

RURAL MIGRATION IN SOUTHERN NEVADA
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This study reviews the history of migration in two rural counties in Southern Nevada. It is part of a larger study about the impact of a proposed high-level nuclear waste repository on, in and out-migration patterns in the state. The historical record suggests a boom and bust economic cycle has predominated in the region for the past century creating conditions that should be taken into account, by decision makers, when ascertaining the long-term impacts of the proposed repository.

INTRODUCTION

An examination of the histories of Lincoln County and Nye County, Nevada, as part of research focusing on migratory effects related to the construction of a high-level nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, Nevada, has provided an applied setting for historical work in the analysis of a contemporary public policy problem. The striking similarities and stark contrasts which exist within these rural counties have created a foundation from which many attitudes, preferences and differences emerge. Understanding this history is an important first-step in providing policy makers on both sides of the Yucca Mountain issue an opportunity to better understand the historical roots of the two rural counties which would be impacted the most if the repository is built.

THE REMAINING FRONTIER: RURAL NEVADA

Both Lincoln and Nye counties were settled by Anglo-Americans in search of economic opportunities, religious freedom or both. Much of Nevada, and specifically the southern region, was isolated due to limited access that the state's earliest pioneers had to overcome. Even today, both Nye and Lincoln counties remain classified as frontier regions by the federal government due to low population densities of less than two persons per square mile. Southern Nevada's earliest settlers were of the same mind-set as many of those who travelled to the "wild west," as the trans-Mississippi frontier became known. In search of their personal fortunes, and inspired by opportunities for land or quick riches from mining booms such as the California gold rush of 1849, many who had little or no knowledge of the frontier, set off in search of fame and fortune. Many of these inspired and often ill-advised individuals spread into, explored and claimed as their own, parts of the far-west and inter-mountain west, including southern Nevada. Mining and the desire for instant wealth was the largest single cause for massive in-migration into states such as Nevada, evidenced by the U.S. government's population statistics for the period, 1860 to 1880 and from 1900 to 1910--the "boom" years of mining in Nevada.¹

Mining was of critical importance in the late nineteenth and early

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twentieth century to most Nevadans.² Virginia City's Comstock rush stands out as the most prominent example, but it was not the only part of the state that experienced a significant influx of people during the 1858 to 1878 "bonanza period".³ When news of a rich strike in the uninhabited and unknown southern Nevada, appeared in newspapers, miners working in other parts of the west rushed in to stake their claims.

The series of events which have been called mining rushes were particularly evident in Lincoln County during the late nineteenth century, and Nye County in the early twentieth century. Although it may be argued that the motivations of the numerous groups migrating to these remote districts were similar, one group's impetus does appear unique from the mining experience, that of the members of the Church of the Latter Day Saints--the Mormons. Even though many historians of the Mormon Church have emphasized the noble motives of their "saints" who established farms in Lincoln County, it is evident that to some extent that they too were drawn to exploit the regions mineral wealth.⁴

Nevada has suffered from cyclical patterns of economic growth followed by decline and eventual complete demise. A boom-to-bust sequence has plagued Nevada throughout its history as a territory (1861-1864) and as a state; a scenario which is particularly evident in Lincoln and Nye counties.⁵ As a result, the residents have adopted a relatively open attitude toward any source of economic prosperity or improvement, even if that requires embracing the often disapproved of federal government.⁶

Although these similarities appear in an examination of each county's past, it is evident that they each have their own unique history and story. Both rural counties sustained Indian populations for several thousand years before any white visitors entered the Great Basin. The people we know the most about are the Indian residents of the post-Columbian era. In Lincoln County, the Paiutes, consisting of several distinct bands were the most populous residents. These semi-sedentary Indians interacted with several other sets of native Americans as both friends and enemies.⁷ Incursions by raiding parties of Utes, who lived in Southern Utah, provide an example of a group which had to be defended against. By contrast, another more passive interaction occurred with Western Shoshones who passed through as traders. While the region attracted explorers from the Spanish empire, little permanent in-migration occurred until the wandering "mountain men" found their way to the Great Basin. Kit Carson was perhaps the most recognizable of these early explorers who reached southern Nevada in the 1820s and 1830s.⁸ Moreover, few Americans knew of Nevada until the 1849 Gold Rush in neighboring California. While the general public seemed to have little interest in such a remote and unknown land, this was not the case with the federal government.

