution-forming practices of settlers in Aurora and Susanville. One community practiced cooperation, albeit due in part to the political self-restraint of the governor, while the other community witnessed competition between officials from overlapping jurisdictions climax in violence. The geography of the west played no small part in the dilemma of one of these communities, where natural boundaries were more restricting than artificial ones. The second part of this paper reveals a strong Unionist presence in Aurora with connections to the Nevada

³ Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest*, 124.

⁴ Richards, "The American Colonial System in Nevada," 29.

⁵ Stanley, "Civil War Politics in California," 115-132.

EASTERN SIERRA MINING REGION 1863

In 1863, the survey of California's eastern boundary was finally completed, determining that the location of Aurora was within Nevada Territory by three miles.

The eastern Sierra mining region and its famous Comstock Lode were celebrated by one of the area's most well-known citizens, Samuel Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain, in his book "Roughing It."

The mining community of Aurora, along the boundary of California and Nevada Territory, was founded in 1860. From 1861 through 1863 it existed as the county seat for Mono Co., California and Esmeralda Co., NT., concurrently.

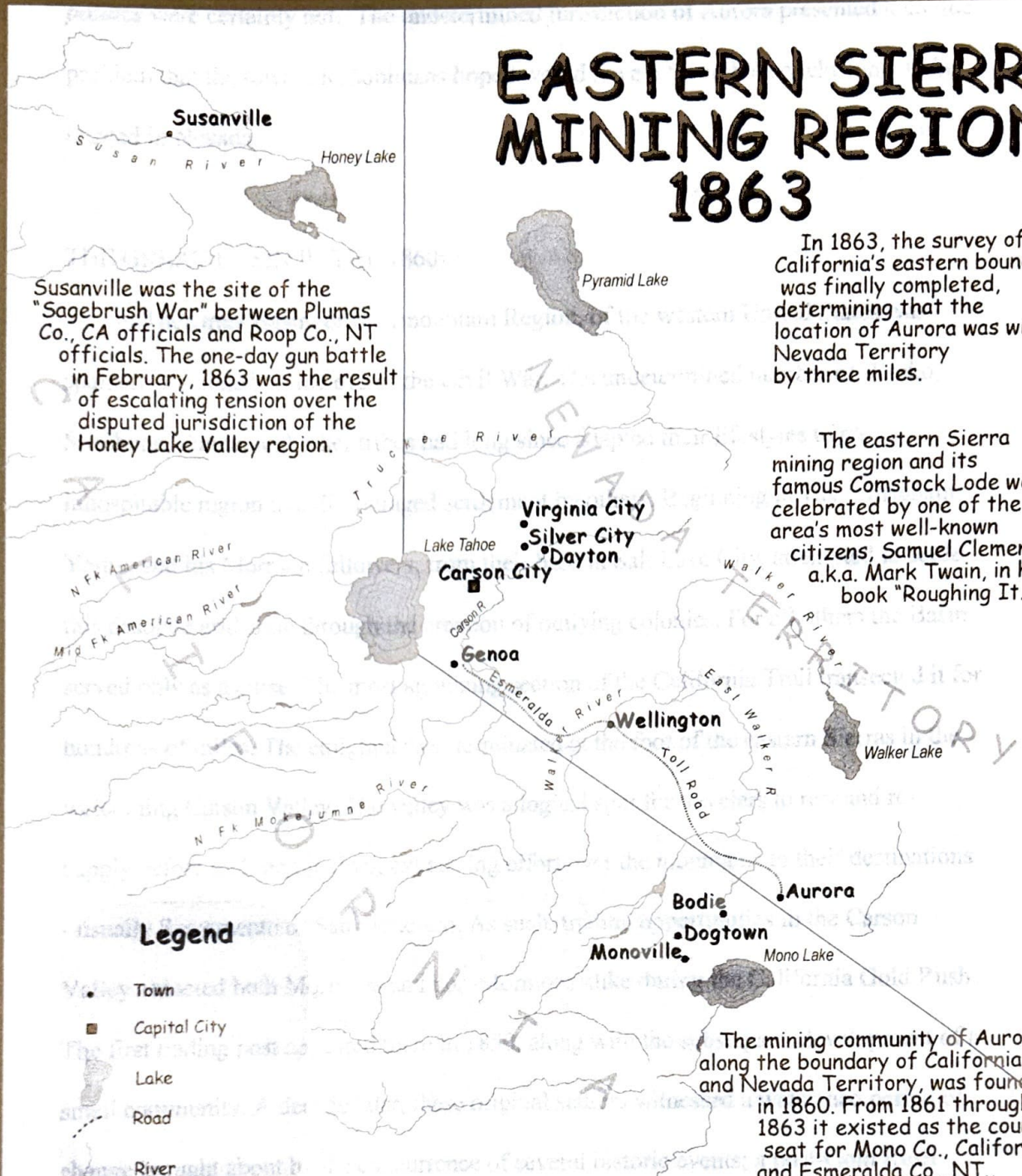
Susanville was the site of the "Sagebrush War" between Plumas Co., CA officials and Roop Co., NT officials. The one-day gun battle in February, 1863 was the result of escalating tension over the disputed jurisdiction of the Honey Lake Valley region.

Legend

- Town
- Capital City
- Lake
- Road
- River

0 Miles 12

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territorial governor, showing that while Civil War *battles* were restricted to the east, *politics* were certainly not. The undetermined jurisdiction of Aurora presented a unique problem that the town's Republicans hoped would have a favorable conclusion – to be located in Nevada.

THE GREAT BASIN IN THE 1860s.

The Great Basin, or Intermountain Region, of the western United States was sparsely populated on the eve of the Civil War. The undetermined number of Washo, Shoshone, Paiute, and other tribes had long since adapted their lifestyles to an inhospitable region that discouraged settlement by others. Beginning in 1847, Brigham Young and his Mormon followers, from their base in Salt Lake City, attempted to settle this desolate arid zone through the creation of outlying colonies. For all others the Basin served only as a curse. The most agonizing section of the California Trail transected it for hundreds of miles. The emigrant road terminated at the foot of the eastern Sierras in the welcoming Carson Valley. The valley was a logical spot for travelers to rest and re-supply before making the final, exhausting effort over the mountains to their destinations – usually Sacramento or San Francisco. As such, trading opportunities in the Carson Valley attracted both Mormons and non-Mormons alike during the California Gold Rush. The first trading post appeared there in 1850, along with the subsequent development of a small community. A decade later, these original settlers witnessed a watershed period of change brought about by the concurrence of several historic events; a post-Gold Rush economic slump in California, incoming waves of west-bound emigrants, the fortuitous discovery of valuable gold and silver ledges known as the Comstock Lode, the

subsequent development of corporate mining, and finally, the Civil War. As such, the Carson Valley was not long in being a lone settlement on the western rim of the Basin.

