

These United States—VIII¹

NEVADA: Beautiful Desert of Buried Hopes

By ANNE MARTIN

NEVADA to most Easterners suggests divorces, or gambling in mining shares of doubtful value on the New York or Philadelphia stock exchanges. Some, more informed, have heard of our "big bonanza" mines which produced nearly a billion dollars in silver after the Civil War, thus helping to restore national credit, and incidentally producing a crop of millionaires and adventurers, some of whom have won seats in the United States Senate. The "wild and woolly" character of the pioneer mining State fixed on her by Mark Twain in "Roughing It" still clings in the popular mind and is confirmed by most of the news that seeps through the press. Few outsiders have ever heard of her agriculture or any constructive activities, and no one with eyes can see her as anything but a vast, exploited, undeveloped State with a meager and boss-ridden population. Those who wish more information will find in reference books that Nevada began well. She was admitted into the Union in 1864 as the "battle-born State," to give President Lincoln additional support in the Senate, and with her vast domain and natural resources gave great promise. Almost as old as Kansas, Minnesota, and West Virginia, and older than Nebraska, Colorado, the Dakotas, Montana, and all other Far Western States except California and Oregon, "youth" cannot explain away her backwardness and vagaries, her bizarre history, her position as the ugly duckling, the disappointment, the neglected step-child, the weakling in the family of States, despite her charm and beauty and great natural advantages.

The casual railway traveler who has crossed Nevada remembers with wonder or weariness, according to temperament, her twelve hours of "desert" plain, her endless chain of sunny sage-brush valleys surrounded by opalescent mountains, all fertile land but valueless without water, and all without sign of water or habitation, excepting a few railroad tanks and straggling towns, or the drying bed of a river. Reformers know her as perhaps the most "wide-open" State of the West, where prize-fighting, gambling, and saloons have been encouraged greatly to flourish, and where the six-months' divorce still reigns, backed by legal and business interests of Reno. They remember her as the last Western State to adopt woman suffrage, and one of the last to accept State prohibition. She is the despair not only of reformers but of case-hardened lawyers, who must be agile indeed to keep pace with the rapid and contradictory changes in laws made every two years by servile legislatures, at the command of the selfish interests which elected them. To national political leaders she is known as a "doubtful" State, a "pocket-borough," which can be swung more easily than any other into the Republican or Democratic column, according to the amount of money used by either side. (She should therefore not be called "doubtful," but *sure*.) She is known as

a State where politicians, irrespective of party, cynically combine every campaign to elect congressmen and legislatures pleasing to the "interests." These legislatures so chosen are largely migratory. Some members have been known to leave the State, pockets bulging, by the midnight train after adjournment. I recall the difficulty experienced by a former governor in securing a quorum for a special session, as many of our itinerant legislators were already far afield in other States, or in Mexico, Alaska, South America, and South Africa.

It must be admitted there are other Western States which differ only in degree. But what makes Nevada an extreme example? Why has she a larger proportionate number of migratory laborers (as of legislators), of homeless men, than any of her neighbors? Why is she the most "male" State in the Union, with more than twice as many men as women, and the smallest proportionate number of women and children? Why has she the smallest and sparsest population of any State, and why has it decreased since 1910? Why has she a peripatetic male electorate nearly half of which has vanished by the next election, with new voters taking their places who will themselves soon vanish? Why is she perhaps the most backward State in precautions against the spread of venereal diseases, the most shameless in her flaunting of prostitution and red-light districts, surrounded by high board fences, to the children of the towns? With no large cities and a largely rural population, why has she a greater percentage in her jails and prison, her almshouses and insane asylum than certain of her neighbors? How can we account for these extreme peculiarities of her industrial, political, and social life?

The migratory character of mining and railway labor has some influence, but the fundamental cause of every one of these conditions undoubtedly lies in the monopoly by the live-stock industry of the water, the watered lands, and the public range lands of the State. At first blush this may sound like saying that sun-spots cause insanity, or that there is an epidemic of pellagra in the South, of small-pox in China, or of cholera in Russia because Wall Street governs us in Washington. But the relation of cause and effect in Nevada is clear. Some may insist that her backwardness is due to her exploitation from the very beginning by the railroads; others, that the mining interests have picked the vitals from her, have taken everything out and given nothing back: witness San Francisco's and even some of New York's finest structures built largely with bullion from her "ghost cities," the Postal Telegraph and Cable system which girdles the globe by means of the Mackay millions taken from the quickly gutted Comstock lode, the Guggenheim and other similar interests still picking the bones for all that is left! True; but mere exploitation by railroads and mine owners does not account for the condition in which we find her today. Other Western States with comparable natural resources have been similarly exploited, and are not a "notorious bad example" of political, economic, and social degeneration.

