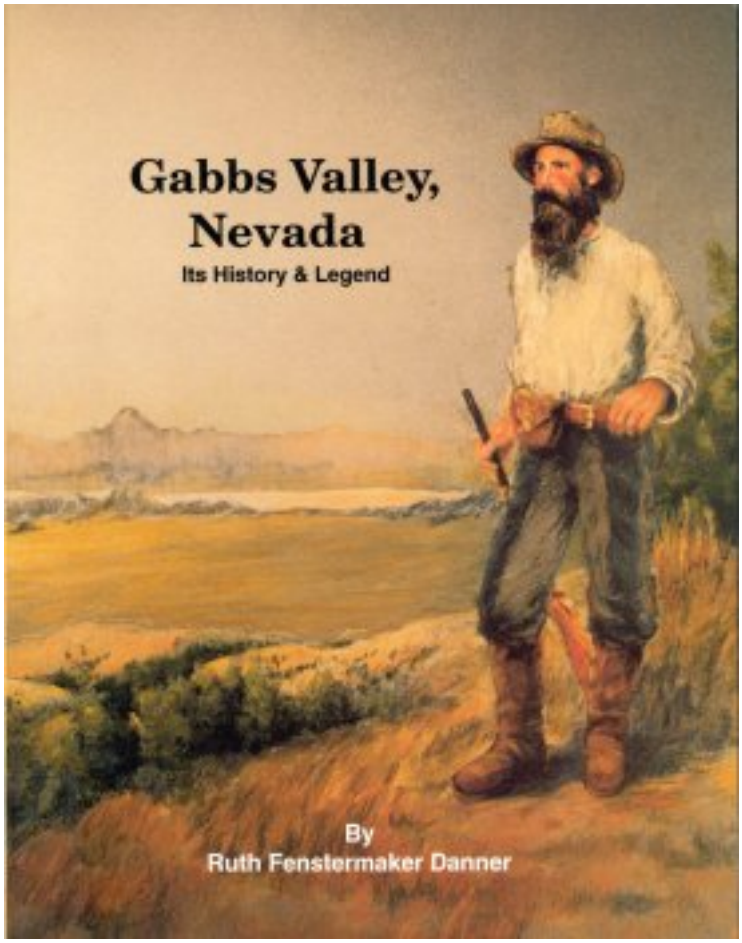
by Guy Rocha, former Nevada State Archivist



Gabbs is no more, well not quite. After 46 years the remote hamlet situated in Gabbs Valley in northwest Nye County ceased being the county's only city on May 8, 2001. The 2000 U.S. Census listed the town's population as 318. Its tax base could no longer sustain a municipal government, and for the first time in over 100 years the state legislature has disincorporated a municipality.

Readers may recognize Gabbs as the home of Melvin Dummar, both the city and the controversial figure immortalized in the movie *Melvin and Howard* (1980). The story revolves around eccentric Howard Hughes' so-called Mormon Will. Dummar claimed he was included in the will because he had unknowingly saved Hughes while the billionaire recluse was wandering in the desert in the vicinity of Lida Junction and transported the disoriented Hughes to the Sands Hotel in Las Vegas. Veteran actor Jason Robards played Hughes and newcomer Mary

Steenburgen received an Academy Award for her performance as Melvin's wife, Lynda Dummar.

Until Ruth Fenstermaker Danner's comprehensive work *Gabbs Valley, Nevada: Its History & Legend* (1992), there was much mystery and confusion on the origin of the name Gabbs, and little history on this isolated area of Nevada. Helen S. Carlson in her book, *Nevada Place Names: A Geographical Dictionary* (1974), claimed the valley, mountain range, and town were named for a Professor E. S. Gabbs, an engineer. Carlson relied on the study *Origin of Place Names. Nevada* (1941) produced by the WPA's Federal Writers Project. The study, in turn, relied on informant Robert A. Allen, the State Highway Engineer, whose department sponsored the federal study in Nevada.

Allen, a powerful government bureaucrat who considered himself a Nevada history expert, was wrong! According to Danner, "It is not known who was responsible for the official naming of the valley, but it seems apparent that both Gabbs Valley and the Gabbs Valley Range were named for William More Gabb." In an excellent biographical sketch, we learn that Gabb (1839-1878) was a paleontologist and a member of a survey team in California and Nevada under the direction of Professor Josiah Dwight Whitney in 1862-67. Several of his colleagues surveyed and mapped the area now called Gabbs Valley. While apparently never seeing the valley that bears his name, Gabb described fossils that were collected there. The first documented use of the name Gabbs Valley appears on a map in 1871. The Philadelphia-native died seven years later at his home at the age of 39 and is buried at Woodland Cemetery.

The community of Gabbs is a product of the 20th century and owes its existence to the discovery of major brucite deposits in Gabbs Valley in the late 1920s. In fact, the town that sprang up in the mid-1930s was first named after the magnesium-bearing mineral.

Brucite grew slowly, then boomed with the onset of World War II and the need for magnesium in the production of defense weaponry. The mineral ore was transported to the Basic Magnesium, Inc. (BMI) plant in the fledgling town of Henderson south of Las Vegas. By the end of 1942, hundreds of workers and their families lived in new town sites named North Gabbs and South Gabbs.

The first federal post office in the Gabbs Valley opened on December 3, 1942. Initially it was named the Toiyabe Post Office, however the name was changed to Gabbs on June 1, 1943. By the end of the war, magnesium production had declined and so had Gabbs.

The Korean War and the opening of a new BMI plant in 1951 spurred the town's growth. Gabbs acquired city status on March 29, 1955 when the area mines were still operating at full capacity and the life-blood of the community. The small city fared well for many years and at its peak may have reached 1,000 residents. According to the 1970 U.S. Census, the population was 874. Subsequent census data showed the town steadily losing population. Estimates today give Gabbs about 300 residents.

Now city hall is closed. Whether Gabbs becomes a ghost town like so many other mining towns in Nevada history, time will tell. The place names commemorating scientist William More Gabb, Gabbs Valley and Gabbs Valley Range, will live on--so to the history of Gabbs thanks to the good work of Ruth Danner who grew up there.

Illustration: John M. Graham, Vernon, B.C. Provided by Ruth Fenstermaker Danner

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