Throughout the 1860s, town founding proliferated in the Great Basin areas of present-day Nevada, Utah, and parts of Oregon, Idaho, and Montana. Eugene Moehring has outlined the development of urban networks generated by these new communities. By drawing on Donald W. Meinig's examination of western urban networks, Alvin Josephy's study of Civil War era militia activity in the west, and Dean May's census-based research on western communities, which placed individual towns into networks, Moehring has attributed town founding in the Great Basin to two factors, both made possible by effects of the Civil War. First, the wartime demand for gold, silver, and agricultural products encouraged urbanization in regions where the primary economic industries of mining and agriculture were taking place. Secondly, volunteer militia units in the west replaced the war-bound Department of the Pacific regulars and were far more aggressive than the regulars had been in dealing with Native Americans. Consequently, a great deal of land was usurped during that time.⁶ Within a decade and a half, more than forty towns developed in the area surrounding the core cities of Virginia City and Gold Hill, themselves outposts of the San Francisco/Sacramento capital and supply network.⁷ In his study of the Comstock network, Moehring placed Susanville on the periphery of the network served by Virginia City, while designating Aurora as the center of its own emerging network.⁸ Nonetheless, Aurora shared a common industry with Virginia City, and the two were connected by a toll road. In fact, a study of primary sources reveals that movement between Aurora and Virginia City /Carson City was as common as movement

⁶ Moehring, "The Civil War and Town Founding in the Intermountain West," 316-341.

⁷ Moehring, "The Civil War and Town Founding in the Intermountain West," 334.

⁸ Moehring, "The Comstock Urban Network," 348, 356, 360.

between Aurora and parts of California. Aurora and Susanville therefore represent communities that were founded in the post-Gold Rush decade and existed within a common social and economic framework in the hinterlands of the San Francisco/Sacramento primary urban network. Settlers of both communities, moreover, shared common experiences as newcomers to California prior to the settlement of Aurora and Susanville. What was not shared between the two communities, however, was a common institution-forming paradigm, as I will show.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE BOUNDARY DILEMMA

The federal government, during this time, was preoccupied with the impending sectional crisis, and thus considered state boundary issues of secondary importance. Minor attempts were made in the 1850s to survey sections of California's boundary. However, the failure to complete the survey, or to take care that the boundary descriptions of California and Nevada Territory were even compatible, created a dilemma when the new territory was created. A brief historical background of California's problematic eastern boundary and of the eastern Sierra's mining boom will help clarify the discussion to follow.

California originally shared a common boundary with Utah Territory – both entities being created on September 9, 1850. While the boundary description in the California Constitution featured a full, written legal description, Utah's Organic Act stated only that the Territory of Utah shall be “bounded on the west by the State of California.”⁹ Lack of conflict in the descriptions of the common boundary and the absence of communities near the boundary made an expedient survey unnecessary.

⁹ *An Act to Establish a Territorial Government for Utah*, U.S. Statutes at Large IX (1851): 453.

Beginning in that same year, a small population of Mormons and non-Mormons settled at the foot of the eastern Sierra slope in Carson Valley, UT. They formed a settlement called Mormon Station, later renamed Genoa. In 1857, for political reasons, territorial governor and religious leader Brigham Young called all Mormons back to Salt Lake City. The territorial government neglected the valley's remaining population because the distance from Salt Lake City to Carson Valley hindered its ability to govern effectively. Carson Valley citizens petitioned Congress to be allowed to form their own territory. Congress neglected to act and in 1859 the citizens formed a provisional government, which proved ineffective in light of the distraction unfolding fifteen miles away – the discovery of gold and silver. This discovery infused new hope into western miners who had returned, disappointed, from the Frazer River, British Columbia, the year before. The geology of the western Great Basin, however, presented miners with an unfamiliar condition – one that soon changed the face of mining. Rather than loose nuggets that could be separated from the sand and soil with water, a process known as placer mining, the gold and silver were lodged in ledges of hard quartz. Extraction would require capital beyond the means of prospectors. Meanwhile, those who rushed to the area, known as the Comstock Lode, were disappointed to find quartz ledges rather than placer sites, most of which had already been claimed. Prospectors dispersed, hoping to discover other “Comstocks.” The new provisional government that assembled for a single session in Genoa on December 15, 1859, adjourned for lack of a quorum.¹⁰

When the Territory of Nevada was created in 1861, Congress inadvertently generated problems by basing Nevada's western boundary on the Washington Meridian. The same boundary line was based on the Greenwich Meridian in California's legal

¹⁰ Elliott, *History of Nevada*, 60.

description. More critically, Congress invited contention by leading Nevada to believe it could obtain possession of the entire eastern Sierra slope, much of which was legally within California. As written in the Organic Act, the western boundary of the Territory of Nevada was to be "the dividing ridge separating the waters of Carson Valley from those that flow into the Pacific." That boundary line, however, was contingent upon acceptance by California as stated, "[P]rovided, that so much of the Territory within the present limits of the State of California, shall not be included within this Territory until the State of California shall assent to the same by an act irrevocable without the consent of the United States."¹¹ The territorial government made overtures in an attempt to get California to relinquish the eastern Sierra region and move the boundary, but their efforts were too late in coming. A second big bonanza was underway in Aurora - the small, but developing, border community between Mono Lake and Walker Lake. Believing that this promising town was located on its side, the California Legislature knew Aurora's riches would be lost to Nevada if the boundary were moved. The discovery of gold and silver in Aurora forever extinguished the idea of moving the eastern boundary of California, and by closing the door on that option, California forced Aurorans to develop their institutions around a situation that had few precedents.

ALL WESTERN COMMUNITIES WERE NOT CREATED EQUALLY – A CONTRAST BETWEEN AURORA AND HONEY LAKE VALLEY

Located in a remote area about eighty miles southeast of Virginia City, Aurora was 'born' in the summer of 1860 by three prospectors – E. R. Hicks, J. M. Cory, and

¹¹ U.S. Statutes at Large XII, 209-210, as cited in Hulse, "The California-Nevada Boundary: The History of a Conflict, Part 1," 94.

