by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

Justice is blind. Well, not in Virginia City. A statue of Lady Justice on the Storey County Courthouse wears no blindfold. For years, Comstock residents claimed that their Justice was some kind of rarity, if not downright unique.

Thanks to Ron James, Nevada's State Historic Preservation Officer, we know better. In his work *Temples of Justice: County Courthouses of Nevada* (1994), James noted that the Storey County Commission ordered an unblindfolded justice to adorn the courthouse built to replace the one burned in the great fire of October 1875. Alfred Doten's
Gold Hill Daily N
ews was inspired to comment on the proposed Lady Justice:

"The facade will be ornamented by a figure representing Justice, with scales and sword that are orthodoxically supposed to belong to her. In the drawing she is represented without her eyes being blindfolded, which may be objected by some as unconventional, but when one considers that this representative dispenser of awards and punishments will be compelled to stand out

and take all the sand thrown in her eyes by the Washoe zephyrs, it will be readily conceded that her eyesight would not last long enough for her to get so much as a glimpse of the great wealth to be obtained by wickedly swaying the scales of Right and Wrong. It makes but little difference whether the blind is on or off."

Some argued that Storey County's Lady Justice without a blindfold was some kind of commentary on frontier justice. "For the Greeks and the Romans," James counters, "Justice was a virgin with an unerring instinct for fairness. She did not need a blindfold. German artists of the sixteenth century had a different point of view. Appalled by the courts, they satirized Justice as blindfolded and staggering around the courtroom." James goes on to note that "Justice eventually shed the negative meaning of her blindfold, which became a standard part of her image. Still, some artists have rejected it. After all, if Justice is truly just, she need not be blind."

While the large zinc statue on the 1877 Storey County courthouse is unusual, it is not rare.

James in a cursory survey of Lady Justices in North America and the United Kingdom found over twenty similar unblindfolded statues scattered from Benton, County, Oregon (1888-89) to the Old Bailey in London, England (1907). Among the most recent was a statue sculpted by W. C. "Brother Rat" Stanton unveiled for the Madison County, North Carolina courthouse in 1973.

So, in the end, justice is not blind in Virginia City. However I can't help but wonder what Mark Twain would have written if he knew about the conspicuous courthouse statue in his old stomping grounds.

Photo: by Ronald M. James
(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, July 1998 edition. Reprinted October 2007)