

# MONTANA'S GHOST TOWNS FROM BOOM TO BUST AND BACK

Leave the modern world behind in a couple of Wild West gold-mining communities where you can almost hear each building whisper its secrets

**T**he California Gold Rush that began in 1848 is famous as a time when a young America was mad for gold and many from the Eastern states suddenly jumped up and headed West in hopes of quick riches and, with some luck, lasting prosperity. Impressive as the California Gold Rush was, however, it was not the only place in the Union where gold was discovered and where legions of people flocked in the mid-1800s. Montana was the scene of another huge gold rush that came 15 years later.

If you are looking for a fun family road trip into America's Old West, where the frenzied thrills of gold prospecting, shootouts, brothels and whiskey once ruled the land, a visit to Montana is a must. Just as in California, Montana's 1860's gold rush eventually became a gold bust, and the towns that once flourished and rang with the voices of thousands of miners today stand vacant, quietly whispering the haunting stories of a time long past.

Gold was discovered in Montana in May 1863 by a group of prospectors who were following the Yellowstone River in their search for gold. While camped by Alder Creek, as they retreated from the Crow Indians, whose hunting

grounds they had crossed, this group unexpectedly struck gold in a big way. Who can keep a secret like that? After they returned to Bannack — but before they had a chance to lay full claim — the news got out. Returning to their site in Alder Gulch a few days later, they were followed by 200 people!

Like the gold-rush towns in California, a makeshift town site was set up near the creek, and rules were made for individual gold claims. Miners arrived in droves within 10 days, and after three months 10,000 people were living in tents and huts along the creek.

But unlike the California Gold Rush, Montana's gold rush started during the Civil War. Although miners poured

into the region from all over the world, including huge numbers from China, most of the miners were rebels from the Southern states. Suddenly having so many Southerners setting up residence in a Northern state made President Lincoln uneasy, so he sent in miners from the North. This resulted in huge tensions in the town, and the new Fourteen Mile City that stretched along Alder Creek quickly became one of the most lawless places in the West.

All this history makes a perfect backdrop for exploring Virginia City and Nevada City in southwestern Montana, two living history ghost towns that stand side by side near Alder Creek today. They are just two hours by car from Yellowstone National Park. We spent several days in the area and were delighted to be able to wander through the original log houses and mercantile buildings that made up these two communities, imagining how life was lived here 150 years ago.

Virginia City is the larger town of

the two. It was originally named Verina in honor of Varina Davis, the wife of Jefferson Davis and the Confederate States' first (and only) First Lady. The judge who registered the town was a Northern sympathizer, however, and he renamed it Virginia City when he entered the city in the official record books. Of course, that name choice was

