by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist

How many times have you heard that Virginia City in its heyday was the biggest city west of the Rockies--sometimes even west of the Mississippi? Well, I heard the Rockies version again while listening to a Reno television news broadcast. The story focused on reopening a mine on the Comstock, the once-great mining region in northwestern Nevada with Virginia City as its "Queen" city. A television news anchor, speculated if a new bonanza of gold and silver was found, "would it [Virginia City] end up as the largest city west of the Rockies again?"

Clearly, the anchor did not believe that a Virginia City mining boom today would ever lead to its growing larger than Los Angeles, San Francisco, Las Vegas, or even Reno. But what he was saying is Virginia City had the largest population of any city west of the Rockies when it was one of the premier urban, industrial centers in the nation.

So when was that? Currently the Virginia City area and nearby Gold Hill have about 1,500 residents. We know that the big bonanza years were in the mid-1870s. Census figures during mining booms usually represent an undercount because of all the comings and goings. With that in mind, the figures for Virginia City and Storey County (which includes Virginia City, Gold Hill, American Flat, and some outlying communities) were 7,048 in Virginia City (11,359 in the county) in 1870, 19,528 in the county in 1875 (state census), and 10,917 in Virginia City (16,115

in the county) in 1880.

Why anyone believes that Virginia City was ever larger than San Francisco is hard to fathom! In 1870, San Francisco's population was 149,473, and in 1880 it was 233,959. Can you say that Virginia City was the largest city between the Rockies and San Francisco, actually between the Rockies and Oakland since the East Bay city had almost 35,000 residents in 1880?

How about Sacramento then? California's state capital had a population of 16,283 in 1870 (26,830 in the county), and 21,420 in 1880 (34,390 in the county). Comparing Sacramento's population with that of Virginia City, Sacramento was clearly the larger of the two cities. Storey County may have grown larger than the city of Sacramento in the mid-1870s, however that's not what people say when they make claims for the size of Virginia City. OK, so maybe Virginia City was the largest city between the Rockies and Sacramento.

If we don't count Denver because technically it's east of the Rockies, what about Salt Lake City? Utah's territorial capital had 12,854 residents in 1870 (18,337 in the county), and in 1880 it was 20,768 residents (31,977 in the county). Salt Lake City appears to have been slightly larger than Storey County in the 1870s, and even if it wasn't quite as large at the peak of Storey County's population in the mid-1870s, Salt Lake City was still significantly larger than Virginia City.

So where does that leave us? Based on US and state census data, Virginia City, between 1870 and 1880, was definitely the largest city in Nevada. To claim that Virginia City was once the largest city between Salt Lake City and Sacramento is correct, however it does not mean much. Exaggerated claims for the size of communities began with local boosterism, and continue today when people wax nostalgic about the past and add thousands, or even tens-of-thousands, to the population figures.

In the end, virtually every "Wild West" boomtown, if you believe most of what you hear or read, was much bigger than it actually was. And that is the stuff of myth and legend!

Photo: Library of Congress

(Original version in *Sierra Sage,* Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, October 1999 edition)