James M. Braly - who discovered silver ore and posted claims on the site.¹² According to Braly, they then "went to Monoville for supplies and returned about the last of the month [August], about fifteen men accompanying us, when we organized the district, adopting mining laws and elected a recorder."¹³ Originally called Esmeralda by Cory, who had just read *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the name was soon changed to Aurora.¹⁴ Although historians are unsure of the origin of the name, there is speculation that the aurora borealis could have been seen there in 1860 since it is known to have appeared during July of the following year. Another possibility is that Hicks may have been from Aurora, Illinois.¹⁵ Aurora soon attracted many new prospectors as word of the discovery spread. Population figures are difficult to track since Aurora was nonexistent during the 1860 federal census and prospector movement in and out of the area was dependant on several factors, particularly the weather. Robert E. Stewart, who wrote the most comprehensive history on Aurora, has reported that there were about six hundred people by the spring of 1861.¹⁶

During its first year, Aurora displayed a social culture that had been developed during the California Gold Rush. Mining was based on the individual pursuit of prospecting, and members of the almost all-male camps were impermanent. Typical of western emigrant groups during periods of transience, members of mining camps practiced limited self-government. Location was probably inconsequential if law and order could be conducted effectively within the community, in which case an indifference to location, which early prospectors to Aurora displayed, is understandable. One of

¹² Stewart, *Aurora: Nevada's Ghost City of the Dawn*, 1; Kersten, "The Early Settlement of Aurora, Nevada, and Nearby Mining Camps," 495.

¹³ Stewart, 1-2; Kersten, 496n.

¹⁴ Stewart, 2.

¹⁵ Stewart, 6.

¹⁶ Stewart, 6.

Aurora's first miners was a young Roswell K. Colcord, who, in 1891, went on to become Governor of Nevada. In 1913, former Governor Colcord reminisced about the early days of prospecting in the eastern Sierra region and indicated that geography was not a concern to the early miners. Describing 1859 Monoville, in the vicinity of soon-to-be-discovered Aurora, Colcord said, "About seventy men had preceded us, and I doubt if any one knew or cared whether we were in California, Utah or Nevada. So far as we were aware there were no other inhabitants within a hundred miles in any direction. At that time no one knew where the boundary line was which separated Nevada Territory from California."¹⁷ [He may have forgotten at the time of his writing that Nevada did not exist until 1861].

Included in the self-governing skills of miners was the procedure for developing "claims" protection. During the Gold Rush they learned that a set of organized rules was basic to the social order of a mining community and the founders of Aurora quickly organized the fundamental institution – the Esmeralda Mining District. Joseph V. Tingley has explained that the term "mining district" was coined in the gold camps of California, where "thousands of miners found themselves outside the boundaries of effective government with no legal means of taking and holding mineral claims."¹⁸ The mining district, then, was a way of establishing local order in the absence of national or territorial laws governing mineral claims, and the success of the institution during the California Gold Rush led to its common use during the Nevada mining boom of the Comstock era. It was customary to intertwine civil and mining matters in mining district regulations.¹⁹

¹⁷ Colcord, "Reminiscences of Life in Territorial Nevada," 113.

¹⁸ Tingley, Nevada Bureau of Mines and Geology, Report 47.

¹⁹ Tingley, Nevada Bureau of Mines and Geology Report 47.

Mining districts, then, often substituted for legal jurisdictions during times of mining booms.

Ambiguity of identity was also a characteristic of the California mining camps. In his study of "forty-niner" miners, John Allen Barksdale has explained that these newcomers to California were "tested by the dilemma of moving into an alien and undefined society."²⁰ As well, one's former social distinction among peers all but disappeared. "To a substantial extent, the traditional hierarchies of class and status bore little relevance to the society being constructed in the mines. An individual's position as rich or poor could shift very quickly, and professions eliciting respect at home were often seen as supercilious within the mining frontier. [G]rowing accustomed to this uncertainty of identity was one of the many tasks involved in becoming a Californian [during the Gold Rush]."²¹ This is where social similarities between the Gold Rush and the eastern Sierra mining boom began to diverge. The transition from placer mining to industrial mining began to replace individualism and social ambiguity, while the infusion of capital from San Francisco into the mining region was instrumental in modifying the social structure of the mining community. Miners became wagedworkers and a population of middle class professionals, such as lawyers, supervisors, and mine owners, developed in Aurora. The need for political administration was at hand and with it, the need to speculate on Aurora's location.

Citing the reason that residents were subjected to "great inconvenience and expense in reaching any section of the State, wherein can be found the necessary organizations for conduction & carrying on business & meeting the wants required in

²⁰ Barksdale, "A Construction of Community Among Miners During the California Gold Rush," 14.

²¹ Barksdale, 24-25, 28.

every well organized conditions of Society," a petition was submitted to the California Legislature, dated February 26, 1861, and signed by one hundred, eighty-six men, which respectfully requested the formation of a new county named Esmeralda.²² Although the location of Aurora relative to the boundary was still in question, the residents chose to petition California. Utah Territory was not a viable alternative for a community of non-Mormons. California granted the request in March, but changed the name from Esmeralda to Mono County and Aurora was named its county seat. It was around this time that civil engineer Joshua Clayton mapped and staked out a town site for Aurora.²³ An examination of the Mono County Board of Supervisors Record from its first meeting in June 1861 until the completion of the boundary survey reveals the many needs that the expanding population required from a county government. Besides providing the services of Judges, Justices of the Peace, and Constables, Mono County assessed and collected property taxes, much of which was spent on developing the infrastructure of Aurora, such as building the Court House and Jail. One of the predominant activities of the Board of Supervisors was the granting of franchises for toll roads between Aurora and locations in both California and Nevada Territory.²⁴ This activity shows that Aurora was, indeed, developing a transportation infrastructure for network connections in both jurisdictions.

In the same month that Mono County was chartered by the State of California, the U.S. Congress passed the Organic Act creating the Territory of Nevada. Its first Legislature, which included members from both Aurora and Susanville, met in October of that year, 1861, and created nine counties, one of which was Esmeralda County.

²² Citizens of Aurora to California Legislature, Feb 26, 1861, Petition to the Legislature, F3679:1344, California State Archives, Office of the Secretary of State, Sacramento.

²³ Stewart, 5.

²⁴ Record of Board of Supervisors, Mono County, CA, 1-97.

Aurora was named its county seat. But because newly established Mono County, CA had already assumed jurisdiction in Aurora, Territorial Governor Nye wisely chose to refrain from appointing county officials for the time being in order to avoid a conflict with his new neighbor. The ambiguous boundary situation may have come to the attention of Governor Nye through one of Aurora's leading Unionists, Samuel Youngs, a fellow New Yorker who initiated correspondence with Nye before the governor even arrived in Carson City. Youngs' role in Aurora's politics will be explored shortly.