Just prior to the Mexican-American War of 1846-48, the United States sent exploration expeditions to the Great Basin under the

command of John C. Fremont. Fremont was ordered to explore the western parts of the nation. Two expeditions he led, one in 1843 and another in 1845, brought the explorer into southern Nevada, including what is now Nye and Lincoln counties.⁹ Kit Carson is credited with guiding the Fremont expeditions through the lands he had previously.

Members of Utah's Church of the Latter Day Saints sent missionaries to explore and settle in Lincoln County as early as 1852; four years after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hildago was signed between the United States and Mexico, formally placing the region within the sovereign territory of the United States.¹⁰ In addition, Mormon leader, Brigham Young, ordered a group of his followers into southern Nevada in order to build a mission to teach the Indians the Mormon faith, and to secure a safe haven for their mail carriers in route to the Mormon outpost at San Bernadino, California. One consequence was for Lincoln County to become a stopover point for those making the journey in behalf of the Mormon Church. For the Moromons, southern Nevada was considered a part of Utah, despite the fact that neither Utah or Nevada had clear title to the region. In fact, southern Nevada was part of the Arizona Territory until 1867. Brigham Young, the Mormon Prophet, sent brigades of settlers to Nevada to claim territory where his faithful would be safe from "gentiles". An area where one of those groups built an encampment in 1858 was near a warm springs in Meadow Valley, the sight of present-day Panaca, NV. The missionaries and their faithful planted corn, dug irrigation ditches, and befriended the local Paiutes in the name of the Salt Lake City based church.¹¹

In the continuing search for pasture lands to feed their livestock, several Mormon families migrated out of Meadow Valley and settled in Eagle and Rose Valleys in a more western part of Lincoln County. One of the more prominent names to emerge from this migration was that of Francis Lee, a Mormon Elder. The Lees were joined by a growing number of settlers who also were affiliated with the Mormon faith. By 1864, the number of Mormons in the Lincoln County had grown significantly, and the town of Panaca was established, remaining to this day a center for the Mormons in the county.¹² The initial plans for the town were drawn up by Erastus Snow, a Mormon leader from St. George, in the Utah Territory with the help of a contingent of U.S. soldiers assigned to the region.¹³

In 1864, Nevada was admitted to the Union, an event which began the process of transforming the territorial government structure into that of a new state. Lincoln and Nye counties were not, however, a part of the state's initial county structure which had been established during Nevada's territorial period. Nye County was formally a part of Esmeralda County from 1861 to 1864, and Lincoln County did not exist during Nevada's territorial period, and was not incorporated into the state structure until 1867--three years after statehood had been granted.¹⁴

Mining, as previously noted, had a pronounced impact upon how Nevada was settled, particularly in the remote rural areas of

Lincoln and Nye counties. With the discovery of silver ore in the mountains of this part of Nevada a growing number of prospectors settled in an area controlled by members of the Mormon Church. Because many of the new residents were not members of "the church." conflicts often occurred. In addition, the Mormon pioneers sent from Salt Lake City contended that they were residents of Utah Territory, and refused to pay property taxes imposed by the State of Nevada.¹⁵

The result, was to draw the attention of the newly formed state government. In combination with the news of a "fabulous" ore discovery at Irish Mountain, in Lincoln County, the state sent a party of men to the region to form a local government with the directive of insuring that the state's claim to the region was perfected.¹⁶ Governor Blasdel personally led the expedition's search for a suitable county seat, designating Hiko in March of 1867 as the political capital of Lincoln County.¹⁷ Nevada politicians had a vested interest in establishing the county quickly in order to insure that the state's claims to Meadow Valley and the lucrative Pahranaगत mines were secured.¹⁸ Concurrently, the Nevada congressional delegation was pressing for an outward expansion of the state, and subsequently county's borders at the expense of the Utah and Arizona territories.

