



*This was Nevada Series*

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**The Beer That Saved Goldfield**

In terms of fire protection, the early history of Nevada's 20<sup>th</sup> century mining camps is not unlike that of Reno and the Comstock Lode. The initial water supply developed in the camps minimally served the needs of residents and businesses and took care of the mines and mills, but fire protection had a low priority. The flimsiness of the structures which served as residences and places of business was also a factor in the history of the blazes which periodically visited the camps, as was the careless storage of gasoline, light oils and explosives used in mining operations.

The life of many mining camps was so brief that they scarcely had a history at all, but fire and fire protection is a major theme in the chronicle of those few which made the transition from boomtown to established community. In Goldfield, to take but one example, the first volunteer fire department was established by the Esmeralda County Commissioners on July 2, 1904. The commissioners enacted an ordinance banning the storage of explosives within the town and restricting the sale of gasoline but to little avail. Goldfield's population was perhaps 2,000 by that time and water came from four shallow wells drilled by the Goldfield Townsite Company, each equipped with a windlass, a rope and bucket, and from the natural flow at Rabbit Springs, a quarter mile from the original townsite, developed by the Goldfield Water, Mining and Milling Company. A three-inch pipeline was laid through the main part of town to serve residents and businesses and a 12,--- gallon tank had been constructed on a hill south of town. A hydrant was installed in the downtown business section, but the inadequacy of the gravity flow and the unmonitored use of the system by residents boded ill for the town.

The first major test of Goldfield's fire system came on March 4, 1905 when a gas lamp exploded near the vault of the Nye and Ormsby County Bank. The fire spread from the bank building to Lothrop's Store and Dunn's Saloon, but the pipeline along the street provided sufficient water to enable the volunteers to prevent the further extension of the conflagration. Realizing that something more had to be done, businessmen raised some \$4,000 to buy a modern chemical truck and a light hose cart, but the equipment was still on order when a second major blaze occurred four months later, July 8, 1905.

The fire began in the Bon Ton Millinery on Columbia Street just after 5:00pm. The firemen arrived moments later and began stretching lines of hose from the hydrant but found that they had no water pressure. Householders in the surrounding neighborhood, fearing that the blaze would reach their homes, were filling every bucket and tub they could find. By the time the men got that situation under control, the flames had spread to business houses from Ramsey Street to Meyer Street and from Columbia to Crook, but all was not lost. As the last trickle of water from the tank dribbled out, Bert Ulmer from the Little Hub Saloon arrived on the scene with two large kegs of beer.

When his bartender, Frank Heaton, got there with a stock of blankets and sheets, the pair set to work soaking the materials in the golden liquid and nailing them to the walls of various business houses, one of which was the Enterprise Mercantile Company, a stone structure, which they hoped to keep cool enough to prevent out outbreak of a fire inside.

Other volunteers got on the roof and laid down beer-soaked tenting while another energetic crew saved the Oxford Restaurant with buckets of the brew. Barkeepers who had never stood a round of drinks in their entire lives were soon rolling out dozens of full kegs and cases of unopened bottles, the latter to be used by the firemen to quench fire-induced thirsts or sooth parched, cracked lips. The beer worked well enough to prevent the clothing of the men from catching fire and dozens of beer-soaked Goldfielders were soon sloshing around in the flames as billows of acrid smoke wafted the reek of hops over the smoldering rooftops.

The spread of the fire was checked within an hour, but the stench of stale beer emanated from cracks and crannies all over the downtown section for weeks afterwards. Those men passing by did not mind, however, taking deep, appreciative whiffs, just as though it were the finest Parisian perfume. For this was the beer that saved Goldfield!

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