Aurora, like Virginia City, was the scene of "speculation fever" which not only lent vitality and excitement to the town, but also characterized the primary motivation of its residents. To extract gold and silver from quartz ledges required capital for drilling, extracting, crushing and stamping the ore before shipping it to San Francisco for processing. Miners soon got in on the action and in the absence of currency, they traded stocks at increasingly appreciating values. Stocks were different in 1864 than those we know today. According to Stewart, "The 1860's mines were stock companies – a group of people – not corporations, which are separate entities from the investors. Holders of company stock could be assessed for additional capital. This huge difference would play an important role in Aurora's short life."²⁵ Speculation fever was best described by one of Aurora's most celebrated transient miners, Samuel Clemens, a.k.a. Mark Twain, who arrived in Nevada Territory during the summer of 1861 with his brother, Orion Clemens, Secretary of the Territory of Nevada. In his book, *Roughing It*, Twain satirized the frenzy of trading that took place in mining communities throughout the Comstock region.

We dropped the "Monarch" [Mine] for the time being. Meantime the camp was filling up with people, and there was a constantly growing excitement about our Humboldt mines. We fell victims to the epidemic and strained

²⁵ Stewart, 4.

every nerve to acquire more "feet." We prospected and took up new claims, put "notices" on them and gave them grandiloquent names. We traded some of our "feet" for "feet" in other people's claims. In a little while we owned largely in the "Gray Eagle," the "Columbiana," the "Branch Mine," the "Maria Jane," the "Universe," the "Root-Hog-or-Die," the "Samson and Delilah," the "Treasure Trove," the "Golconda," the "Sultana," the "Boomerang," the "Great Republic," the "Grand Mogul," and fifty other "mines" that had never been molested by a shovel or scratched with a pick. We had not less than thirty thousand "feet" apiece in the "richest mines on earth" as the frenzied cant phrased it – and were in debt to the butcher. We were stark mad with excitement – drunk with happiness – smothered under mountains of prospective wealth – arrogantly compassionate toward the plodding millions who knew not our marvelous cañon – but our credit was not good at the grocer's.²⁶

It was speculation fever that prompted the young Samuel Clemens to go to Aurora in the first place. He had purchased stock, or "feet," in Esmeralda mines, prompted by "the *real* secret of success in silver-mining – which was, *not* to mine the silver ourselves by the sweat of our brows and the labor of our hands, but to *sell* the ledges to the dull slaves of toil and let them do the mining!"²⁷ Clemens, however, was constantly assessed for money to develop the mines and when this became "oppressive," he was prompted to travel to Aurora "to look into the matter personally."²⁸ The events described above by Twain occurred in Unionville, though Aurora had its share of colorfully named mines – the Wide West, Real Del Monte, Garibaldi, Last Chance, Wide-Awake, Yellow Jacket, Tennessee, San Francisco and Mohawk among them. Satire notwithstanding, Twain's description fairly depicted the state of affairs that were occurring throughout the region. Contemporary newspaper accounts furnish supporting evidence. It was reported in the *Visalia Delta* that in Aurora, everyone was rich – worth at least a half a million dollars –

²⁶ Mark Twain, *Roughing It*, 205.

²⁷ Twain, 209.

²⁸ Twain, 209.

and without any money.²⁹ The biggest commodity in town was not gold or silver - it was hope and opportunity. That the "profit motive" superceded even judicial authority was demonstrated by an event that occurred in September 1863, on the day the boundary survey was completed. The minute that Judge Baldwin, of Mono County, packed up and left town, the two major mining companies, The Pond and the Del Monte, dissolved the injunctions that Judge Baldwin had granted against them and put their laborers back to work to extract as much ore as possible while they had the chance. With the arrival of the new Territorial clerk, The Pond filed papers once again for an injunction against The Del Monte.³⁰

It is important to note that Aurorans, once organized, took no further steps to alter the form of their government or to petition to come under the jurisdiction of Nevada Territory after the territory was formed in 1861. Legal administration by Mono County proved effective, even while pro-Nevada factions operated openly in town. The key to cooperation might lay in the primary motive that had been present since the days of the "forty-niners," as described by Barksdale. "Acquisition of wealth rather than construction of a permanent home was the primary objective of these pioneers, and the value of "free land" lay primarily in the minerals it hopefully concealed."³¹ Such was not the case in the other disputed community - Susanville, whose residents are referred to by historians as Honey Lakers.

While the residents of Aurora were initially organizing themselves, those in Honey Lake Valley were in their sixth year of grappling with the same issue- trying to form institutions under overlapping political jurisdictions so they could establish property

²⁹ *Visalia Delta*, "Aurora Correspondence," May 30, 1861.

³⁰ *Daily Alta California*, "Our Letter From Esmeralda," September 24, 1861.

³¹ Barksdale, 6.

rights and judicial administration. Being the first settlement in the northeastern Sierras meant that Honey Lakers had no established position within a multi-community network and had to establish that for themselves. Although Susanville, legally in California, was located many miles further from the boundary than Aurora was, ambiguity of which state it belonged to developed as a result of residents initiating a number of conflicting attempts to establish an administrative jurisdiction. Charles Curry Aiken has suggested that although the Honey Lakers were aware they were in the vicinity of the boundary, it was probably wishful thinking to believe that they were on the eastern side of it. The Sierra Nevada, which cut Honey Lake Valley off from the rest of California, would have made it very inconvenient to obtain county services if Honey Lake were, in fact, part of Plumas County, California.³²

In their first attempt to establish themselves outside of California, twenty citizens met in April of 1856 to adopt statutes to form their own territory, to be called Nataqua. Section 1 began by declaring, "Inasmuch as Honey Lake valley is not within the limits of California..."³³ They set California's eastern boundary as the description of Nataqua's western boundary. Aiken has pointed out that in doing so, they established a territory that legally excluded themselves, but included a large geographic area of Utah Territory!³⁴ Within a year and a half, the population of Honey Lake Valley had increased enough for Plumas County, CA to notice them and the Board of Supervisors created Honey Lake Township on the assumption that the valley was in California. Honey Lakers took exception to the "unwarrantable assumption of power" and met to adopt resolutions to protest the actions of Plumas County, but not until after they had united with the residents

³² Aiken, "The Sagebrush War: The California-Nevada Boundary Dispute on the 120th Meridian," 48.

³³ Farris and Smith, *History of Plumas, Lassen & Sierra Counties California 1882*. 345.

³⁴ Aiken, 49.

of the Carson Valley, who were organizing to create a jurisdiction apart from Utah Territory. Honey Lakers had earlier abandoned their plans for Nataqua because Carson Valley residents, who were included within the boundaries without their knowledge, refused to recognize that territory. Residents from both communities, then, met in Genoa, Carson Valley, in August of 1857 and composed a memorial to Congress asking for the creation a new territory. Twenty-eight men at the convention were appointed to manage the new territory, including five representatives from Honey Lake Valley. One of those men was the town founder of Susanville, Isaac Roop, who would soon play an important political role.