Nevada won the battle to expand its boundaries in the United States House of Representatives and secured title to the lands of the Arizona and Utah territories even before the boundary had been surveyed.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Governor Charles Durkee, of the Utah Territory, visited Pahranaगत and declared the mines part of the Territory of Utah.²⁰ Inasmuch as Utah lacked political clout and at the time Nevada did, Nevada's claims superseded Utah's. Nevada won the political contest, but a majority of the people living in the Meadow Valley locale maintained their loyalties to Utah. In part this was due to their ties to the Mormon church, headquartered in Salt Lake City. This was readily apparent when the Lincoln County tax assessor was forced out of the area at gunpoint.²¹ In the end, an official survey provided the evidence that the people living in Meadow Valley were indeed a part of Lincoln County, and the State of Nevada. Subsequently, this news led to another exodus of the Mormon faithful to Utah. The population did not dramatically decline, however, largely due to the emergence of the Pioche mines and the beginning of another mining boom period which attracted more in-migrants.²²

The resident's reaction typified one of the over-arching themes that appears throughout the history of Lincoln County--a conflict between Mormon and gentile citizens, that to a lesser degree still exists today.²³ Panaca was, and remains to this day a community dominated by the Church of Latter Day Saints, resulting in reverence or irreverence depending on membership in "the church." This farming and ranching area was originally settled by Mormon families and conflicts between the gentile miners and the Mormon farmers were frequent after the Panaca ledge blossomed into the Pioche mining boom in the 1870s. Despite their mutual suspicions

both parties soon came to realize that they needed each other and, subsequently became mutually dependent. Miners bought the farmer's agricultural products with the money earned in the mining camps and at times young Mormon men were employed as wagon masters and day laborers.²⁴

Most of the state suffered a serious depression from 1880 to 1900 which resulted in the closing of numerous mines or even an abandonment of entire mining districts. The population of Nevada declined dramatically, especially in rural areas like Lincoln and Nye counties. Most likely the trend would have continued if it had not been for another gold rush in southern Nevada's Nye County. With the decline of large-scale mining operations, cattle ranching, farming and limited small-scale mining dominated the economic landscape of Lincoln and Nye counties. This trend towards economic diversification in the late nineteenth century had an impact that has carried forward to this day in the region's business community. Even though many county residents desired economic diversity they still hoped that a renewed mining boom would occur. In 1935 it finally seemed that major mining operations were slated for a comeback when the United States government constructed a power-line to transport cheap electrical power from Hoover Dam to the region's mines at Pioche in Lincoln County.²⁵

The real boom period for mining did not occur, however, until World War II created a dire need for nonprecious and strategic metals important to the war effort. Lead and zinc were common in the deeper shafts around Pioche that had played out and were considered worthless in the late 1800s. Combined Metals Corporation made those shafts productive from 1939 to 1957, and World War II provided some economic stability for the local population. Combined Metals serves as an example of this renewal, accounting for 50 million dollars of ore production in the eighteen year period.²⁶ As a result the population remained stable and experienced a slight in-migration growth during the war years. The "cold war era" saw a new influx of residents, including a number of people who began working at the Nevada Test Site and commuting from Lincoln county's four communities, Alamo, Caliente, Panaca, and Pioche, to Mercury, the nation's atomic capital.

The citizens of Lincoln County also saw a few additional, yet limited influxes of monies during the 1950s and 1960s, primarily from the federal government (Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service), and from the state to promote tourism. One of the major areas of investment from the state involved developing the county's recreation facilities and expanding its parks, lakes, and reservoirs. Overall, these influxes assisted in stabilizing the economy as well as the population, but only in a marginal manner. Subsequently, they did not serve to enhance in-migration. Federal money it seemed would flow into the county coffers in the late 1970s when national leaders proposed building the MX missile system in Nevada. From early 1979 to mid-1982 government surveyors were prominent in-and-around Lincoln and Nye counties in search of ideal sites for constructing the mobile launch vehicles for ICBMs.

