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## 12. Ghost Towns

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# 12

## Ghost Towns

After burying Zeph in St. George, Bob returned to the shipyards in Oregon. He supported himself through a bachelor's degree at Reed College, graduating in 1947. Although grateful for the opportunity to study, Bob must have felt very alone. His brothers were in a similar situation, struggling their way through university degrees. Without the benefit of counsel from his parents and at a time when graduate study was far from the norm, Bob decided to pursue a master's degree in English at the University of Oregon in Eugene.

At age thirty-one, Bob was balding and had little dating experience. While teaching a Sunday school lesson at the local LDS congregation, he met my grandmother Shirley, who was among the members in attendance. When he brought up philosophy in his discussion of religion, Shirley raised her hand and asked him, "What about Hegel?"

He pointed to her and said, "I'll see you after class."

My grandmother's mom, Eva Nancy Angeline, was a southern belle and had instructed her daughter well in the art of flirtation. Seven years younger than Bob, Shirley Wilkes was petite, pretty, and well mannered, but the thing that interested Bob most was the characteristic that had attracted Zeph to Maud: her mind. They married on December 24, 1947 in St. George. Two years later, they moved across the country so Bob could pursue a Ph.D. at Colombia University. Shirley found a job teaching in a private school.

A generation removed from the mines, my father Ryan's earliest memories are of streetlights, narrow alleys between tall buildings, and a New York City bus that almost took off his arm when he was three—a very different landscape than the mining camps that traumatized his father with scenes of coffins, burning crosses, and searchlights on a mountainside in central Utah.



Bob and Shirley Thomas, circa 1949

Eight years after Zephaniah's death, Bob and Shirley moved their family back to Provo because Bob had been offered a position teaching English at Brigham Young University (BYU). Here at the school that had figured so strongly into his mother's happy memories, he worked his way into the administration, founded the honors program, and finished his career as an academic vice president.

I remember visiting my grandfather in his office in Kimball Tower, a thirteen-story office building in the middle of campus. My father had finished his Ph.D. in education and was teaching at BYU as well. In 1982, my grandfather retired to spend his time tending his garden and playing with his grandkids. My father moved up into the administrative ranks at BYU until he left to become a vice president at Utah Valley Community College. In 2001, when he accepted the position of president of the College of Eastern Utah (CEU), the Thomases returned to Carbon County after a seventy-five-year absence.

I am reminded of the image of the Castle Gate as I consider how my family history has circled back. Driving away from these cliffs, Zeph and Maud must have regretted leaving their friends. But there also must have been a tremendous amount of relief as those gates shut on their experiences of the strikes, the explosion, and the lynching. They believed it marked the end of their work in the mines, just as Evan and Margaret must have watched the seaport fade into the distance, thinking leaving Wales meant

leaving coal. When my parents drove south from Provo past the Castle Gate to move their belongings and my younger siblings to the house on the hill overlooking CEU campus, mining reentered my family's consciousness.

During my father's eight-year term at CEU, my parents lived in Price, the largest remaining town in Carbon County. Most the former mining communities have been abandoned. Just as these towns appeared and swelled to capacity, once the coal was exhausted or no longer profitable to mine, the towns disappeared, following the four inevitable stages outlined by historian Homer Ashmann: prospecting and exploration, investment and development, stable operation, and decline.

Currently thirteen underground mines operate in Utah, ranking that state twelfth (at around 1.8 percent) in US coal production nationwide. Through modern technology, these mines yield four times as much coal as all of Utah's mines put together in 1925. However, most of the mines in Carbon County are now out of operation, and the remaining pit miners commute to neighboring Emery County. The majority of Carbon County's almost twenty thousand residents cluster in five cities; the county's population has grown by only a little over three thousand since 1925, when Zeph and Maud left.

In the far reaches of this county there are at least fourteen major ghost towns, as well as many smaller settlements and abandoned mine shafts. Historian and mine enthusiast Richard V. Francaviglia offers this explanation for the fascination of a ghost town: "The public understands a ghost town to be a tangible but depopulated place inhabited only by the memories of former occupants. The term 'ghost town' implies former activity, perhaps even former greatness, as manifested in decrepit buildings and other ruins. A ghost town is a place that is being reclaimed by nature, and we seem to take a perverse interest in the aesthetics and symbolism of time marching into, and over such forlorn places." On a drive through Spring Canyon, I spotted the remains of several abandoned mining camps. The foundations of stone buildings scattered throughout sandstone cliffs have become part of the scenery. Standardsville was named for its exemplary building design. Its five hundred residents lived in modern houses and steam heated apartments and enjoyed tennis courts, a baseball field, and a recreation hall. The cement retaining wall of the tippie still towers over the dirt road. Other than the scant remains of homes, the walls of the hospital represent the only other evidence of the community that sprawled out in the crevice between two mountains.