According to Aiken, Honey Lakers met in Susanville in October to endorse the memorial to Congress and to reaffirm their resolution to resist all attempts by California to exercise authority over the valley.³⁵ Two weeks later, under threat of attack from Pit River Indians, they sent a request to California Governor Johnson for protection from the Indians. It was signed, "Honey Lake Valley, Plumas County, State of California."³⁶ An emissary from the valley met with the governor and, according to Aiken, "admitted that the Honey Lakers may have been mistaken and that "They were willing to come under the jurisdiction of California if it were found they were within its boundaries."³⁷ California responded to their request, but the Indian threat quickly quieted down. In making the request, Honey Lakers introduced a conflict of interest that eventually led to violence. Aiken has explained that in addition to accepting Indian protection, residents manipulated the tax situation to suit their purposes and that new settlers to the valley

³⁵ Aiken, 62.

³⁶ Aiken, 52.

³⁷ Aiken, 52

were more concerned about how they were governed than they were about who governed them. He has charged that Honey Lakers considered the boundary to be "flexible."³⁸

The original pioneers persevered in their joint attempts with Carson residents to organize a workable alternative. When Congress failed to act on the request for a new territory, the group met again in February 1858 to create laws for themselves until such time that the U.S. Government made them into a legal territory. As explained in the description of events in the history of the boundary, they were not content with the inaction on the part of Congress and they formed a provisional government. On September 7, 1859, Isaac Roop from Susanville was elected Governor. When Nevada Territory was formed in 1861, Honey Lake Valley was included in Lake County (later named Roop County). In the meantime, Plumas County officials continued their attempt to exert jurisdiction in Honey Lake Valley. The conflict of jurisdiction culminated in an episode of violence in 1863 that is known as the Sagebrush War. The one-day shootout in Susanville between Plumas County and Roop County officials (including Honey Lakers on the side of Roop County) is well documented by Aiken. The confrontation was strangely amicable when the two sides, many of whom had been friends and neighbors for years, ate and drank together after a truce was called.³⁹ This episode prompted the final boundary survey as a joint activity between California and Nevada Territory that determined once and for all that Honey Lake Valley was in California and Aurora was in Nevada.

As I have shown, the settlers of Aurora and Susanville showed different strategies in forming institutions to meet the administrative needs of their new communities. But

³⁸ Aiken, 53.

³⁹ Aiken, 83.

while Aurora was a community of miners who applied institution-forming skills they had learned during the Gold Rush, this cannot account for the difference. The biographies of Susanville pioneers reveal that approximately half of those profiled were former miners.⁴⁰ The community of Susanville in the Honey Lake Valley was a family-oriented agrarian community. Many of its members were passionately involved in the Carson provisional government, most notably Isaac Roop. Evidence suggests that they remained involved in the political activities of the Carson Valley while others left to stake their claims on the Comstock Lode. The miners in Aurora, on the other hand, had a very different primary motivation – the quick accumulation of wealth. The pro California/pro Nevada factions made no attempt to alter local government once it was in place – both sides seemingly were driven primarily by the “profit motive.” The transition from prospecting to industrial mining placed Aurora, like the Comstock communities, in the formative stages of a more stratified social hierarchy than had been experienced outside of San Francisco or Sacramento. Barksdale has quoted one of the “forty-niners,” who came to California a decade before the events described in this paper, as stating, “There is but one species of aristocracy and that is of Labor, the state of society is that of unmixed democracy.”⁴¹ Susanville, it seems, remained in this somewhat more egalitarian state than Aurora did. A perceived difference between agrarian and mining communities and their primary motivations might then account for the differences in organizing strategies.

I use the term “perceived difference” because Patricia Limerick has pointed out in hindsight that while agrarian values were underpracticed in mining camps, and mining values ran counter to the ideal expectations of westward expansion, which was supposed

⁴⁰ Fariss and Smith, 400–412, 499–507.

⁴¹ Barksdale, 25.

to create a land of independent, agrarian landowners, the two were not necessarily that different.

[M]ining appeared to be the social and economic opposite of farming. Mining meant sudden riches for some and hard and unrewarding labor for most; settlements suddenly thrown together and as suddenly abandoned; rootless male populations; dependence on imported provisions; and extraction of a resource that could not be replenished and would eventually run out. In farming, the theory went, both labor and rewards were distributed evenly through the population; permanent, responsible settlement resulted; families anchored people in space and through time; farm products provided an essential self-sufficiency; and an unlimited cycle of planting and harvesting ran no risk of depletion. And yet from other angles, farming and mining did not appear to be so different. The same factors of dependence – on capital, nature's good behavior, transportation, markets, and a labor supply – left farmers frequently discontented with their 'independent' lives.⁴²

Gunther Peck has explained how the newly developing classes in the Comstock Lode – capitalists, middle class professionals, and wageworkers – expressed risk-taking in different ways, even though it was the motivating force for all.⁴³ While this supports the theory that core communities experienced a change in social structure resulting from the transition to industrial mining, it does not imply that agrarian communities, on the other hand, were risk-free. Simply put, communities in the eastern Sierra region did not follow a common pattern of community building, and some, including Aurora, diverged from the pre-industrial social structure of earlier mining communities.

PRO-CALIFORNIA/PRO-NEVADA – THE REPUBLICANS MEET THE DEMOCRATS

Barksdale has established a foundation for his study of "forty-niners" by introducing Mary Louise Pratt's idea of the "contact zone" – "the space in which people

⁴² Limerick, 124.

⁴³ Peck, "Manly Gambles: The Politics of Risk on the Comstock Lode, 1860-1880," 701-723.

geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relation.”⁴⁴ He has explained that while Pratt’s context of the contact zone “is to construct an alternative paradigm for exploring the workings of European colonialism, her general idea is applicable to the cultural interaction that accompanied the gold rush.”⁴⁵ Barksdale has applied a broad context to the term “contact zone” by identifying a mining camp as a similar type of meeting ground. He has stated, “I conceptualize the contact zone to include any type of interaction among unfamiliar, regardless of any ethnic or racial similarities.”⁴⁶ In using Barksdale’s study to show that community-building in Aurora was based on social characteristics formed during the Gold Rush, I further expand on his application of the term “contact zone” and define Aurora as a contact zone where differences in ethnicity and culture were replaced by differences in politics and where political antagonists formed institutions to manage their differences for the good of the community. Political differences would not necessarily have been a threat to the cohesiveness of community in Aurora, however, during the Civil War those differences were inflamed.