The live-stock industry, established as a monopoly in

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This is the eighth article in the series entitled *These United States*. The first was on the State of Kansas by William Allen White (April 19), the second on Maryland by H. L. Mencken (May 3), the third on Mississippi by Beulah Amidon Ratliff (May 17), the fourth on Vermont by Dorothy Canfield Fisher (May 31), the fifth on New Jersey by Edmund Wilson, Jr. (June 14), the sixth on Utah by Murray E. King (June 28), and the seventh on South Carolina by Ludwig Lewisohn (July 12).

Nevada under very extraordinary conditions, is responsible. It has prevented the development of small farms, of family life, of a stable agricultural population, and has produced instead an excessive proportion of migratory laborers and of homeless men, larger than any State in the Union. The 1910 census figures give 220 men to every 100 women. The number of married women in the State is about one-third the number of men. The number of children from six to fourteen years is less than two-fifths of the usual average in other States. Utah, for example, with natural resources not much larger than Nevada, has more than eight times as many school children. (The 1920 census figures so far received show an improvement in these proportions more apparent than real, due chiefly to the reduction of the homeless male population since 1910 by the migration of thousands from dying mining camps.) It appears that practically one-half the men of Nevada, or nearly 20,000 out of our total population of nearly 80,000, are living under bad social conditions outside the home environment, as cowboys, sheepherders, hay-hands, miners, and railwaymen, sleeping in company bunk-houses or on the range, and dependent for their few pleasures and social contacts on the frontier towns the traveler sees from the train window. These afford a movie, perhaps, certainly a gambling house with bootleg whiskey, and a "restricted district" behind a stockade, in which the women are "medically inspected" (for a price) while the men are not.

A characteristic Nevada sight, and to those who know its significance one of the most pathetic, is the large groups of roughly dressed men aimlessly wandering about the streets or standing on the street corners of Reno, Lovelock, Winnemucca, Battle Mountain, Elko, Wells, Ely, Tonopah, Goldfield, and other towns, every day in the year. They are in from the ranches and mines for a holiday with hard-earned money, and the only place they have to spend it is in the numerous men's lodging houses, gambling dens, or brothels. In our suffrage campaign in 1914 and in later campaigns we found it always possible to gather these men into a quick, responsive, and generous street audience. But a large proportion of them are wanderers, and are, of course, prevented from voting by the election laws. Of those who can vote many have most naturally no sense of civic responsibility and are easily corrupted by the political machine. If instead of the land and water monopoly by the live-stock interests for the almost exclusive production of hay, cattle, and sheep, this same land with water, now manned chiefly by "ranch-hands" and in the hay-making season by a large influx of migratory hay-hands, were subdivided into small farms for diversified and intensive agriculture, Nevada would soon have many new homes with women and children in them, she would soon have a large and growing farm population, larger towns and community centers, and greater social stability, instead of languishing on as an exhausted weakling in the sisterhood of States. But the strangle-hold of the live-stock interests continues as the cause of the mortal illness from which she is suffering, and to grasp the case we must consider some physical features.

Nevada's area is 110,000 square miles, more than twice as large as New York or Pennsylvania. Her population is 77,000, or about one person to every one and one-half square miles. Her *land* area is more than 70,000,000 acres, of which nearly 90 per cent is still owned by the National Government. The remainder is chiefly land granted by the Government to the railroad, with the exception of a little more

