



Emily Fagan

By Emily Fagan

When my husband and I pulled into Pioche, Nevada, the first thing we noticed was the unusual tramway coming out of the hills like a ski lift. It wasn't a ski lift, however: it had buckets. We craned our necks as we drove under a bucket suspended from a cable, and traced the tramline down to a collection of buildings in the valley. "Wow!" we said in unison. With a unique, historic piece of engineering overhead, and a million dollar view of the valley and distant mountains out our back window, we knew we were in for a really enjoyable few days.

We hopped on our bikes to explore the narrow, steep streets of the town and find out more about those buckets. At an elevation of 6,000 feet, our bike ride was quite a workout, but what a great reward. Main Street makes a gentle curve as it climbs the hill, offering up many treasures along the way: an original miner's shack with an open door you can enter at will, a restored opera house, a historic hotel, a café, historical museum, whimsical displays of ore buckets and other mining equipment, and other shops. Finally, at

the top, you arrive at more miners' cabins in various stages of deterioration, just below the huge wooden gear building that supports the tramway.

This almost-ghost town is rich with living history, as we soon found out when we asked a man painting a house about the tramway. His grandfather had been a miner, and he explained that the tram was used in the 1920s and '30s to haul ore. However, the real boom and bust had come and gone long before the tramway, he said. Back in the 1870s, when silver was king, the town boasted as many as 10,000 residents, 80 saloons and 20 brothels. That was when Pioche was the wildest of the west's wild towns. Seventy-five men died from gunshot wounds before the first person died of natural causes, and many were buried "with their boots on" in Boot Hill cemetery below town. We looked down across the quiet, hillside community and far out into the silent valley beyond. Today, the town has just 700 residents, mostly descended from miners, and there are just four saloons to choose from.

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IF YOU GO

- Pioche is 193 miles northeast of Las Vegas on Route 93.
 Pioche Chamber of Commerce: www.piochenevada.com.
 Pioche information: www.lincolncountynevada.com/pioche.html.
- City RV Park: A 10-site RV park with water and sewer hookups (no electricity). Self-pay donation box.
 - Roll Inn RV Park: full hookups, laundry, cable TV. (775) 962-5566.
 - Pioche RV Park: full hookups, cable TV, located behind the post office.
 - Echo Canyon State Park campground, water, toilets, no showers, no hookups, <http://parks.nv.gov/ec.htm>.
 - Cathedral Gorge State Park campground: water, toilets, showers, no hookups, <http://parks.nv.gov/cg.htm>.



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Cathedral Gorge is filled with sandstone spires.



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The Overland Hotel and Saloon is one of Pioche's few surviving saloons.

Gun Play

Back down in town, we stopped at the Lincoln Historical Museum, where curator Jane Humphrey brought even more of the town's history to life. Standing amid two rooms packed floor to ceiling with historical artifacts donated by local residents, she explained that Pioche was wild in those early days because the mining claims were poorly surveyed and there was little legal recourse for strike claimants other than bribing the sheriff. In those days, the sheriff's office was rumored to be taking in \$40,000 per year in bribes while prospectors hired gunmen to protect their interests.

It didn't take much to start a gunfight, she told us, and as long as you killed your opponent in self-defense, you weren't charged with murder. One poor fellow was shot dead after slapping a man in the face. Another man succumbed to gunshot wounds resulting from an argument over a dog. Neither gunman was charged with murder. It wasn't until a stray bullet killed an orphaned 4-year-old boy in 1873 that Pioche began to restrain its wild ways. The museum boasts many original newspapers recounting these tales as news items of the day, and Jane has spent many a quiet hour, while waiting for visitors, pouring over the faded, brittle pages.

Still pondering these stories and the lives of the 19th century miners the next morning, we took a bike ride out to Echo Canyon

State Park for a change of pace. The valley is vast, and after 10 miles of desolate desert, the road curved past a beautiful, lush farm. Suddenly, a reservoir surrounded by green trees and backed by huge rock cliffs appeared before us. We watched a heron fishing along the edge of the water, while two people paddled a canoe in the reservoir. We circled through the almost empty campground. With the park's large, clean sites, fresh water and a book swap, it was amazing that only two sites were occupied. Cycling beyond the campground, we followed the road through several turns, up alongside the stream that feeds the reservoir, and through a steep-walled rock canyon. We yelled to check out the echo, and the walls yelled back.