On March 2, 1861, the United States House of Representatives passed the Organic Act for the Territory of Nevada. It was signed the same day by lame duck President James Buchanan. That same month, the California Legislature created Mono County, carved out of portions of three original California counties. The government of California, being long established, was in the position to implement action quickly, whereas Nevada Territory needed to establish its territorial government before attending to matters of local organization. Suddenly, Aurorans had new choices to discuss. The

⁴⁴ Barksdale, 8.

⁴⁵ Barksdale, 41.

⁴⁶ Barksdale, 9.

Visalia Delta reported on April 27, 1861, "The balance of the good citizens of Esmeralda District, are talking or making cocktails, or observations, or discussing the comparative merits and advantages of California State laws with Territorial law."⁴⁷ Good-natured joking, as shown with the 1863 election anecdote, makes for an engaging story in tales of the "old west," but sophisticated politics were actually in play. The peak years of Aurora, 1861-1865, coincided with the Civil War and as such, politics in town reflected the national political agenda. Republicans (Unionists), war Democrats, and peace Democrats waged heated verbal battles in the California, Nevada, and Aurora newspapers while residents of Aurora displayed Civil War patriotism and organized into Republican and Democratic political clubs. While this paper highlights the Nevada-leaning Unionists' activities because of their prominence in narratives of Aurora's history, it in no way suggests an absence of parallel activity on the part of the town's California-leaning Democrats. Such a comparison would require a more comprehensive study than is given here. Pro-Nevada Unionists refrained from aggressive activity, and chose instead to work behind the scenes in 1863 to position themselves advantageously for either outcome of the boundary survey.

Politics in Aurora got off to an ambitious start once Mono County was established. When it was announced that elections would take place to fill the positions of county officials, about fifty Aurorans ran for the various offices.⁴⁸ With at least seven running for Sheriff and five for County Clerk, all candidates actively solicited votes from their townsmen.⁴⁹ Those who were not elected to county offices got another chance a few weeks later when the new Board of Supervisors called an election for the township

⁴⁷ *Visalia Delta*, "Esmeralda Correspondence," April 27, 1861.

⁴⁸ *Visalia Delta*, May 30, 1861.

⁴⁹ *Visalia Delta*, June 6, 1861.

offices of Justice of the Peace and Constable. 568 votes were polled, where F.K. Becktel and J. N. Tyler became Justices of the Peace and M. Center and D. Osborne were elected to the two Constable positions.⁵⁰ Government-as-usual was the order of the day for Mono County. The Board not only conducted county business, but also actively oversaw the development of the town to serve as the county seat.

California's Mono County government was fairly well entrenched in Aurora by the time Nevada Territorial Governor James W. Nye reached Carson City in July to set the territorial government in motion. One of his first proclamations was to establish census and election districts. Election District One included the mining boomtown of Aurora. A study of the Mono County Board of Supervisors' handwritten minutes from 1861 through the end of 1863, three months after the boundary survey was completed, reveals that the Board never acknowledged the fact that a rival jurisdiction was sharing its county seat. The name Esmeralda does not appear in the minutes and for all intents and purposes, Mono County seems to have considered the overlapping jurisdiction a non-issue. The boundary was acknowledged only once. "August 19, 1861... Whereas, the interest that is felt by everyone in this vicinity in regard to having the Boundary line established between California and Nevada Territory is such that the Board deem it necessary to urge the Boundary Commissioners if possible to establish a point in the vicinity of Aurora in order to determine the question of the Jurisdiction of California."⁵¹ Meanwhile, the creation of election districts in Nevada Territory facilitated the August 31 election of members to the First Territorial Legislature. Three Aurorans were elected to

⁵⁰ Record of Board of Supervisors, Mono County, CA, 7.

⁵¹ Record of Board of Supervisors, Mono County, CA, 18.

that body – one to the Council and two to the House. Samuel Youngs, the town's leading Unionist, was one of those House Representatives.

Political factions had been forming in town along pro-California/pro-Nevada lines. Polarization began in June after the election of Mono County officials, when several Democrats were elected, upsetting some Republicans, including Youngs. According to Roger McGrath, "Aurora Republicans were disgruntled and now generally fell into the pro-Nevada camp."⁵² This statement suggests that the disgruntled Republicans were *anti-California* rather than *pro-Nevada*. Yet, Unionists throughout the new territory could have been anticipating the strength of their new Republican leadership. As Richards has explained, Nevadans repeatedly heard Nye, who was personally selected by President Lincoln and Secretary of State Seward, pledge "loyalty to the Union and early statehood for Nevada."⁵³ This undoubtedly attracted staunch Unionists, like Youngs, who attempted to gain favor with the governor. Union clubs were popular institutions during the Civil War and Youngs formed the Esmeralda Union Club in June, before the governor's arrival in the territory. He recorded important events in his sparingly worded journal.

- May 13 Wrote to Epstein to send me Am Flag with Stars & Stripes.
- June 4 Hoisted American Flag with "Stars & Stripes" over our cabin in Aurora Mono Co. Cal.
- June 27 Wrote notices & put them up for meeting to form Union Club.
- June 29 Held meeting in eve'g & I was Chairman. Wrote Preamble & Resolution, Constitution. A large enthusiastic meeting. Songs etc.
- June 30 Wrote by-laws...
- July 6 Was elected Prese't Union Club.⁵⁴

⁵² McGrath, *Gunfighters, Highwaymen & Vigilantes: Violence on the Frontier*, 57.

⁵³ Richards, 30.

⁵⁴ Zimmer, "Colonel Samuel Youngs' Journal," 46-47.

Following California's state election in September 1861, Youngs displayed considerable animosity towards Democrats in Mono County when he wrote to Governor Nye and reported the election results.

Wednesday last we gave Stanford a majority of 108 over McConnell & 49 over Conness [for California Governor]. Our friend Dr Mason was defeated by that "Sodom" of a place Monoville. We gave Mason a majority of 80 [for Judge] but Monoville went 121 majority for Moultrie. But we have the comfort that it is only temporary for so soon as we you can have the Line run we will I trust have Sodom struck from the Terr[itor]y & then we will have a new election for all County offices. We have not as yet heard who was elected delegate to Congress.⁵⁵

Although Youngs had spent time in the California gold fields seeking his own personal fortune and came to Aurora with that same intention, the community offered him an opportunity of a different kind – the chance to reestablish the political career he had left back in his native New York. Youngs had been a supervisor of the Town of Oyster Bay, a member of the New York State Assembly, and had served in the New York State Militia.⁵⁶ As a colorful character at the Nevada Constitutional Convention in 1863, Youngs came to the attention of Mark Twain, who lampooned him in the *Daily Territorial Enterprise* along with other members of the convention. In addition, "Twain wrote that financial problems facing Youngs in his position as Chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means – "to pay expenses" – had caused Youngs to go "blind and baldheaded."⁵⁷

Surviving documents do not reveal to what extent Youngs' financial problems were publicly known, but his personal letters to Governor Nye expose much more than Twain's lampooning ever would. Youngs wrote his first letter to Governor Nye in July

⁵⁵ Samuel Youngs to Governor Nye, 8 September 1861. Correspondence of Governor James Warren Nye 1861-1865, Nevada State Archives.

