

by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



"Did you know . . . one of Nevada's mining towns, Virginia City, was once so rich that its streets were paved with silver?" You will find this question in an elementary school text written by Karen Sirvaitis entitled *Nevada*. The book was published in 1992 by Lerner Publications Company of Minneapolis, Minnesota for its "Hello U.S.A." series.

Well, do you believe Virginia City's streets were once "paved with silver?" Sirvaitis cites a Jack Lindstrom in her acknowledgments for the story. She certainly believed Lindstrom, however the question posed to young school-age children is misleading. In fact, you might call it a trick question!

Chester W. Cheel in his work *The Truth About Virginia City, 1850-1940*, claimed that the streets of Virginia City and Gold Hill in the early 20th century had been "built-up and filled-in with material from the dumps of the old mines in the district... a very conservative estimate places the gold and silver value at about \$1,000,000."

During Virginia City and the Comstock's boom days in the 1860s and 1870s, silver and gold in the hundreds of millions of dollars were mined. In the early years, the mills were not efficient in extracting the silver and gold ore from the rock. The tailings left from the milling process did

contain some precious metals. Some of the silver-bearing rock and tailings may have been used in road building, but clearly it is a stretch of the imagination to say Virginia City's streets "were paved with silver."

What image does such an assertion conjure up in the minds of elementary school students in Miami, Boston, Seattle, San Diego, and cities in between? The nuance of the statement is not explained. Will these children expect to see silver streets if they visit Virginia City, or at least find evidence of silver streets in old photos of the town? Is this really more a hoax based on hyperbole the likes of which Mark Twain and Dan DeQuille might have perpetrated?

It's a fun story, but should it be used in a school text without explanation? Should error-riddled books like this one--and there are more errors--be in school libraries throughout the country? Or, in the end, much like the internet and websites, should free speech prevail even if it is error-ridden? In the meantime, let the librarian, teacher, and student beware in the virtually unregulated information marketplace.

Photo: Nevada State Museum, Carson City

(Original version in *Sierra Sage*, Carson City/Carson Valley, Nevada, January 2000 edition)