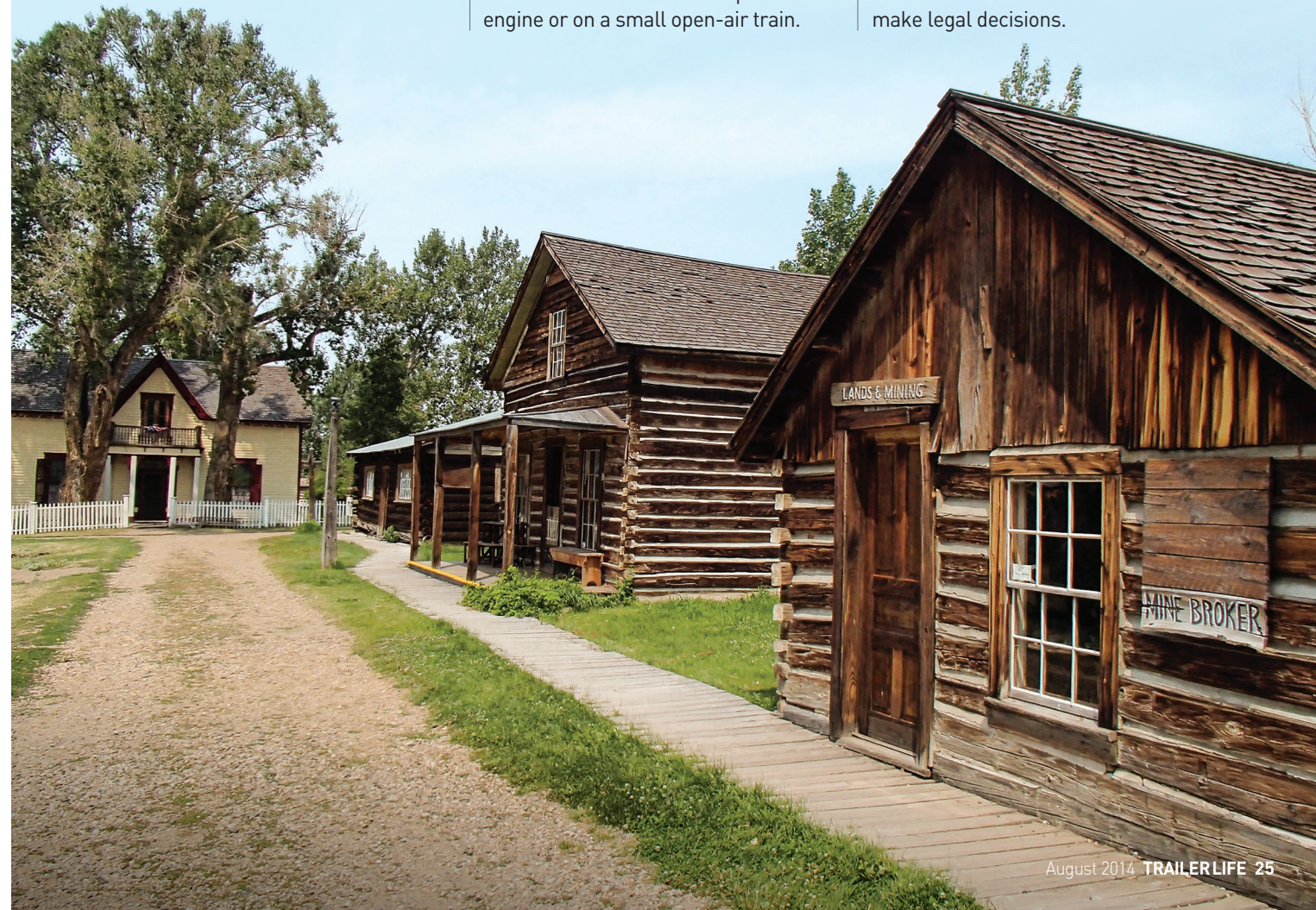
a little ironic at the time, as the state of Virginia had seceded from the union two years earlier.

Today, Virginia City has a main street and several blocks of adjacent streets filled with original buildings. It is a wonderful place to enjoy a stroll, take photos, savor a meal at one of several eateries and even take a guided tour around town aboard an antique fire engine or on a small open-air train.

While ambling through town, it is hard to imagine just how quickly the ramshackle tent city in Alder Gulch became established as a true city of homes and businesses. Those first two years, 1863 and '64, were both chaotic and busy. Tempers flared, and scoundrels were on the loose as the population exploded, and no one wanted to wait for the far-distant courts to make legal decisions.



(Far left) At this gold dredge in Nevada City, a conveyor lifted buckets of dirt to be sifted for gold. (Left) Looking across a schoolhouse classroom to the tiny teacher's quarters visible beyond the doorway. (Right) A Nevada City street lined with historic buildings was moved here from other parts of Montana.







## FOR MORE INFORMATION

**Montana Heritage Commission**  
[www.virginiacitymt.com](http://www.virginiacitymt.com)

**Montana Post**  
[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025293/](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83025293/)

**Nevada City History**  
[www.legendsofamerica.com/mt-nevadacity.html](http://www.legendsofamerica.com/mt-nevadacity.html)

**Virginia City Audio Tour**  
[www.visitmt.com/experiences/audio\\_tours](http://www.visitmt.com/experiences/audio_tours)

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[www.virginiacity.com](http://www.virginiacity.com)  
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## Staying the Night?

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**Southside RV Park**  
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 RV sites for \$38 near Blacktail Creek. Pull-throughs and back-ins with full hookups and 30- and 50-amp service, wide easy-access roads, free Wi-Fi, laundry, picnic tables and DVD library. Located 58 miles from Virginia City.