⁵⁶ Zimmer, 27.

⁵⁷ Zimmer, 27.

1861 while the governor was waiting for his baggage in San Francisco. Nye had sailed to California, rather than taking the long overland stage journey that Territorial Secretary Orion Clemens and his younger brother Samuel (Mark Twain) had taken. Youngs took a familiar tone with the governor from the start, addressing the letter to "My Dear Jim." Subsequent letters included the same familiar salutation, although sometimes substituting the word "Gov" for the word "Jim." In any case, the familiarity of the salutations is not as curious as Youngs' constant solicitation to the governor for financial assistance. Limerick has quoted Gilman Ostrander, from his political history of Nevada, as saying, "Actually, almost everyone knows that businessmen are out to make money and that politicians are out to gain office and that much history has been made in this nation by businessmen and politicians helping each other out." Limerick has agreed, though has pointed out that businessmen and politicians are often the same.⁵⁸ The surviving letters from Youngs to Governor Nye cannot disclose a complete picture of the situation, but they do serve to illustrate the strong political tie between the Territorial Governor and Aurora's leading Republican. There was no mention of finances in this first letter, which was merely to inform Nye that Youngs had received a letter of introduction to the governor from his (Youngs') brother-in-law in New York. An ensuing letter revealed that he and Nye had since met and that Governor Nye had agreed to lend him money. "I was in hopes of receiving the money by yesterday's express for the mill but did not. I wish you would lend it as early as practicable."⁵⁹ Though Governor Nye was known to have invested in mills, subsequent letters to him from Youngs do not suggest that this was the case between them. Letters written in 1861 and 1862 conveyed a growing urgency as the

⁵⁸ Limerick, 85. 19 September 1861 and 3 December 1861.

⁵⁹ Youngs to Nye, 8 September 1861.

success of Youngs' business ventures in the mining industry were threatened and Nye apparently continued to ignore Youngs' pleas for financial assistance. "I wrote you on the 8th _ giving the importance of having the thousand Dollars which you proposed lending me when you were in this place, forwarded as early as practicable. It has put me to some little inconvenience not having it." "Send me some money if you have any hope of a "Here after"⁶⁰ Although this demand sounded serious, whether it was actually a threat or merely said in jest would be pure speculation. Letters that followed sounded less threatening, but the pleas for money continued.

Esmeralda County existed as an inactive entity in Aurora throughout 1861 and 1862, but held an election in September 1862 to elect representatives for the Second Territorial Legislature. In December that body passed a joint resolution asking Governor Nye to organize Esmeralda County. His only response was to appoint a District Attorney.⁶¹ In February 1863, the Sagebrush War occurred in the Honey Lake Valley, prompting action to initiate the final joint survey of the shared boundary. Nye bided his time. The issue in Aurora did not need to be forced. The boundary survey team would provide the answer. But while Mono County conducted business as usual, Republicans in Aurora were surreptitiously positioning Esmeralda County to take over, should Aurora be found to be east of the line.

According to Robert Stewart, in June, Governor Nye instructed the current legislative representatives in Aurora to prepare for a county election on September 2, to coincide with the California General Election. A slate of county officers was absent, however, from the Nevada ballot in Aurora that day. A letter from Aurora resident and

⁶⁰ Youngs to Nye, 19 September 1861 and 5 December 1861.

⁶¹ McGrath, 62.

Territorial Representative J.W. Calder to Governor Nye indicated that the decision was a local one. "We have decided not to hold an Election for County offices for Esmeralda County at the _ general election. We will elect members to the Legislative Assembly and to the Constitutional Convention."⁶² Calder's next letter, dated two days later, revealed concern about whether the boundary carried the jurisdiction with it or whether it had to be verified and acknowledged by both parties first. He also inquired of the governor whether, if there was no call for an election of county officers, a person receiving a majority of votes could be declared duly elected and hold office. In the same letter, Calder indicated that specific individuals running on the Union ticket of Mono County would be willing, if victorious, to be appointed to Esmeralda County offices (if Aurora was found to be in Nevada Territory).⁶³

The culminating political event in Aurora took place days before the boundary survey team reached Aurora. On September 2, 1863, residents went to the polls for the extraordinary double election. The California ticket featured a full slate of state, county, and local offices and issues, while the Nevada ticket allowed only for the election of representatives to the Nevada Territorial Legislature and of those to the upcoming Constitutional Convention. A canvass of votes for Mono County showed that 1,412 Aurorans voted in the California election.⁶⁴ The canvass of Esmeralda County votes in Aurora showed that slightly fewer visited the Nevada polls, the count being 1,168.⁶⁵ Although all voters in town were eligible to vote in both elections, it is impossible to determine how many participated in both elections, how many voted only in the

⁶² J.W. Calder to Governor Nye, 14 August 1863. Correspondence of Governor James Warren Nye 1861-1865, Nevada State Archives.

⁶³ Calder to Nye, 16 August 1863.

⁶⁴ Record of Board of Supervisors, Mono County, CA, 93-95.

⁶⁵ Abstract of the Votes for Councilman and Assemblymen, Esmeralda County 1863 and Abstract of Votes for Delegates to the Constitutional Convention, Esmeralda County 1863. Nevada State Archives, Carson City.

California election, and how many voted only in the Nevada election. The Union ticket was victorious in both Mono and Esmeralda Counties, to the delight of the Republicans. In a letter to Governor Nye, John Dudleston and J.K. Bechtel, of the Territorial Legislature, described the jubilation and celebration felt in town. But more importantly, it listed individuals from the Mono County ticket that should be appointed to Esmeralda County, if necessary, and what positions they should fill. Bechtel displayed full confidence that the approaching survey team would find Aurora in Nevada Territory and he expounded on the flourishing development of the town and its two militia companies who were "ready to squelch a copperhead at the polls, or Bayonet a rebel on the field."⁶⁶ Two weeks later the matter was put to rest once and for all. Aurora was in Nevada Territory. (Susanville, on the other hand, was in California). Reaction was mild to nonexistent. The Mono County Board of Supervisors did not acknowledge in their minutes the existence of a boundary survey, the outcome of the survey, or their own forced relocation following the survey. Some newspapers reported the outcome, but it was far from being headline news. Even Ethel Zimmer's edited version of Samuel Youngs' journal reveals an absence of entries between August 10 and October 4, 1863.⁶⁷ The most responsive reaction was a letter that appeared in the *Daily Alta California*, a San Francisco newspaper.