than 3 per cent, or about 2,300,000 acres, which are reported in privately owned farms in 1920. Of this amount nearly 600,000 acres, or less than 1 per cent of the total land area, are under irrigation. The water for this purpose is supplied chiefly by Nevada's four rivers, the Truckee, Carson, and Walker, which rise in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and the Humboldt, which rises in the northeast. The snow-fall in the mountain ranges which traverse the State north and south produces in addition a few small springs and streams. These water part of the valley lands. It has been estimated that the State has enough water, if carefully conserved and used, to irrigate 2,000,000 acres, or about 3 per cent of her area. But owing to the great cost of constructing the necessary dams and reservoirs for the storage of flood waters, and the dams and ditches for its distribution, and because of waste of water by many users, the irrigated area is not increasing. According to the 1920 census it has decreased. The vital fact is that about 97 per cent of the State's enormous area has no agricultural value except as grazing land for cattle and sheep (unless water can be developed from new sources such as artesian wells), and that the National Government owns nearly all this grazing land. Uncle Sam owns it, but a few live-stock companies monopolize its use for their herds. This is made possible by the fact that the law under which government grants of school lands to Nevada were administered enabled certain stockmen to select practically all the land with water, so as to control all water available for irrigation and drinking purposes for live stock. Unlike other States, the Nevada law controlling the sale of the millions of acres granted by the Government enabled a stockman to pick out only the forty-acre tracts with water on them. He could buy 640 acres directly, and get as much more as he wanted by using the names of relatives and employees—"dummies." The price of the land was \$1.25 an acre, but only 25 cents had to be paid down, with long time for the balance. So a man with \$5,000 could buy 25,000 acres, carefully selected in forty-acre tracts along the banks of rivers and streams, and through this water monopoly he could secure the exclusive control of a million acres of public range land as free pasture for his herds. In other States the government land grants consisted of numbered sections according to United States surveys, and buyers could not pick out exclusively the areas with water. (The bill granting 7,000,000 acres of government land to Nevada, which passed the United States Senate in 1916 through the efforts of Senator Pittman, was drawn on similarly vicious lines. It would have increased the hold of the land and water monopolists and large-scale live-stock producers on the people.)

Thus was fixed the strangle-hold of the live-stock interests on Nevada. A few families and corporations control nearly all her many million acres of range land (97 per cent of the State's area) through their control of the water, and own most of the watered land. Trespassers are kept off by the laws of nature, as they cannot use the pasture unless they have drinking water, or if necessary, by the "law of the range," as shown by many past conflicts of stockmen with their small competitors. With rare exceptions like the Newlands irrigation project at Fallon, Truckee Meadows, and a few other valleys early settled in small and fertile farms by the pioneers, this monopoly has made Nevada practically one large and desolate live-stock ranch. But deliberately or unconsciously its population of homeless workers has taken its revenge, as told by Nevada's overflowing jails and

prison, her almshouses and insane asylum, by her lack of political, economic, and social stability, by the most backward position of all the States. No society can allow its natural resources to be monopolized and neglect its workers without paying a heavy price. As Professor Romanzo Adams points out,² in no other State is there such concentration of land ownership in a few families, or are there so few farmers. In no other State is the average size of farms, and the average number of cattle or sheep on each farm, so large. And in no other State are there so many migratory farm workers in proportion to the number of farms. "Nevada has from two to six times as large a percentage in prison, jails, almshouses, and hospital for the insane as certain neighboring States where farms and farm homes are numerous and migratory workers few."³ Paupers, insane, and prisoners are largely recruited from the migratory workers. But the sorry population of her institutions does not tell the full story of damage done. Thousands more must have been maimed in body and soul, and roam free to spread the social canker, while the State continues to decrease in population and to deteriorate in nearly all that increases human welfare.

What is the remedy? Will the live-stock interests subdivide their holdings? Will pigs fly? The stockman's motto is "What I have I hold," down to the last drop of water. I have seen large quantities of it overflowing the ditches and running to waste on the fields and roads of company ranches, producing a rich crop of willows and tules after irrigating the wild hay lands. Across the road were the scattered "dug-outs" and cabins of settlers who under great difficulties had cleared a few acres of sage-brush land. They were struggling to "prove up" and sustain life for their families and themselves on a "dry" farm, as their entire water supply was from a well. Staring at us through the sage-brush or clinging to their mother's skirts were two or three eerie little children, timid as jack-rabbits, growing up without school or toys, in ignorance even of children's games. Sooner or later these settlers are starved out, as Nevada is literally the "driest" State in the Union (as regards rainfall), and dry-farming is hopeless. These failures please the large owners; they do not want homesteaders "fussing about," fencing the land on their own government range, and breaking the continuity of their holdings. I know intrepid settlers who have hoarded trickles from mountain streams and seepage that would otherwise be wasted, and used it to water crops on their homesteads, into which they had put years of work and all their meager capital. But they were enjoined at the behest of the neighboring live-stock company from using the hoarded water, on the ground of "prior rights." I have seen them denied its use and lose everything in court. Only their cabin home and the parched land with its withered crops were left them. The manager of this company replied to my protest: "This is *our* country, and we don't want any damned squatters and water stealers around interfering with our water and range and settling it up. We'd *run* them out if we couldn't get rid of them any other way!" However, it is generally not necessary "to run them out," as under our big-business system of government, national and State, the natural resource monopolists, the banks, and the courts are of course in cahoots, and the verdict is to the strong.