**Virginia City RV Park**  
 406-843-5493, [www.virginiacityrvpark.com](http://www.virginiacityrvpark.com)  
 RV sites from \$33 to \$40. Pull-throughs and full hookups with 30- and 50-amp service, free Wi-Fi, cabins, picnic tables. Pets welcome. Just 1/2 mile from Virginia City.

The rural and quiet road through Virginia City is far safer and better than when earlier gold miners made the trek in the 1860s.

One George Ives shot and killed a popular Dutch man, Nicholas Thiebalt, while trying to rob him of his gold and mules. This heinous act resulted in an immediate three-day trial held by the locals. Within an hour of conviction, the murderer was hanging at the end of a rope tied to a 40-foot pole rammed through the window of an unfinished building, in front of 2,000 people. This swift justice launched an era of lynchings carried out by a group calling themselves the Montana Vigilantes.

The region had originally been part of the Dakota Territory and briefly became a part of the Idaho Territory at the start of the gold rush. Just a year later, in August 1864, the lines were drawn for the Montana Territory, and a year later in 1865, Virginia City became Montana Territory's capital.

As we walked around town, we came across the building for the *Montana Post* newspaper. This is hardly an imposing corporate office by today's standards, but the proud sign atop its walls, the big windows and impressive front doors reveal the importance this newspaper had in its day. Peering inside, we could imagine the hustle and

bustle that went on in the pressrooms in the 1860s.

The *Montana Post* was established just four months after the Montana Territory was formed, and it chronicled the events of this part of the Wild West for nine years. It was a vital news outlet in its time, as this area was the most populated place between Minneapolis and San Francisco. However, just as Virginia City's size and influence didn't last when the gold rush moved on to Helena after a few years, the *Montana Post* was replaced by *The Madisonian* when it began publication in 1873.

Closer to RV campers' hearts, Virginia City was made the administrative site for Yellowstone National Park when it was designated the first national park in 1872. For us, wandering through the tiny antique buildings around town, and standing on the creaky, wide plank floors while ducking through the impossibly short doorways, this little historical note made the National Park System's rustic beginnings all the more real.

Today, the national parks are awe-inspiring and stunning, with gracious visitor centers and all the familiar com-



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## MONTANA'S GHOST TOWNS



(Above) An antique firetruck takes visitors on tours of Virginia City. (Right) The Virginia City Courthouse lights up at night. (Bottom right) Train tours are a fun way to see the sights of America's Wild West.



mercialism that reflect our modern, technology-driven society. However, none of that existed when the most gorgeous parcels of our raw landscapes were set aside to become our national parks in the late 1800s. What great fortune for us today that the leaders of that bygone era had the forethought to preserve those natural treasures.

Just a mile-and-a-half down the road, historic Nevada City offers another glimpse of life in the early days of the Montana Territory. It's an easy bike ride from Virginia City, or you can drive or take a fun narrow-gauge train ride to get there. Both cities are loaded with photo ops, and everyone around town wields a camera or camera phone. The towns are a bit touristy, but they are so engaging it doesn't matter.

How did these two little neighboring historic towns end up with so many well-preserved buildings? Everything here today is available for the public to enjoy, courtesy of the hard work and philanthropy of Charles and Sue Bovey. Charles was the heir to the General Mills fortune, and he and his wife had a deep interest in Montana's history. They began buying historic buildings in the 1940s, and in 1944 they established the Historic Landmark Society. In 1977 the Bovey family sold the more-than-400

buildings that make up Virginia City and Nevada City to the Montana Legislature which, in turn, established the Montana Heritage Commission that manages the two sites today.

The Boveys began buying the buildings in Virginia City because, as the Great Depression deepened in the 1930s, the town had reached a low point in its history and was deteriorating. Rather than see these classic pieces of American history crumble to dust, the Boveys methodically purchased one building after another until they owned most of Virginia City. At the same time, they began buying other historic buildings all over Montana and moving them to where Nevada City once stood.