A half a mile up from this old mining community lies Latuda. A short jog from the road brought me to the skeleton of the mining office, once the largest structure in town. This building was intact until 1969 when a nineteen-year-old from Price planted half a case of stolen explosives in it and blew the building apart. He claimed he meant "to kill a ghost."

*Erin Thomas, 2007*

Mining office in Latuda

When the mine in Latuda closed in 1966, the last mining families moved lower into the surrounding communities, and around this time the legend of the White Lady became popular. Sightings of this ghost had been reported since the 1930s, when Latuda was an operational mining town. But an abandoned town added additional lure to teenagers from Price and the surrounding communities who hoped to catch a glimpse of her white, flowing robes. Reputedly a woman with a grievance with the mining company, she walks through the town almost to the threshold of the mining office and then disappears. There is no agreement on her history, except that she was a miner's widow. Some say an avalanche killed her child in 1927. Others assert her husband died in a mining accident, and the company never compensated her for his death. There is also considerable disagreement as to her final demise: hanging herself in the mining office, or dying in a mental asylum after killing her child to spare it from a life of suffering. My sisters, both of whom graduated from high school in Carbon County, drove up Spring Canyon with their friends late at night in search of this ghost.

Although not easily persuaded by hauntings, I felt tentative entering the ruins where a teenager in 1969 claimed to have found the body of a woman and chose to visit during the day. Broken glass scattered on the cement floor of the mining office next to the remains of a fire. It reminded me of the place under a bridge where teenagers in my town used to enact their mischief—still, after a quick inspection, I did not linger.

Locals still report seeing the White Lady of Latuda. One man, when questioned by a national ghost hunter, revealed: “I saw her once. Must’ve been back around 1985. I’d been prospecting, fiddling around really, in these canyons since I retired. I camped back here one night and while I’d hear all the stories, I never expected to see her. But around midnight, there she was. She walked past my fire like I wasn’t there at all. I was too surprised to do anything but watch her go.”

Not far down Route 6 from Spring Canyon is the turnoff to Scofield, the town below Winter Quarters. Here Route 96 cuts through the tops of mountains that, from a base altitude of over six thousand feet, look like hills. This mine is another abandoned shaft that is purportedly haunted; miners started reporting sightings a year after the Winter Quarters explosion. A 1901 article from the *Sun Advocate* reads: “The superstitious miners who are foreigners, have come to the conclusion that the property is haunted, inhabited by a ghost. Several of them have heard a strange and unusual noise, and those favored with a keener vision than their fellow workmen have actually seen a headless man walking about the mine and have accosted the ghost and addressed it or he ... Many supposedly intelligent men have claimed this and some twenty-five or forty have thrown up their jobs in consequence. These same people and others have seen mysterious lights in the graveyard on the side of this hill where many victims of the explosion of May are buried. Efforts to ferret out the cause have been fruitless ... These lights are always followed by a death ... Tombstones where the light appeared have been blanketed, but the light remains clear to the vision of those who watch from the town.”

These days hikers and campers report hearing moaning and crying near the opening of the old mine, where the women waited in the rain for their men to be carried out in gunnysacks. When I turned down Route 96, it was also in search of ghosts, but there is more than one way to approach the dead. Scofield attracts not only those interested in the occult, but also those seeking communion with their ancestors. This sort of other worldly link is an accepted aspect of the LDS religion. Occasionally members will talk of the “veil being thin,” meaning the veil between this life and the afterlife, this earthly existence and the heavenly existence. We believe in a realm of the dead where our ancestors have passed on only in body but maintain their individuality in spirit, and this realm is not far from where we are. In part, my belief in the living spirits of my predecessors motivates me to walk along their paths.

I have one early memory of Scofield. Nine or ten, I stood at an overlook, my eyes bouncing from each blare of red, orange, and blue sheet-metal roof that popped out of the dun colored summer landscape. I don’t remember why I was there or who had brought me, only the connect-the-dot game I played with the colorful roofs in the valley below. More people

lived there then than they do now; according to the most recent census, Scofield is home to twenty-eight people who live in twelve households in a town of seventy-eight households. Some of these are vacation homes that stay empty for the majority of the year. Others are just abandoned. In order to serve these twenty-eight residents, Scofield maintains five operating saunas, testimony to its lingering Finnish character.

These homes make up the few streets of a community wrapped around a railroad. A little white LDS chapel lies under the eastern mountains on a main street named Commerce. Across to the west, a graveyard is more populated than the current town. The last saloon marks the end of Commerce Street. Religion has lasted longer as a motivation for gathering than drink; although the church still draws a small crowd on the Sabbath, the saloon has been boarded up.