As the debate raged in Congress, federal agencies planned large scale construction projects that would have had a considerable economic and population impact had they come to fruition.²⁷ The MX project was, however, not funded leaving both Lincoln and Nye County commissioners searching for the means to expand their economic bases in order to maintain their populations.

Nye County's early history is similar to that of Lincoln County's. While Lincoln County was cut out of the Utah and Arizona territories, Nye County was portioned from pre-existing Esmeralda County in 1864.²⁸ Once created, however, few knew the county's true boundaries or of its mineral wealth. When the Comstock Lode further north had proven its ability to produce fortunes, a number of daring miners decided to explore the relatively unknown regions of the Nevada Territory in what became Nye County. When the territorial legislature received a petition in February, 1864 to create Nye County, it was responding to the needs of a "bold lot of prospectors who penetrated beyond sight or easy reach of known springs or water courses to discover a new mining district".²⁹ Although the region never became another Virginia City in terms of the dollars of ore recovered, several boom towns did appear that were said to have the potential of their famous northern counterpart. Several newspaper accounts from the 1860s illustrate how the boom town fever clouded the vision of many visitors to the region. Reporters from the Reese River Reveille, among others, proclaimed Ione in Nye County as "the silver city of the future" capable of rivaling Virginia City, not only in production, but in population, a migration which never occurred as the wealth of the region quickly played-out.³⁰ This was one in a series of examples of a boom town that would never live up to its expectations, but still serving as migration magnets for speculators who would be drawn to Nevada only to leave in short-order.

Mining towns were created with every new find of ore, and drew an increasing number of people to the extreme northern parts of Nye County. The southern portion of the county remained relatively uninhabited because most dared not venture into the desert areas which were far removed from the few water supplies in the area. Although wary of the arid regions, a few miners did investigate some of the isolated valleys to the south and discovered underground springs and other water sources that in time would support cattle and small-scale ranching operations.³¹

As the mining industry floundered the cattle herds increased in size and number, wandering the arid landscape at the same time that agriculture efforts began to put some of the land under cultivation.³² In the 1870s America experienced a rail road building frenzy which made cattle from Nye and Lincoln counties valuable in California's emerging urban markets. While Nevada ranchers expanded their herds, the overall impact on the population was negligible.³³ Overgrazing, several difficult winters and an economic depression severely impacted the cattle industry nationwide during the 1880s. Nye County, like its sister county to the east, Lincoln, depended upon small-scale mining and beef

exportation for their economic existence, which in combination with the economic decline kept both regions sparsely settled and waiting for the next boom period at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Nye County experienced a resurgence when gold was discovered at Tonopah, Rhyolite and Beatty, at the turn of the century. Tonopah grew into a major urban center during the winter of 1901, immediately after the news flashed that rich gold ore bodies had been found in the surrounding southern Nevada desert.³⁴ James L. Butler, a rancher, attorney, and sometime miner, is credited with initiating Nevada's second great mining boom located in Nye County, and subsequently bringing to the state a massive influx of immigrants, as well as a shift south from Virginia City, site of the state's first boom.³⁵ When Butler and his companions staked out their claims, however, they were imposing their will on the areas indigenous Indian peoples, namely a number of Western Shoshone encamped within the Tonopah area that the Anglo-Americans divided among themselves.³⁶

The region seemed inhospitable and inaccessible for several reasons; a lack of adequate water and timber, complicated by the fact that the nearest rail connection was at Sodaville, California, 63 miles to the west. Even though the prospects looked dim for the most experienced of the migrants who had been tested by the harshness of the west before, the lure of a quick fortune convinced many to brave the rigorous climate. When the rush began many miners were forced to either rent prospects from Butler and his partner, Tasker L. Oddie, who had laid claim to the premiere claims, or to find ore bodies in the surrounding hills.