EDITORS ALTA: The last link is broken which bound us together. During long and patient vigils in this ethereal atmosphere of sage and alkali, night and day we dreamed of thee, oh virgin State of gold, our best beloved California. But our locks have been shorn by that cruel masculine Delilah, Surveyor-General Houghton. This mathematical practitioner came into Court on Thursday last and divorced us from our fair young bride by

⁶⁶ John Dudleston and J.K. Bechtel to Governor Nye, 5 September 1863. Correspondence of Governor James Warren Nye 1861-1865, Nevada State Archives.

⁶⁷ Zimmer, 54-55.

the unpleasant statement that the State boundary survey, lately completed, brought Aurora three miles inside of the Territory of Nevada. Whereupon quoth Justice Baldwin, County Judge of Mono county, with a readiness of judgment and eloquence of language that reflected honor upon the bench, "Well then, I guess this Court is adjourned." It saved the trouble of making any such useless minutes as an "order" and let the deputy-clerk out of a "peck" of trouble. Well it's the decree of fate, and "before this cruel war is over" some of the best of friends must part. Goodbye, old girl, and good luck to you. When we were wedded you scarcely appreciated us as we did you. Because of several wild-cat escapades on our part, you deemed us a sad rake and much given to staying out late o' nights. Now that the law has separated us for life, don't get jealous if we should be much petted by our new bride, the Virgin of the Silver Shrine of Nevada. Adios, California, and exit Esmeralda, right wing.⁶⁸

For all of Aurora's efforts at community building, it declined after its boom years of 1863-1864. This is often the case for towns whose sole industry is based on the extraction of non-renewable resources. Stewart has estimated that the peak population was approximately 3,500.⁶⁹ And according to Kersten, "In the spring of 1863, the town was reported to have 760 houses, 20 stores, and 22 saloons. Included in the population of 3,000 were 200 women and 80 children."⁷⁰

CONCLUSION: THE LEGACY OF AURORA

After the completion of the survey, Mono County officials vacated Aurora, which continued to serve as Esmeralda's county seat until 1883, when that honor was given to the nearby town of Hawthorne. In 1911, Esmeralda County was split and the northern section, where Aurora was located, became Mineral County. The town's population declined over the years as the availability of ore diminished. Though there were attempts at various times to revive the industry in Aurora, more profitable mining opportunities in Tonopah and Goldfield and the depletion of labor during World War I further decreased

⁶⁸ *Daily Alta California*, "Our Letter From Esmeralda," September 24, 1863.

⁶⁹ Stewart, 2.

⁷⁰ Kersten, 497.

activity in Aurora. By 1920 it was a ghost town and suffered significant vandalism.

Describing Esmeralda County as “a field of almost utter desolation,” the First Directory of Nevada Territory described its geography as follows:

[T]he want of good water alone will forbid its ever being more than sparsely settled, while the absence of feed – the yielding nature of the soil, being mostly soda marsh or sand, - and the extreme heat of the summer render even a journey across it a matter of suffering and toil. Toward a region so devoid of both geographic and historic interest, there would be little to invite attention, were it not for the rich mines discovered on its western border, and the hope of still others being found in the depths of its lone and silent wastes.⁷¹

Aurora has returned to this state. The only artifacts that remain today are cracked and chipped headstones in the abandoned cemetery, betraying the long ago presence of men and women who once built a community there. Some might argue that the history of a short-lived town in a remote region of the desert is not relevant to the greater historical dialogue. Events in Aurora, however, should not be easily simplified or dismissed. Contained in the community histories of small, short-lived towns in the west are events not commonly found in broad views of history and by studying them, we add to our understanding of the social and political development of the urban networks described by Moehring.

From 1946-1951, a series of newspaper “advertisements” portraying Nevada’s pioneer history were published in newspapers throughout the state. Once a week, an anecdote from Nevada’s history was told. Each was written by an advertising professional and accompanied by a dramatic drawing of the incident. At the conclusion of the campaign the “ads” were bound into a single volume, published by Harolds Club in Reno. According to the book’s forward, there were many requests for reprints after they appeared in newspapers. “Harolds Club...then announced the same subject matter would

⁷¹ Kelly, *First Directory of Nevada Territory*, 238.

appear in full color illustration on the walls of the gambling club, and would be available in booklet form. Later the pioneer western theme was followed in the interior decoration of Harolds Club, and the Covered Wagon Room was added. Roaring Camp, a virtual museum of western Americana followed, to be climaxed with the construction on the third floor of Fort Smith."⁷² The image reprinted below is the drawing from one of the featured weekly anecdotes.



The short article stated, "Probably the only town in the nation's history to serve simultaneously as county seat for two counties in different States, Aurora solved the dispute by placing full political tickets in the election race of 1863 for Mono County, California, and Esmeralda County, Nevada. Residents trooped to the polling places and cast ballots for their respective choices in both California and Nevada. Officials for both

⁷² *Pioneer Nevada*, "Foreward."

counties were duly elected, the majority of them being citizens of Aurora.”⁷³ While this statement completely misrepresented the facts, the following statement misled readers about the tone of the governments. “[P]olitics rather than gold brought far-flung fame to the thriving hamlet which was *aggressively* claimed by both the State of California and the Territory of Nevada (italics mine).⁷⁴ Quite to the contrary, violence between California and Nevada officials occurred in Susanville, but not in Aurora. The portrayal of two armed men in the drawing implied that Aurora lacked order during the short time it served as dual county seats. While some historians claim that elections during the early years of Nevada were sometimes occasions for rioting, and “roughs” were hired to preserve order, there is no evidence to suggest that this happened in Aurora.⁷⁵ Limerick has explained that simplicity - a characteristic of creation myths, including that of the western frontier - “is the one quality that cannot be found in the actual story of the American West.” This paper dispels some of the myths surrounding Aurora while showing that complexity, rather than simplicity, characterized its community-building process.

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⁷³ *Pioneer Nevada*, 90.

⁷⁴ *Pioneer Nevada*, 90.

⁷⁵ Bennett, “Ballots and Voting Systems,” <http://dmla.clan.lib.nv.us/docs/nsia/archives/political/ballots.htm>.

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