We have in Nevada some laws that automatically keep

water away from the land and the settler. On one of my campaigns I met a sturdy young fellow climbing out of a tungsten mine in the Humboldt Mountains, who told me with pride of his wife's work as school-teacher to help him in his struggle for a farm and home for their children. "This is no sort of life for a man to lead," he admitted, wiping the yellow dust from his face, and gazing off at the desert. "I've got to live on top of this mountain in a company bunk-house (and pay \$40 a month extra for board) instead of having a home. We can't have it until I get water on my land. The water's there in the Humboldt River, but I can't get it." He had filed on 320 acres under the Desert Land Act, "proved up on it" by making the necessary improvements and payments, cleared the land of sage-brush, dug ditches, secured a water right to certain river waters from the State engineer, and put in a crop of wheat which sprouted well but died, because he was not allowed to run water to his ditches. Instead of the profit of \$2,000 he was counting on to pay his debts and build a house, he lost several hundred dollars and all his work, and was now struggling as a miner for a fresh start. He took from his pocket a letter from the agent of a land and live-stock company owning adjoining land. It curtly refused his request for a ditch right of way over its land to his. Another company had filed a protest in the State engineer's office against granting his water right because the company "believed" a dam built at the point of diversion of his ditch from the river would back up the water and flood its land, and because his ditches would have to cross numerous company ditches and thereby prevent it "from enjoying the free use of its vested water and ditch rights." Only by winning lawsuits against neighboring land owners—and both cards and courts were stacked against him—could he fill his ditches. "And with water running to waste in the Humboldt Sink!" he said bitterly. "We fellows haven't a man's chance, and all we want is a fair show to live by our own work." He held out his large, muscular, calloused hands. "And with the Government wasting billions on airplanes and shipyards and railroads and foreign loans! We're doing some thinking for ourselves!" The tungsten mine has since shut down and he has joined the army of homeless men looking for work, while one of the neighboring land companies has filed on his water right, on the ground that he never put it to beneficial use by raising crops.

I have seen families stoically enduring life in little hot cabins in the heart of a burning desert. A well, a few scraggly chickens, a cow perhaps, and a sparse and parched field of rye or wheat were their only visible means of subsistence. The father of one of these families confessed almost apologetically: "I ain't one of these dry farmers, ma'am. I've got some good wells located and could grow fine crops if I could only get a few hundred dollars for a pump." Throughout the State I found it: on the one hand, men and women who had shown energy and hardihood and a pioneer spirit in their struggle against nature for a meager existence, asking only for water; on the other hand the Government, national and State, indifferent to the crying need for farms, homes, and jobs, doing nothing. The settlers struggle on until they lose everything, the land remains barren and unproductive for lack of "a few hundred dollars for a pump," while underground rivers flow beneath the floor of Nevada's driest looking valleys, and undeveloped artesian water abounds. (Senator Pittman's

² Public Range Lands—A New Policy Needed; by Romanzo Adams. *American Journal of Sociology*, November, 1916.

³ *Ibid.*

underground waters bill, recently enacted, reserving the right to any citizen or "association of citizens" to drill for water for two years on land areas of 2,560 acres, thus securing a patent on 640 acres if water is developed, does not help the settler; as a director in one of these water-drilling corporations recently told me: "Only big companies can afford to drill and get land and water on these terms." Several companies have already done so, thus increasing monopoly in the hands of a few.)

I have seen rivers flooding their banks on their way through barren valleys which in the language of congressmen would "blossom as the rose" with the storage and distribution of this water. The Humboldt River spreads out into a lake at one point, owing to a bad channel, and loses 300,000 acre feet in a few miles, due to evaporation and absorption. This is enough to irrigate 200,000 acres through the season, and provide homes for 2,000 families. Fertile sage-brush lands, but waterless, spread on both sides of the river for miles to the foot of distant mountains, waiting for the homemakers.