Budget Overrun

Ready for more history the next morning, we walked into town to visit the Million Dollar Courthouse. We were delighted to find Jane on duty here as well. She regaled us with more wonderful stories about this unusual town as she took us on a tour. It cost just \$26,400 to build the courthouse in 1871, but corruption and greed exploded the bill to almost \$1 million by the time all the interest and bond settlements were finally paid off in 1937, four years after the building was condemned! Jane whisked us past fascinating collections of typewriters, firemen's hats, an original voting booth,

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A silver ore bucket hangs from a tramway that spans Pioche.



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The Lincoln County Courthouse has a scandalous history.

a mimeograph machine used to record mining claims, an enormous original ledger listing the miners' names and daily wages in beautiful penmanship (\$4 a day for miners and \$6 a day for engineers), and vintage post office boxes that were in use until 2000. Her stories came so thick and fast I felt almost overwhelmed trying to take it all in.

The local theater company has placed life-sized 19th century mannequins in the courtroom chambers, giving the room an authentic air. As Jane opened the jailhouse door, just beyond the courthouse, I had a sinking feeling inside, as I imagined a convicted criminal being taken from the courthouse to the jail to serve his sentence. The jail's walls are two feet thick, and there is a double wall. A scary looking wooden chair with leg chains stands in the outer cell, and there are three pitch-black inner cells with neither lights nor windows. Only three men ever escaped from this jail, Jane told us. After nine days of intense rain, these men dug in the mud under the foundation with tools fashioned from eating utensils. Unfortunately, they made a lot of noise as they scrambled up into the courthouse lawn. The sheriff just happened to be doing his personal business in the outhouse next door at the time. When he heard the commotion, he burst out of the outhouse and arrested the men on the spot—with his pants around his knees.

Jane told us that a more recent escape was staged by the illusionist Chris Angel. He brought an entourage of TV people to Pioche for two weeks. After studying the jail intensely for five days, he was locked inside. While the TV cameras rolled, he performed his escape.

Back in the 1970s the local sheriff's department locked 66 people in the jail. A local celebration had gotten way out of hand, and there was nowhere else big enough to contain all the rabble-rousers for the night.

Tough Lesson

An 89-year-old Pioche resident told Jane his own personal story about the jail. As a 9-year-old he had disobeyed his father and been lax about doing his chores. At his wit's end, his father got the sheriff to lock the boy in the jail for a night to teach him a lesson. Determined to find a way out, the boy climbed up into the rafters in the pitch dark, until his groping hand touched a human skull. He leapt to the floor in absolute terror, and sat bolt upright in the wooden chair, his eyes like saucers, all night long. Needless to say, he

never disobeyed his father again.

Jane's love of the town and its history is contagious. She told us a friend of hers was excavating his backyard to build an addition when his digging revealed that not only did his house connect to others via a system of tunnels, but the tunnels contained jars of opium. Another friend had a major plumbing repair job in her house, and discovered 19 coffee cans filled with gold and silver coins beneath the floorboards. Whenever her grandkids visit, Jane sends them out into the hills to "find stuff." Most recently they returned with an exquisite silver ladle.

Our heads were soon spinning with all these tales. Seeking another quiet interlude a few days later, we ventured out of town once again, this time to Cathedral Gorge State Park. Also just 10 miles away, this park is hauntingly beautiful, filled with sandstone spires, otherworldly vistas, and narrow caves. Starting with a vast overlook at Miller Point at the north end of the park, we hiked down into the canyon. We scrambled over the needle-like formations and shimmied into the skinny slot-like Cathedral Caves, reveling in this crazy jungle gym of nature. It was hot and dry on the rocks, but below, in the caves, the air was cool and slightly moist. A lovely campground graces one side of the park, and looks back onto the sandstone formations from a distance. Walking back along the marked trail through the wash and clambering up the stair-cased canyon walls to our starting point, we were like excited little kids who just made a discovery. It wasn't a long hike, but I shot so many photographs it took the better part of an afternoon to complete it.

Pioche and the surrounding state parks are a little remote, but seeing these seldom-visited treasures is worth every mile of driving to get there. ■

Emily Fagan and her husband, Mark, have been full-time RVers since May of 2007. She chronicles their adventures at their website, www.roadslesstraveled.us.

