



History of the Big Bonanza: An Authentic Account of the Discovery, History, and Working of the World Renowned Comstock Silver Lode of Nevada

Dan By De Quille

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This book is about the history of the Comstock Lode. The Comstock Lode is a lode of silver ore located under the eastern slope of Mount Davidson, a peak in the Virginia Range in Nevada (then western Utah Territory). It was the first major discovery of silver ore in the United States.

After the discovery was made public in 1859, it sparked a silver rush of prospectors to the area, scrambling to stake their claims. The discovery caused considerable excitement in California and throughout the United States, the greatest since the California Gold Rush in 1849. Mining camps soon thrived in the vicinity, which became bustling centers of fabulous wealth, including Virginia City and Gold Hill.

The Comstock Lode is notable not just for the immense fortunes it generated and the large role those fortunes had in the growth of Nevada and San Francisco, but also for the advances in mining technology that it spurred, such as square set timbering and the Washoe process for extracting silver from ore. The mines declined after 1874, although underground mining continued sporadically into the 1920s.

History of the Big Bonanza

In 1874 mine operators John W. Mackay, James G. Fair, Sen. John P. Jones, and William Ralston decided that a book should be written about the history of the Comstock. They approached DeQuille as the preferred author and he accepted the task. His original intent was to write a small book which could be sold to overland train passengers and to continue expanding it with new information and additional sketches until it eventually became a volume which could be published for a broader audience.

DeQuille set to work on the book, collecting data, illustrations, and sketches to be included. In March 1875 he sent a letter to Mark Twain, then residing in Hartford, Connecticut, to seek his advice on having the book published. Concurrently Twain had himself seen a need for such a book and, seeing DeQuille as the one to write it, wrote him a letter to that effect. In response to DeQuille's letter, Twain responded with a 19-page letter enthusiastically providing advice and an invitation for DeQuille to gather up all the material he might need and join him in Hartford where they could each work on their respective projects in close proximity and mutual support. Under Twain's mentorship during the summer of 1875, DeQuille pieced together a sizable volume which contained a mixture of technical chapters on silver mining interspersed with lighter accounts of Nevada events and individuals, including the Northern Paiute group of Native Americans living in the vicinity. DeQuille and Twain believed the book would have wide appeal and sell well. Twain helped DeQuille negotiate a favorable contract with his own publisher and DeQuille returned to Virginia City late that summer. In October a fire destroyed much of the city and his account of this tragedy would become the last chapter of his book.

A History of the Big Bonanza was published by the American Publishing Company of Hartford, Connecticut, in 1876.

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