Such is the way with ghost towns: they flourish one day and die off the next. The gold in Alder Gulch was in the riverbed, and after the initial gold rush extracted all the gold that was easy to find by panning in the early years, dredges were brought in to float down the river and sift more deeply through the gravelly riverbed. Virginia City had

already lost its luster after only six years when its population fell to just 100 people and the gold rush moved on to Helena.

However, there was still some gold left, and from 1889 to 1922 the dredges that were brought in grew ever larger, digging ever deeper and wider along the riverbed and leaving ever-bigger piles of "tailings" behind. The biggest dredges left scars on the landscape that are still visible today.

Nevada City and many other towns along Alder Creek were essentially plowed under by the dredges. Virginia City was spared because it hadn't been built directly on the riverbank. Over the years, whenever gold prices were high, the region would see a mild resurgence, and then as prices fell, the dredges would fall silent again.

So today, Virginia City is still largely intact, the way it was a century ago, with about 100 historic buildings out of 227 in town. In contrast, Nevada City (which charges a small entrance fee) has only 14 original buildings along with 100 other buildings that the Boveys brought in from elsewhere. Together, the two cities contain the largest public collection of historic buildings in the United States.

Not all the buildings are authentic antiques, however. Back in the 1950s, once the Boveys had acquired most of Virginia City, they opened the historic buildings to tourists and began operating the town as an open-air museum. Of course, such a venture

is not without its commercial side. Needing workers to serve the tourists, they purchased some Army barracks to use as employee housing, set them up on the back streets of town, and decorated the fronts with western facades so they would fit into the town decor. These buildings are fun to wander through.

Tacky as it might seem to bring in barracks and dress them up for workers, the wonderful thing for visitors is that by transforming Virginia City into a museum, tourists can enjoy the buildings at leisure, and there is no charge. As we stood in each building, smelling the old wood and feeling the cramped spaces, it was as if we touched the heart of a precious era in the American West.

Nevada City is laid out the way a town might have been in the 1860s with walking paths between the buildings. I was particularly taken by a tiny boot shop with a doorway just a little taller than me. Anyone taller than about 5 foot 7 inches has to duck to enter this wee building. Surprised by just how small all the houses were, we paced off the outside walls of many and found they often occupied as little as 200 square feet. The early Montana settlers must have been rugged and hardy people to survive and raise families through the long and cold Montana winters in homes that small.

The one-room schoolhouse is similarly enchanting. Virginia City's first schoolhouse opened in 1865, but



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## MONTANA'S GHOST TOWNS

the one on display in Nevada City is from another part of Montana. It is just two rooms and has barely enough space in the schoolroom to cram in about 20 students and a teacher. Peering into this room, I could almost feel the strict discipline from the teacher that would have been necessary to keep a group of kids of all ages occupied with their lessons while the great outdoors beckoned just beyond the windows.

The teacher's quarters in the back is barely 12 x 12 feet, and that was all he or she had for living space. The bed, kitchen area, washtub and everything else were all somehow squeezed in. Coming home to our big 350-square-foot fifth-wheel trailer, with its hot and cold running water, ample shower and modern appliances, made us realize how truly palatial our rolling home is in comparison to the early settlers' homes.

Walking down one of the paths in Nevada City, we heard music coming from the inside of a building. Poking our heads in, we saw a technician at a piano with tools spread all around him. He was working on an old player piano, and we had just hit upon the very special Music Hall that houses the largest public collection of automated music machines in North America! Unfortunately, the Music Hall was closed that day so the repairman could do his work.

Meandering down another path, we came across a large building that is home to a massive collection of antique vehicles, from simple hay wagons to sleighs to carriages worthy of transporting Cinderella to the ball. Every conceivable wheeled contraption that can be towed by horse or oxen is on display. Even more fascinating is that the building was once the dining hall at Yellowstone National Park.

Amusing discoveries like these abound in Virginia City and Nevada City, and the area is well worthy of a summer RV trip, especially for travelers heading to Yellowstone National Park. From special events like lantern tours and reenactments to simply wandering and pondering the history that shaped this corner of America, these charming antique cities — or open-air museums — offer something for everyone. 📱

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