Utah has shown our bosses both in Washington and Nevada how to manage large land and water holdings for the public good. It was the policy of the Mormon church to divide good land into small farms. And Utah, with nearly equal agricultural resources, has a much larger population and greater economic and social stability than her neighbor. The Mormon church carried out this policy in Nevada, when a large cattle ranch of several thousand acres in the eastern part of the State accidentally came into its possession. It planned at once to divide it into a large number of small farms. The Mormon bishop there tells me the church was warned that the colonists would starve, as "the ranch was only fit for cattle." But the colonists came, and the land today supports two villages of more than

one hundred families, which are producing diversified crops under sound social conditions, instead of wild hay for cattle at great social cost to a lot of homeless men and to the State.

What is the solution of Nevada's problem? Undoubtedly the Government should end its long neglect of its vast public domain and administer these lands as it recently began the administration of its forest reserves, but in the interest of the small settler. The Government should extend its irrigation projects, providing credits and other necessary aid to settlers during the first difficult years, and, even more important, in cooperation with the State, should buy from the large stockmen tracts of land which control water for live stock. It should manage land, water, and public range with the definite purpose of increasing the number of small farms, of small stockmen, and range users. As Professor Adams suggests, it should also reduce the number of animals pastured on the public range by the large owners, which would of course reduce their yearly production and profit and thus lessen the value of their watered lands. Thus the natural operation of economic laws would lead to the subdivision of their holdings. But this will never be done until the people make their bosses see that government, national and State, if it is to endure, must develop natural resources for the good of all, instead of gutting them for the enrichment of a few, to the ultimate injury of all. Until it is done, Nevada's stable population cannot increase, despite the efforts of boosters' clubs and chambers of commerce. She will continue to lie, inert and helpless, like an exhausted Titan in the sun—a beautiful desert of homeseekers' buried hopes.

[The next article in this series, to be published in The Nation of August 9, will be Ohio: I'll Say We've Done Well, by Sherwood Anderson.]

The City That Walled Itself In

By NORRIS HODGINS

Though thou shouldest bray a fool in a mortar among wheat with a pestle, yet will not his foolishness depart from him.—Prov. xxvii, 22.

IN a fruitful valley in China was a prosperous little city filled with industrious Chinks who ate their rice and sipped their tea with gladness. And although some there were who were masters and some who were their servants, yet none was wealthy enough to afford a rickshaw, and none but had a well-stocked larder and a red and yellow gown to wear on feast days.

For many moons they had lived at peace with their neighbors, having, indeed, little to do with them except when they fared forth to a neighboring market in search of a fan, for they grew their own rice and tea, and with the exception of fans all the necessities of life were sold in their own market-place.

Now the Lord High Muckamuck of the city rejoiced in the name of Fou Hu Yun. His position corresponded to that of our mayor, and he occupied it because he could eat more rice at a sitting than could anyone else in the city. Fou Hu Yun loved his city and it grieved him sore to see his people go to neighboring towns to buy fans. Many a time and oft, as he pillowed his head at night on his block of wood after the fashion of his country, did he rack

his brains for a scheme to lure a fan-maker to his city, but nothing of a feasible nature occurred to him.

About this time there arrived in the city a stranger who desired speech with its rulers. His robe was of sky-blue silk with dragons wrought thereon in thread of gold and his queue was four feet long. He was evidently an important personage so the Lord High Muckamuck called together his merchant princes, the owner of the chop-suey place, and the tea merchant, and the rice dealer, and the laundry-man, and the seller of silks and sandals—all these called he to meet with him and to hear the words of the stranger, for they were his councilors. And when they had been given tea and were squatted on the floor of the council hall, the man with the blue robe arose and said: "Greetings I bring to you, O children of the morning—greetings and good tidings. Hear what I have to say and give ear to this plan which I shall presently unfold to you and so shall great prosperity come to your city.

"First, you must build a great wall about your city so that no one can enter save at one gate only. And on that gate you must set a guard, who will see that nothing is brought into the city that can be bought inside. Then shall your merchants be able to set the price of their wares much higher than they now are and so advance the wages of their