

# The Riddle of Ghost Towns in the Environmental Imagination.

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## The Riddle of Ghost Towns in the Environmental Imagination

Cheryll Glotfelty

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### In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Riddle of Ghost Towns in the Environmental Imagination Cheryll Glotfelty When I first moved to Reno, more than a decade ago, I went on Sierra Club day hikes to meet fellow environmentalists and to learn about local natural areas. I still recall an unlikely hike listed in a 1991 issue of the chapter newsletter, The Toiyabe Trails: April 14, Sunday. American Flats Special/Six Mile Canyon Dayhike Calling ex'hippies, UNR Art Department members, mining history buffs, and those with a taste for an extraordinary adventure. Cameras and lots of film a must as we traipse to a little known site outside Gold Hill — an extensive ruin reminiscent of a Roman Coliseum but redecorated in contemporary fashion. ... Post sack lunch at the notable Virginia City cemetery, then hike junkies will do a 6 Mile Canyon highlighted by a stop at

another historical mining site at the base of Sugarloaf Chriss Pagani. HARDMAN, OREGON. 2003. Watercolor. 11" x 15". Reprinted with permission from the artist. Cheryl G. Lotfeldty245 Mountain. ... After all this, will we need a stop in V.C. for a tall, cold one? (6) I regretted a schedule conflict that prevented me from joining this hike as it would have been fun to soak up some local history, see real ruins, and top it all off with a convivial beer in historic Virginia City, perhaps even at the Bucket of Blood saloon! Recently that newsletter page resurfaced, yellowed and brittle, and I found myself musing on how peculiar it was that a Sierra Club hike would choose an old mining site as its destination. I wondered where the conversation had gone on that hike. Did the Sierra Clubbers admire or berate the old mining ruins? When they beheld the plundered hillsides, did they gaze in awe or shake their heads in disgust? Did they maintain the customary lively trip banter at this gutted site or did a solemn hush descend? As I would learn, in Nevada ghost towns outnumber live towns by about ten to one, the legacy of over one thousand mining booms and busts. Even as early as 1879, a mere fifteen years after Nevada obtained statehood, observer John Muir penned an essay titled "Nevada's Dead Towns," in which he observed, Nevada is one of the very youngest and wildest of the States; nevertheless it is already strewn with ruins that seem as gray and silent and time-worn as if the civilization to which they belonged had perished centuries ago. ... Wander where you may throughout the length and breadth of this mountainbarred wilderness, you everywhere come upon these dead mining towns, with their tall chimney-stacks, standing forlorn amid broken walls and furnaces, and machinery half buried in sand, the very names of many of them already forgotten amid the excitements of later discoveries, and now known only through tradition— tradition ten years old. (195) Numerous popular guidebooks direct tourists to these historic mining sites dotting the state, some of which are so far gone that it takes a sharp eye just to recognize them. I love to visit these places where there was once such bustle but where now there is only the sound of some buzzing insects, maybe a twittering bird, the wind— maybe nothing at all. But, like many people drawn to ghost towns, I never know quite what to make of these places. These sites seem charged with an almost Western American Literature 41.3 (Fall 2006): 244-65. 246 WESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE FALL 2006 palpable significance, but it's...

# THE RIDDLE OF GHOST TOWNS IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGINATION

CHERYLL GLOTFELTY



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