
Book Reviews

Kelly J. Dixon. *Boomtown Saloons: Archaeology and History in Virginia City*. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005; 219 pp., ill., notes, bib., ind., cloth, \$34.95. ISBN: 0874176085.

In this engaging and accessible work, Dr. Kelly Dixon of the University of Montana uses the results of the excavations of Virginia City, Nevada, saloons to explore the saloon culture of this remarkable silver bonanza town. Building on a strong foundation of previous scholarship and acknowledging popular culture constructions of “Wild West” saloons, Dixon convincingly demonstrates that archaeology adds much to modern understanding of the economy, clientele, and day-to-day operation of these establishments.

Dixon, a former administrator and archaeologist of the Comstock Archaeology Center, bases her work on excavations of four Virginia City saloons which variously slaked the thirst of desiccated miners and townspeople from the early 1860s into the 1880s. Of these, two were distinctly rustic establishments, both owned or operated by Irish immigrants. O’Brien and Costello’s Saloon and Shooting Gallery operated during the 1870s in the heart of Virginia City’s “Barbary Coast,” a saloon and bordello district. The Hibernia Brewery, which operated in the early 1880s, was located just outside of this district. Both presumably catered to Irish immigrants and others who enjoyed relatively low socioeconomic status in the Comstock Lode’s hierarchy.

The remaining saloons sought and presumably attracted a more upmarket clientele. Piper’s Old Corner Bar, located in a substantial brick building which has survived, operated between 1863 and 1883; for the last six years as an adjunct to

Piper’s Opera House, which incorporated the earlier structure. Archaeology reveals that Piper’s was perhaps the most genteel and opulent of the four resorts, offering patrons a wide range of beverages including that luxury, drinkable water—both filtered local product and imported mineral waters—plus the predictable alcoholic ones. A general absence of artifacts from women’s clothing supports documentary indications that Piper’s generally operated as a male-only resort.

The fourth saloon offers the most surprises. The Boston Saloon was owned and operated by William Brown, an African-American who arrived in Virginia City in 1863 and first found work as a bootblack. In the next year he opened his first saloon and by 1866 established the Boston, which did business on a busy corner until 1875. Dixon, who participated in the excavation of the Boston’s site in 2000, demonstrates that this saloon was no rough doggery: its remains indicate an upscale establishment, serving high-quality food and drink in comfortable surroundings. Women were present, as indicated by dress and shoe button fasteners, ornamental beads, and a clay pipe-stem bearing genetic material whose profile contained two X chromosomes, suggesting that it had been used by a woman.

Dixon suggests that “[the Boston] was most likely a place where well-off individuals mingled with people who worked in low-paying jobs (155),” based on documentary evidence indicating that African-Americans were not welcomed at most other establishments. The Boston’s high-class ambience and quality menu offerings (indicated by analysis of skeletal remains of cuts of beef and mutton), Dixon hypothesizes, may have served to “combat racist assumptions about

an African American way of life (156)."

Boomtown Saloons offers much detail drawn from the material culture remains of these four Comstock resorts. Much of it at first seems commonplace, such as the sorts of condiments offered to patrons or the odd objects dropped by patrons and preserved under floorboards. Dixon acknowledges that common reactions to historical archaeology can be skeptical or dismissive, terming it "an expensive way to study history (164)." She demonstrates, however, that archaeology does not simply "ground truth" the documentary record. Instead, it helps "make pasts" for those who lived and worked on the fringes of what was well-documented: women, minorities, and even children.

This volume offers tangible indications of what the saloons' diverse populations ate, drank, wore, and did within these establishments' confines. *Boomtown Saloons* is less revisionist than expansionist in what it adds to our understanding of diverse mining-town society. As such, it is a solid addition to the body of literature, stretching back to Elliott West's *The Saloon on the Rocky Mountain Mining Frontier* (1979), which has established western watering holes as something more complex and significant than squalid, violence-ridden, proto-honky tonks. And, as a bonus, Dixon affords the reader a vivid and committed sense of the hard work and pleasures of historical archaeology.

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Robert E. McHenry (comp.). *Chat Dumps of the Missouri Lead Belt: St. Francois County*. Adrian, MI: Bob McHenry, 2006; 400 pp., 8 x 11 inches, extensive b&w photos, maps, ind., cloth, \$65 (includes S&H; contact the author at: mcgolf@localdialup.com).

Chat Dumps, as the name implies, are the immense waste piles that dominate the mining landscape in the towns of Flat River, Bonne Terre, Rivermines, Desloge, and Elvins in southeast Missouri. Many members will recall seeing these dumps during our MHA convention in Farmington, Missouri, in 2004.

This volume is a compilation, from many sources, on the history of this preeminent lead mining area, which at one time was the world's leading lead producer under the St. Joseph Lead Company until mining ceased in 1974. In that year all operations moved to the newly discovered lead-zinc ore bodies in the New Lead Belt in south-central Missouri.

Beginning with French explorations in the eighteenth century, the author traces the history of the small operations that mined during the early years, followed by the first real investments in deep-shaft mining in the mid-nineteenth century. Through articles in local newspapers, material from the University of Missouri Western Historical Manuscripts, St. Joe Lead company publications and family histories, along with interviews with retired mining employees of the St. Joseph Lead Company, the author does an excellent job of piecing this complex puzzle into an historical mosaic of excellent photographs, time lines, and sixty personal memories.

The book highlights the making of these immense chat dumps (from the early aerial tramways to the conveyor systems), the history of the area, the growth and acquisitions of the players in the lead mining business, mining methods and machinery, ore dressing, the underground mules, and the impact of mining on the development of the area. This is no doubt the only in-depth look at the Old Missouri Lead Belt published to date. *Chat Dumps* is a book worthwhile having in your library, as it depicts the mining history of an area long neglected, considering the stature that it once enjoyed as a premier lead-producing district.

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