I arrived in Scofield on a fall afternoon when the hills were sprinkled with rows of gold-leafed quaking aspens, set off by the green-black of pines. I got out of my vehicle and shivered. The air had a cold, moist edge. I hesitantly jiggled the door of the saloon, unsure about entering if it yielded. I pressed my face up against the window to peer inside. Above the bar, a sign said “No Checks” and a clock stopped at 2:25. Stools stood vacant over a floor where the white tiles had begun to curl up like brittle sheets of paper. A cabinet was stocked with ancient bottles of Raid and Scope.

I stepped away from the windows and crossed back to my car to drive up to the graveyard. Scattered between the houses with colorful sheet-metal roofs, outhouses and boarded-up shacks crouched that nobody had ever bothered to take down. A few feet from the end of the road stood a sign that read Open Range. Once a booming mining town, Scofield had reverted back to its original purpose as a place to feed livestock. Half a mile at the other end of Commerce Street, a tall, lean dog stared me down. It was the only living creature I had seen that day, but was strangely immobile—not turning its gaze or moving its tail.

There is no lush patch of grass in the Scofield graveyard because there is no gardener to tend it. Tombstones poke irregularly out of mountain grasses—wild, tall, and dry. Even so, in the disarray there are signs of remembrance. A plaque was erected in 1987 with the names of all the miners who died in the Winter Quarters explosion. The bronze relief above the names portrays a sense of torque, clamor, and night in the faces of coal miners who seem to be craning into a thick haze, the oil-powered lamps on their caps failing to light the path to escape.

At the dedication, Leslie Norris, former poet-in-residence at BYU and one of the most important Welsh poets of the post-World War II era, read a poem he had written for the occasion. I met Norris while I attended BYU. My writing teachers would invite him to class, to show him off, I suppose, but more because listening to him speak in his Welsh accent, with

his careful gestures and vibrant imagery, was a beautiful experience. It was as if something dew-kissed and green-smelling had burst into the rooms and the white-painted bricks of the basement classrooms were breaking into verse. Once, in poetry class, he peered over the top of my poems and smiled at me. He was born in Merthyr Tydfil from mining stock, just like my ancestors. His father died in a cave-in there.

In 1983, he came to the United States to lecture at BYU for six months. He and his wife Catherine Morgan never left. I suppose he found the Mormon community under the rise of the Rockies a bit like the land of his countryman: the people cut off from the rest, a little peculiar, with a set of idiom all their own. His poem to the Scofield miners was published in a run of lithographs:

I make this poem for the men and boys  
Whose lives were taken wherever coal is cut,  
Who went too early to the earth they worked in.  
I have brought with me to Winter Quarters  
Echoes of the voices of mourning women.  
... Let the men from Finland,  
The Welsh, the Scots, Englishmen, Frenchmen,  
Dying far from their countries a hundred years ago  
Let them be united in the rough brotherhood  
Of all tragic mines ...  
I make this poem for the men who died  
When darkness exploded, and for their families  
And for those of us who come after them.

I walked to the back corner, where a marble obelisk engraved with THOMAS marked the resting place of Evan Jr. and Frederick. The stone stood six feet tall and was mounted on a two-foot piece of concrete. Red lichen grew on the base, and the inscription listed only their names and their dates of birth, followed by “sons of E. S. and M. D. Thomas.” The first burial of a Thomas in the New World, it was executed under both the greatest poverty and the most pomp and ceremony. In the whole of Scofield cemetery, only one stone rose more imposing. Bearing the name of Edwin Street, the inscription had worn away, so that a couplet was barely legible: “To forget is vain endeavor. Love’s remembrance lasts forever.” An inscription similar to those on several other stones throughout the graveyard, this must have been a popular epitaph at the time. The few other massive grave markers in the cemetery belonged to Welsh and English families.

Most of the miners buried here were laid to rest in the front of the graveyard in rows. Each grave spanned wide enough for the coffin and a wall of earth between it and the next. Some families had replaced the original



*Erin Thomas, 2007*

New wooden headstones for Winter Quarters disaster 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary

wooden markers with six-inch cement markers engraved with initials, but many remained until 1999, when Ann Carter, a local resident, decided to beautify the graveyard to commemorate the one hundredth anniversary of the explosion. She and her husband Woody enlisted the help of the Utah State Historical Society and x-rayed the gray, splintered tombstones for the original lead-penciled names written by the blacksmith in 1900. Many of them had fallen over and split into shards. Now new wooden markers stand beside the old, engraved with names like Lasko, Kevlcaho, Kitola, Warla, Koloson, Heikkila, Jacobson, Maknus, Niemi, Bintella. In the front row of the graveyard, five small cement blocks mark the remains of the five Louma brothers.