The search for instant wealth spawned several other mining boom towns and developed adjoining mining districts. As early as 1904, the camp at Goldfield, for example, claimed that another find rivaling the Comstock and Tonopah lodes had been found. The camp evolved into a city, and from 1905 to 1910 served as a way station on the route from "civilization" to the other mining camps that dotted the Nye County landscape.³⁷ During the 1920s, Tonopah diversified its economy, to include shipping as well as mining and smelting silver ores among its activities. As the town prospered and attracted new residents, so did the mining companies in an interdependent and isolated economic setting that hallmarks the community to this day.

In further examining the migratory history of Nye County, it is evident that there are two distinct regions within the county that have evolved along very dissimilar lines. Tonopah and the northern portion of Nye County were early mining centers. By contrast, the Pahrump Valley, in the southern portion of the county, owed its inception to agriculture. Pahrump and the extreme southern region of Nye County were initially settled by non-indigenous people in search of ranching property in the 1870s. Throughout the late nineteenth-century and well into the early twentieth century, Pahrump remained an isolated area that had a few ranches and was visited by tourists in search of an experience in the "wild west." Agricultural experimentation in this arid region began in the 1930s, and included the introduction of cotton by John R. Hughes

that served as an economic mainstay for nearly half a century.³⁸

NYE AND LINCOLN COUNTY TODAY

Though spawned from different forces, the early patterns of migration in Lincoln and Nye County are both records of "boom and bust," primarily linked to western expansion and the mining industry. As we move towards the end of the twentieth century, it is safe to say that similar cycles are on the landscape of the counties today. The federal government has become a presence as a result of military activities at the test range in Tonopah in Nye County, and the Nevada Test Site, home of the nation's nuclear weapons testing program, affecting both Nye and Lincoln counties. The impact which the federal government has had in both counties in the post-World War II era, through land management (the federal government owns over 80 percent of Nevada), through military installations, and more recently the decision to place high-level nuclear waste at Yucca Mountain in Nye County, have led to political investments that appear to continue the boom-to-bust cycles. As the counties struggle to retain their rural identities, the need to insure an adequate economic base exists that will lead to a slowing of net out-migration among the younger residents and skilled-labor pool, forces a reliance or expectation of a boom, with each proposed activity of the federal government. Booms that might slow out-migration among younger cohorts and skilled labor. Both counties have also become second-home enclaves for many residents of the Las Vegas area, who see a bit of the past a relatively short distance from "glitter gulch", forcing a mini housing-boom and a potential retiree pool in the future that will move out from the metropolitan area into rural communities. Revenue crises in the state have forced infrastructure gaps, especially in the rural areas, and the dual recessions in the last decade-and-a-half, have made for a bust from another perspective, as the rural counties fall behind the growing urban core areas of the state in the fulfillment of services and public goods needs. Added to this, the federal government has once again made the region the focus of its efforts.

In deciding to study, and most likely build, a high-level nuclear waste repository at Yucca Mountain, Lincoln and Nye counties are designated as the most affected counties. The economic boom of a multi-billion dollar federal project could go a long-way in shoring up the fragile economies of the region. Construction of the repository and the transportation system needed to bring high-level nuclear waste to Yucca Mountain suggests a potential of two decades of high paying jobs that would bring new residents into the region and bolster the communities in both counties. On the down-side, the historical record would, in time, most likely repeat itself as the construction phase of the Yucca Mountain project winds down and the jobs that went with it are phased-out; playing out like the mines of years ago. One school of thought might propose avoiding the cycle, however, such a boom can provide the infrastructure of capital, both physical and human, that can be built upon and service new economic ventures.

Given that the need for economic stability stands out as the primary need in both counties to insure demographic stability, a large-scale federal public works project may serve well the region and its people. If, however, the long-term prospects of the region can not be served by developing the labor force and infrastructure necessary to support such a project, then the interpretation of the history of the two counties is to warn caution and measure the long-term community values against short-term boom and bust schemes.

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