The Finns in Winter Quarters kept their connections with the Old World. Later, when the mine closed in 1922, many moved to Salt Lake City, where a large Finnish community thrives to this day. They were among

the two thousand people who came on May 1, 2000, to commemorate the death of their ancestors. The blast of a cannon at 10:25 a.m. signaled the beginning of the ceremonies. After graveside services, descendants shared their oral histories of the Winter Quarters explosion. Word had reached the great-grandchildren of Mataho Louma, the only son of Abe Louma spared in the disaster, who accompanied his parents back to their homeland. Two Loumas, a brother and a sister, came from Finland to participate in the celebration.

Ann Carter descended from a Finnish miner who came to Winter Quarters a month after the explosion to take the place of a dead miner. After I visited the graveyard, I sat with the Carters on their living room carpet, bending over a hand-drawn map of Winter Quarters. Scofield is located in a flat valley between the tops of mountain ranges. On the far southern side of town, a small road leads up to Winter Quarters. Tucked away and inconsequential, if it weren't for the accident, Winter Quarters would have disappeared from history. I would know little of the circumstances of Evan, Margaret, and Zeph in their first few years mining in Utah. Winter Quarters exists in the records only as a consequence of tragedy. Ann Carter would have never grown up in Scofield if it weren't for the accident that brought a new wave of Finnish immigrants to the area. The Carters and I leaned over the map. Ann pointed to the schoolhouse, the superintendent's home, and the church.

My ancestors might have lived in Scofield or in Winter Quarters. In an area so small, it hardly seems worth making a distinction. In those days, however, it might have added a mile or so on to the morning and evening trudge to and from the shaft, where the miners would descend and walk another mile into the side of the mountain. Winter Quarters is private property now, and I unwittingly arrived in Scofield in the middle of hunting season. I drove to the edge of the town and parked in front of a gate. A stocky hunter in camouflage, with hard-cut Slavic features, was loading a four-wheeler into the back of a truck. According to an old farmer in a faded cap standing nearby, the hunter was the owner of Winter Quarters canyon. He ignored me for fifteen minutes while the farmer and his daughter warned me I might get shot. I insisted until the hunter turned and waved his hand. I walked up the road to Winter Quarters, convinced my pink and white striped shirt would set me off from the deer.

A farm snuggled into the mouth, but from there, the canyon thinned. A creek ran down the middle. Willows sunk their roots into the banks, and the woods climbed down the hill, covering where telephone poles used to carry electricity up to the mine. It was such a narrow canyon that I couldn't imagine how so many small wooden huts could have clung to the sides of the hill, the cold wind inserting itself through the cracks between the boards where the gum had worked free. I followed the path that Zeph

*Courtesy of Western Mining and Railroad Museum*

Ruins of Winter Quarter's Company Store, 1990

and his brothers would have walked every morning to the mine, trailing behind Evan. I know so little of this man, only that there was something in him that Margaret loved enough to spurn a rich man's son, and that he was short and tempestuous. There are a few foundations of outhouses on the outskirts of town, and some other lines of stones visible through the plant growth. The town was dismantled when the mine closed, every bit of stone and wood hauled out for other enterprises. Only two walls of the company store remain, cutting a lonely silhouette against the deeper canyon where the Finns and Greeks thrived, set away from the families of the other coal workers.

This intimate, wooded canyon seemed fitting as the ghost town of my ancestors. A deer ran across my path, and then another, in hunting season worse luck than black cats. I shivered, thinking of the hunters in the woods and the shot that could echo at any moment from the trees. I was so sure of my pink and white stripes, but watching the deer dash out of the underbrush diminished my bravado. The cool air held a light moisture, and a creek lined with willows trickled in the silence of the canyon. The colors of the forest deepened with the approaching dusk. I wasn't insensitive to the beauty or the danger; my heart beat loudly and my breath fell short as I climbed the trail of my ancestors. Fear, wonder, and love—the latter quickening my pulse the most. It was a grasping love of ghosts, spirits I wished would appear so I could say, "Yes, this is Evan and Margaret, and they lived here and I long to know them still."

In the photos of Winter Quarters taken just after the accident in 1900, it is early spring, and the quaking aspen are leafless. They make thin stick figures against the evergreens. At that time, the willows were cleared from the side of the river to make room for the railroad. In terms of trees, aspens have short life spans, somewhere between seventy and a hundred years, but the pines live longer. The pines that seemed to crowd closer into the slender valley as dusk deepened could be more than a century old. These same pines might have lined Evan and Zeph's early morning walks to the mine. These pines could have blocked the winter wind coming through the cracks in their cabin. It was possible that in this moment my life and the lives of Evan, Margaret, and Zephaniah were contemporary in the life of a tree.

